

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 10TH JULY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 10TH JULY, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.34 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 Tuesday, 9th 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. Budget is quite a long process and I am so grateful that up until today, you all look fresh in coming this morning and ready for another long march, as the military always term their march.

I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Once more, I thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Committee of Supply – Votes

For the information of honourable Members, the Business Committee has approved that the votes taken during the Committee of Supply stage, with respect to Programmes, Activities and SEGs will be through acclamation, but the final vote on the respective Heads, that is when we will finish all the details of a particular Head, we will go back to the Head and I will put it to the vote, and that vote will be taken electronically.

Back-to-Office Report – Study Visit to Australian Parliaments

Honourable Members, please, take note that the Back-to-Office Report on the study visit to the Australian Federal Parliament and the New South Wales Parliament will be made available in the Library for your perusal and reference. At this juncture, I also remind honourable Members who had attended the approved parliamentary meetings, conferences and workshops abroad, especially the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to submit your Back-to-Office Report, if you

have not done so.

Resignation - Opposition Whip

I have also received correspondence from the honourable Leader of the Opposition informing that the honourable Viliame Naupoto has tendered his resignation as Opposition Whip and this will be effective from today. As a temporary measure, honourable Jone Usamate will temporarily act as Opposition Whip, until such time that a substantive appointment is made. I hope we will bear all that, honourable Members.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2024-2025 APPROPRIATION BILL 2024

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable Alvick Maharaj. Oh, he still has not come back from his leave or sick leave, but we bear with him in the struggles that he is undergoing. I think that is his first child.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Baby girl, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Come again.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Baby girl last night.

MR. SPEAKER.- Oh, baby girl last night.

(Acclamation)

He has a fantastic history. He got married a bit late, that is why. I am just joking, honourable Members.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, let me begin by thanking the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his dedicated staff for the delivery of the Budget for all Fijians. It is a 'here and now' budget with an eye for the immediate future.

I acknowledge the increase in the budget for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts from \$38.7 million to \$39.4 million.

While the Government considers options for the 2013 Constitution, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which Fiji now supports, is our framework for action. It is complemented by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and we are aligning our objectives to it. We want to thrive in this modern world. If the budget trend for our Ministry continues by the end of our current term, the *iTaukei* will be better off than they were when we came into office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Assistant Minister has highlighted the increase in the budget for the culture sector. We are already seeing the reason why it was placed under our Ministry. We will develop Fiji's first National Art Gallery. We will restore the Levuka World Heritage Property. We will recognise the contribution of every ethnic group in Fiji through arts.

Today, I will outline some other key programmes in our budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have now

been resourced to implement the GCC Review Report. This includes a standalone legislation. The GCC will continue to lead the iTaukei Administration. With its revamped focus, it will enhance and strengthen the development of the iTaukei economy. We must quantify our contribution to the economy, and we will approach this with lessons learnt from past mistakes.

Mr. Speaker, earlier, I had touched on UNDRIP. We have developed a National Action Plan which Provincial Council Meetings have overwhelmingly endorsed. Several legislations could be reviewed to localise UNDRIP. This important work is recognised in our budget.

Mr. Speaker, last year, the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and Cabinet endorsed a framework to improve the livelihoods of *iTaukei* and Rotumans through economic empowerment. As part of the framework, support will be provided to Provincial Council companies and resource owners. I am pleased to announce that Provincial Council companies and resource owners will be assisted under the \$3 million allocation - *iTaukei* Resource Owners Support and Development Fund. This is an interest subsidy allocation.

Mr. Speaker, funding has been provided for Provincial Economic Units. The purpose of these Units is to drive economic activities and enhance market access. Market access is the issue for our community. To assist our *iTaukei* community, we will, again, convene the iTaukei Resource Owners Forum this year, which has been funded.

Mr. Speaker, we must not underestimate the ability of the *vanua* to resolve the pressing problems upon us - the invasion of hard drugs. If we strengthen *vanua* governance, it could significantly address the problems that now confront us. To assist in this regard, the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission's budget has been increased by \$1 million.

Mr. Speaker, a good education is the shortest way out of poverty and our latest village profiling data confirms this. Education is a pillar of poverty alleviation. This year, we convened the first ever Provincial Education Forum.

Provincial Council Chairpersons and Chairpersons of Education Committees met to discuss the status of *iTaukei* education and map a way forward. An outcome of that forum was to further investigate the cause of primary and high school dropouts and how they can be better supported. We will do that through the 2024-2025 Budget with an allocation of \$300,000.

Mr. Speaker, the Village Improvement Scheme will continue with another allocation of \$2 million. Our focus will be on sanitation and village beautification. We have also seen the need to transform two villages as a modern tourist villages. We will work on this in coordination with the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.

Mr. Speaker, we will continue to implement the National Action Plan on reducing violence against women and girls. Breaking through the traditional setting is not easy but we want a fair deal for our women, and we will ensure that the message of reducing violence is conveyed appropriately. The allocation for this has been provided in the budget.

Mr. Speaker, our budgetary allocations and initiatives are geared towards driving transformative change within our *iTaukei* communities through economic empowerment, preserving culture and heritage, promoting education and holistic wellbeing, empowering villages and developing visionary youth leadership.

Increased funding for the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission, iTaukei Affairs Board, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts and the establishment of the Provincial Economic

Development Unit will significantly support sustainable economic development and enhance the welfare and prosperity of *iTaukei* communities.

The *iTaukei* Resource Owners Forum will facilitate access to natural resources, while the Resource Owners Support and Development Fund will provide a vital injection of interest subsidy. Coupled with measures enabling sustainable development of *iTaukei* land and resources, these initiatives unlock unprecedented economic opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, preserving our culture and heritage is a cornerstone of our agenda. Our experience with the Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival last year and the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture this year has heightened the importance of this agenda. Efforts by the *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission to safeguard ancestral land and waters, the revitalization of customs and leadership roles through the confirmation of traditional titles, and the promotion of language, traditions and identity via cultural programmes will ensure our rich legacy endures for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, initiatives aimed at promoting education and holistic wellbeing are equally vital. Bridging educational gaps will be addressed through village-level awareness campaigns on integrating formal and informal learning pathways. Furthermore, the exploration of sustainable indigenous tourism opportunities will showcase the unique *iTaukei* culture to the world while creating economic prospects.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the story of the *iTaukei* is more than a tale of challenges we have endured, and in our future, we must strive for more than just making do. Our budget reflects our highest aspirations - it continues our step in the right direction which is to develop the *iTaukei* economy and make the *iTaukei* primary beneficiaries in their natural resources. We will forge a new economy and a new generation of prosperity to make the *iTaukei* prosperous and equipped to take on the challenges of the future.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to be able to contribute to this debate.

I want to start off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by thanking you also for your leadership and decision that has allowed me to be here today as an Independent Member of Parliament. I assure you, Sir, that I do not take this privilege of continuing to serve in Parliament lightly and will perform it to the very best of my ability and my convictions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, putting together a budget is a massive and a critical undertaking, so I congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for the second budget which he has been responsible for. I also congratulate the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his staff for their hard work, and their very useful presentation and interactions they had with us in Opposition Chambers last week. I also want you to know, honourable Minister and the staff, that I appreciate the additional parts of the Budget Supplement Booklet that we had this year.

I also would like to congratulate the new Attorney-General, honourable Graham Leung on his appointment. I have appreciated the tenor of his maiden address, it has been a breath of fresh air, a fragrant aroma.

I also congratulate my Nakasi neighbour, honourable Alitia Bainivalu, for her appointment as Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, and wish her well in the enormous responsibility accorded to her.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many things to be thankful for in this Budget, and I would like to highlight a few of these. The people of Fiji are battling high inflation that has been bought about initially by the global forces, but which were then fanned into a frenzy, became a ferocious hurricane by the decision of this Government to raise VAT by 66 percent last year. The impact on our people has been catastrophic, Sir.

For that reason, I am glad to see that the raising of the National Minimum Wage to \$4.50, and then to \$5 an hour, and I also understand that the Sectoral Minimum Wage will also be increased by the same quantum, and civil servants pay will also increase. All of these will help people to ride the waves with the high cost of living that this Government is largely responsible for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision by Government to set aside up to \$52 million for the FNPF Pensioners, whose pensions were reduced, has been applauded widely. This is welcomed, respite for the pensioners who receive their payments, and I am glad for them and their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the payment is being made by Government out of taxpayers' funds, and not out of FNPF funds. This validates that initial decision taken to amend the FNPF pension levels, to ensure the sustainability of FNPF. Without that reform, FNPF would be in a dire situation right now and would go head over heels by the year 2050, meaning that future pensioners would not benefit from it. The decision by the then Government took guts and gumption. This Government must be willing to do the same when it is required to do so.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- A tough decision!

HON. J. USAMATE.- For Vatukoula, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will provide payments to the Vatukoula Gold Miners who had been strike for 30 years. This payment is substantive and is also being paid from taxpayers' funds. I am sure it will come in very handy for the gold miners and their families. There is a danger, however, Sir, that others will use this as a precedence for future unresolved industrial disputes.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is your mess, that is why.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is yours.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad to see that all the measures that were innovatively implemented by then FijiFirst Government, continued to be implemented. These include all the social wages, despite with some minor tweaking by this Government. This includes the Free Education, the enhanced Social Welfare payments, free water, electricity for the needy, school bus fares, back to school assistance, et cetera. So, thank you for continuing to do what was started from the people from this side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for reducing fiscal duty on prefabricated buildings to 5 percent and for reinstating zero duty on materials, and committing to establish the

Financial Services Ombudsman, a great move. I also appreciate the allocation for constructing gas crematoriums in major districts around Fiji.

Budgetary Concerns: Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst in Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics was forever deriding the then Government about the nominal debt values. As soon as he got into office, he increased those debt levels to record levels. The honourable Leader of the Opposition has itemised in detail the Debt to GDP ratios that we have had in Fiji from 2006 to 2019, clearly showing that we kept it to below 50 percent in the immediate period before COVID-19 struck.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reduction in post-COVID-19 Debt to GDP ratio has been far too slow. Why? Because of Government's poor choices. They could have helped to reduce it further by getting rid of highly bloated operating expenditure. One example, every person on that side, including two on this side, is either a Minister or Assistant Minister (including honourable Ravu), with vehicles, staff, offices, bloated travel expenses, bloated expenditure everywhere, hugely bloated operational expenditure, unheard of in this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Hogwash!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- If they had been able to control that, they could have helped push the expenditure down.

The Budget deficit remains alarmingly high, posing significant risks to our economy stability. While the Government has made lofty promises, it has not presented a viable plan to reduce this deficit. Borrowing to finance current expenditures without a clear repayment strategy will only lead to further financial strain on future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics said he had to raise VAT in order to pay for the debts. In other words, that he had to raise the cost of living so that Government debts could be paid. Guess what, Sir, no debts have been paid off. The stock of debt continues to increase.

Inflation has been at the record level. It hit 7.1 percent in April - a 10-year record. Now, they are talking about 5.7 percent, but there are others who are arguing about the high cost of living which is being felt hardest by the worse off in our society. That is who you are attacking – the worse off in our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji needs growth, and good effective investment in infrastructure helps to build that growth. Government is providing very little or no expenditure on new infrastructure in this Budget. Government is only and largely providing funding to preserve what is already in place. The new infrastructure is coming through our development partners and I thank them for their assistance in that area. They are funding new infrastructure that will contribute to GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, slow implementation of projects by some Ministries and Departments that are part of the Executive – meaning you are supposed to execute and do or deliver things, has led to underspent budgets. This inefficiency not only hampers economic growth, but also undermines public trust in Government. When allocated funds are not utilised effectively, essential services and infrastructure projects are delayed, directly impacting the quality of life of the citizens of this country.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics replied to Written Question No. 74/2024 on the status of budget usage at the end of Parliament, which is posted on the Parliament website and reported that \$42 million was vired out of capital expenditure. Why? Lack of execution.

The Ministry of Local Government's total execution was at 40 percent at the end of June, according to his report. For the Rice Development Project of \$600,000, there was zero utilisation, according to his report. For the \$2.5 million budgetted for jetty infrastructure, only 37 percent was used - very, very poor execution. Executives are supposed to execute, that is what you are there for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics did his job by allocating funds, the question is, did the Ministers and their executive team led by the Permanent Secretaries effectively deliver these commitments? This is the result you get when merit-based appointments are replaced by political appointments, rewarding those who helped them in their campaign. It is the public that bears the brunt of the Government's failure to implement the Budget and deliver the outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism has been doing well this year. However, there is a significant drop in forward bookings till the end of the year, when compared to last year. This is a concern. Are we outpricing ourselves for our key Australian market – mum, dad and the children?

Tourism arrivals from Australia – our main source of tourists, has been flat, and now tourism levels have been sustained by other source markets. It is possible that increasing the departure tax to \$200, coupled with a relative high cost of Food and Beverage and accommodation, will reduce our tourism arrivals, especially from the more budget conscious markets. We need to protect and nurture tourism, and not stop the flow of the economic lifeblood it has provided us with in these past three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of talk about diversification, but we are not seeing a targetted approach to achieving that. Investment Fiji reports that there are 39 projects at construction stage in Fiji worth \$1.2 billion. Sir, 34 of those projects, worth \$1.22 billion, are in tourism services and real estate. The remaining six projects are in wholesale, retail and manufacturing. There is very little investment in other sectors that we need to diversify to. Why? Because there is no focussed approach to develop diversification into other areas.

Private sector improvement and value addition is critical and is generally lacking, Sir. The Government's decision to write off student debts in the last Budget has cost over \$600 million – directly equating the current budget deficit.

Converting the Student Loan Scheme to Scholarship is not sustainable for a small economy like ours. Even larger economies, like Australia, continue to maintain a loan scheme for tertiary education. The reality is that many graduates are now sitting at home without jobs and many more will join them.

In this Budget, the Government has imposed penalties for forfeiting bonds, if they wish to seek opportunities offshore. How does this help our graduates, or the economy? It creates a burden on the very individuals whom we should be supporting to drive our nation forward. We give them scholarships, they graduate in numbers, but there is no demand for jobs, as the private sector, which we refer to as the engine for economic growth, is not creating enough employment opportunities, resulting in high unemployment. So, in fact, these students get frustrated and look at opportunities abroad. It is ironic that we bond them, but we cannot assure jobs for them, Sir.

Sir, in the labour market, we have a very tight labour market with shortage of skilled workers and professionals. At the same time, the Reserve Bank of Fiji has noted that there is decline in job advertisements.

Honourable Minister, I am very happy to see that there is a lot of focus on apprenticeship and skill development, I am very glad for that. But what worries me is why this Government has decided to reduce its grant to the Fiji National University (FNU), our very own University. Government has been ready to dish out grants to the University of the South Pacific (USP), even though I understand that USP has more than \$150 million cash sitting in its coffers. And on top of that, it decides to increase the grant to Pacific Polytech to \$5 million. There is nothing that Pacific Polytech does that is not done by FNU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU has graduated more than 45,000 people from 2010 to 2023. It provides vocational education and skills training. It has been conducting training in rural remote areas since 2012, and in the year 2023 alone, the National Training and Productivity Centre issued more than 14,000 certificates for short courses. They graduated more than 2,500 people with degrees and 1,300 through Technical and Vocational Education and Training programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU is our own institution, a key player in Fiji's development with a long-proven record. It has received growing records internationally for its own contribution to SDG, yet Government is giving FNU short shrift, and has leaned over backwards for Pacific Polytech right from day one, even before the 2023-2024 budget was put to them. What is going on? The FNU is delivering, so why are you diverting funds from USP into a private institution?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are no initiatives to stop the exodus of skills and professionals. We are resigned to the fact that these gaps will be fulfilled by Bangladesh, Indonesia and Philippine nationals, but applications to get them here takes time. In the meantime, our private sectors suffers.

Our brightest minds are leaving the country in search for better opportunities abroad. This braindrain is detrimental to our development. We need policies that retain talent, that provide adequate remuneration and create that conducive environment for professions to thrive in our own country. For this to happen, we need a vibrant private sector and a conducive investment environment, and that is what this Government needs to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, Fiji needs Government to do well. I need Government to do well. Everyone on this side needs Government to do well. We all need it. We want you to do well. You determine the way forward, and in my current capacity as an independent Member of Parliament, I am prepared to support the honourable Prime Minister and support the Government on issues that are being brought up by Government that I believe are in the best interests of this country. But I will fight against and oppose anything that I believe does not address our needs as against the best interests of this country.

While this Budget has a lot of very good aspects, there are also many underlying weaknesses, and it is for that reason that I cannot fully support this Budget. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- 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, I also acknowledge those who are sitting in the gallery and those watching through livestream from the comforts of their homes; I rise today in this august Parliament to lend my full support to the 2024-2025 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by congratulating the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, and his team for their outstanding work in stabilising Government debt and prudent financial, fiscal and economic management after inheriting a debt of 90 percent of GDP from the previous Government or the previous Administration.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can note here the distinction between someone who is a professor in economics preparing a national budget for a government, and someone who does not possess these attributes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is commendable that Fiji's debt has now fallen to less than 80 percent, with a targetted projection to reach 78 percent of the GDP at the end of July 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year's Budget Address is not merely a financial plan but a roadmap that aligns our aspirations with the global mandate of sustainable development and resilience. Through the foresight of the current Coalition Government under the steadfast, sound and consultative leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, together, we can embark on a journey to ensure that our rural and maritime communities thrive, and our disaster management efforts set benchmarks for local and regional excellence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the global level, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a universal call for action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all the people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. As signatory to this ambitious agenda, our commitment resonates across borders, emphasising our role in achieving sustainable development both, locally and as part of the regional and global community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regionally, our priorities are shaped by the unique challenges and opportunities presented by our geographical context.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the announced 2024-2025 Budget is also a roadmap that aligns our national investment priorities to the collective regional strategic pathways to:

- (1) Strengthen governance which will, in turn, improve economic viability for all Government initiatives, targeting Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and promote peace and security.
- (2) Promote inclusion and equity by investing in the empowerment of women and the promotion of women's rights and promoting the anticipation of women in leadership.
- (3) Enhance data-informed decision-making through education, research and technology to revitalise our MSMEs sector, strengthen tourism, empower Fiji citizens and guide Government policy work to better address poverty and the high cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through partnership and collaboration, the Coalition Government, in their wisdom, have empowered us with the resources to leverage regional strengths to address common challenges, such as climate change, natural disasters and economic disparities. By working together, we create synergies that amplify the impact of our efforts and contribute to regional stability and prosperity and, consequently, better secure our own national security and stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the foresight of the Coalition Government in producing a budget that also actualises our beloved nation's commitment to the regional priorities outlined in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. This will, in turn, enhance the faith of our development

partners, in the capacity of our beloved nation, to deliver as the regional hub, to take lead on the achievement of the SDGs in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the national level, the 2024-2025 Budget reflects the Government's commitment to a transformative change in rural and maritime development and disaster management. I must acknowledge, Sir, that this Budget is more than a fiscal plan - it is a blueprint for building resilient communities, enhancing infrastructure and promoting economic opportunities in our rural and maritime areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my capacity as the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, I would like to thank the honourable Deputy Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and the Coalition Government, for prioritising some areas that I would like to highlight:

- (1) Allocation of \$2 million to the Ministry for our Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF), to continue to help our rural communities' infrastructure development to improve connectivity and accessibility, and ensure our contribution to SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure.
- (2) Assisting our communities in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and small businesses, to stimulate local economies and create sustainable livelihoods through the \$1 million budget for the Ministry's Self-Help Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these priorities are integral to our vision of a prosperous and resilient nation where every citizen can thrive. The honourable Minister for Finance rightly stated that the 2024-2025 Budget is centred around the vision of "security, stability and sustainability", focusing on improving the fundamentals of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increased investment to improve our health infrastructure, increased funding to reshape our education sector, decisive investment incentives to encourage investors and improve efficiency, and increased public private partnerships, is noteworthy. The Ministry has been liaising with development partners, such as the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, who are actively enlightening our communities and institutions with upskilling in conflict resolution to improve governance. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), through the Governance for Resilient Development in the Pacific (Gove4Res) initiative and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), through their exemplary support in the Northern Division are, but a few of the partnerships that this Coalition Government has supported to-date with a centred vision on improving livelihoods and empowering our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, no man is an island and the announcement that the Government will continue to fund our District Advisory Councillors proves just that. The Government cannot work independently and needs the support and trust of the people of Fiji for holistic economic development. As alluded to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, "We must hear all views, this is the way for true nation building and inclusive development, to build consensus on sustainable progress and unity."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the setting up of a Pilot Tourism MSME fund of \$15,000 will empower our rural communities to innovate their natural resource environment for job creation and income generation to not only enable sustainable management of their natural resources, but that of their rural livelihoods as well. People in the rural areas very much appreciate the effort by the Government, especially the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Finance for their support to the sugar industry which the rural areas are very much dependent on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Permanent Secretary and Management of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development for the work undertaken this financial year. A special acknowledgement to the four Divisional Commissioners for their active roles in spearheading development in the Divisions through the Integrated Rural Development Framework. This year, we received \$3 million in our budget for our Rural and Outer Island (ROI) programme. Of that allocation, we managed to complete 22 projects. One of the projects, is the road that links the interior of Saqani from Nasasa to Nadogo, Valevoni, Nacula and Lakeba, which was undertaken through this budgetary provision. I only hope that we were in Government for the last 16 years, we would have opened up all the areas that are still to be developed. I hope that this budget will continue to be given to the Ministry and we will continue to build more roads for our people in our rural areas.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to render my full support to the National Budget and motion before Parliament.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen in the public gallery and to all those who are watching this proceedings on live platform; firstly, I would like to congratulate honourable Bainivalu in her appointment as Minister for Fisheries and Forests, and I thank our colleague, honourable Ravu, for his service as Minister. Of course, he will continue to serve the people of Fiji with his know-how and skillset, and unwavering commitment to the Coalition Government. Secondly, I congratulate the Attorney-General, honourable Graham Leung, in his appointment as the Chief Legal Adviser to Government and Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every once in a while, a generation of people and, for our purpose, a group of leaders, would be called upon to a time of nation rebuilding, resetting and revisioning. They would be called upon to congregate around a fresh new vision for a better country. They would be required to rally around a new set of ideals that would have an impact on the lives of our nation's citizens now and, most importantly, in the future. That future already has a mortgage on it in our children's name.

That time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is upon us now. In saying that, I salute the nine Independent Members who have shown support to the honourable Prime Minister. When I say anything about the Opposition in this contribution, it excludes the nine Members who are, for all intents and purpose of this speech, a part of Government.

Mr. Speaker, it is time to rebuild the political, economic and social landscapes of our nation for those who will come after us. It is time to rehash, rethink together as leaders, collectively as representatives of voters, who thought it prudent to put us here in the first place. Let us validate their hope and aspirations, and hand them a Fiji that they can enjoy and continue to call home, and God willing, for many generations to come.

The statement of the honorable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Finance cannot be clearer for the future. We need a budget that speaks truth to the citizens of our nation now and sets a stage for growth, bringing equity into the economy that we can all participate in into the future. Some critics on the other side (excluding the nine), claim that it lacks glamour, colour and high ending statements. Whilst they are entitled to such opinions, Mr. Speaker, this year's Budget, in my view, seeks to do a few things.

Firstly, it seeks to salvage the nation from a one and a half decade long of poor fiscal management and its impacts, bloated economic numbers, fragile investment environment, targeted persecutions and unsustainable programmes, that has created an extremely unhealthy economic environment, uncondusive for future growth. Empowerment programmes for self-sufficiency,

monitoring of the Government expenditure to gauge efficacy of the public dollar, encouragement to entice new industries and innovation to bring employment were all drawn downwards in favor of the much easier but much costlier hand-to-mouth policies of the previous Government.

Secondly, it realises that the GDP-to-debt ratio must come down and must continue to come down for the next decade for stability, provide more latitude for Government to spend on growth areas that will energise the economic environment for contextual investment, targeted assistance and making Fiji a country that can attract large investments of the world. Much of the noise from the loyalists have been in no programmes, no incentives, no new infrastructure, et cetera. As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications said to me in passing yesterday, “they spent like a wounded bull in the last decade that resulted in very limited fiscal space to move post-election.” That is true.

Mr. Speaker, *Google* is here, large BPOs are coming, large farming companies are now doing their due diligence before they put shovel to ground, new hotel ventures are in the horizon, and as announced by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications on Monday, 8th July, 2024, \$6.25 billion of investment is in the immediate forecast. This is what economic prudence and discipline in governance does in only 18 months. It brings investor confidence back to the country.

Imagine, Mr. Speaker, the employment that will be generated by these investments. The Lyndhurst Kalabu Project, for example, will alone bring about 10,000 to 15,000 direct employment when all the project phases are completed. That is a Government that is giving confidence to investment. That is a Government that is giving confidence to young Fijians, a job launching pad to begin a career, get married, raise a family and prosper right here at home.

It must not be forgotten, Mr. Speaker, that this Government is 18 months old, and we are doing the best we can within means. The previous government and its founding platform ruled Fiji for 16 years. We are just at the surface level of repairing our economy and reigniting Fiji that was built by our founding fathers pre- and post-independence democracy.

Whilst much has been accomplished, Mr. Speaker, much more needs to be done. We are not flushed with funds as a nation so we all must work within our means. Working within means was something that the Bainimarama Government did not have in its dictionary for the last 16 years. They overspent easily between \$1 billion to \$2 billion during their tenure in office, and that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is irresponsible governance.

The Opposition have talked about natural disasters and global pandemic as the shocks in our progress as a nation. Let me remind them of the most devastating disaster and a phenomenon more damaging than COVID-19 that was pushed on the people of Fiji as early as 2006 - a two-men government and their much-proclaimed leaders. That two-men government gave Fiji the highest debt a single government has given us since all the governments put together post-Independence.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- They gave Fiji a warped political party registration law that they are now paying for it. In 2014, they cooked the economic books, they realigned the statistician to change the baseline and therefore change the numbers. No wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that by 2018, there was a huge confusion between the GDP and the *dinau* by the previous Prime Minister. Speaking of *dinau*, a few hundreds of thousands of dollars is still yet to be paid by the de-registered

Party. Right? Right! Too much noise from the other side, Mr. Speaker, that Government is not doing enough.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Prove it here, prove it here!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- We are doing everything a responsible government will do within its means.

Perhaps on the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the honourable Members may not have maths as their best subject. In this year's Budget, \$410 million is in direct assistance. In addition to that, we have also included the 22 zero-rated items on VAT and, of course, the prescribed medicine. We have increased salaries for the civil servants, as well as upping the minimum wage.

In the sugar industry this year, the last payment was \$101.08, the largest ever in the history of the sugar industry in Fiji; the largest ever.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has this year been allocated \$36.5 million; that is an increase of \$6.4 million from the previous year.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- The budget increase will continue to allow the Ministry to enhance its commitment and fulfil its roles to effectively and efficiently administer and regulate land and the mineral resources sector.

For the Ministry of Lands, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also I may have to say this before my time is up, to the people who may not have had a good run with my Ministry and the staff of the Ministry this year, I stand here as the responsible Minister to ask for your forgiveness. We will work towards our collective effort to make sure that our service delivery in the next financial year is better.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I hope so.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government's Budget may not be filled with fancy words of the previous government's budget, but we know is that it is attending to the everyday-need of Fijians, especially those who live farther away from the main urban centres and the peri-urban centres of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have run out of time, I fully support the Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Finance. I thank his team at the Ministry of Finance - the Permanent Secretary, Director Budget and the entire budget team. *Me lagilagi saka o Viti!*

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea but before doing so, I would like to make two announcements.

The first one is that when we resume, I will be calling upon the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to make his Right of Reply, that is, the reply to all that have been raised in the debate that you have participated in, honourable Members. It will be an uninterrupted speech as is the tradition and this has been approved by the Business Standing Committee as well, so he can speak for as long as he likes.

The second one is that the Secretariat would like to inform you, honourable Members, that the Medical Team is at Level 2 in Parliament precincts, willing to undertake checkup, et cetera.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Blood pressure!

MR. SPEAKER.- Well, it is bound to affect a lot of pressure because of the Budget. You will gain some, you will lose some, that is the way it goes. Those are the two announcements that I would like to make from the Chair and enjoy your tea. We will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.12 a.m.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers and Members of Parliament; I rise to provide my Right of Reply to the 2024-2025 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two days, I have listened carefully, I did not try to interject as much as I wanted to, but I have listened carefully to all the contributions coming from both sides of Parliament, and I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister and all my colleagues on the Government side for their contributions. I also want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all the Independent Members, who came out in support of the Budget and many others who were more balanced, showed some creativity, and I cannot say the same about few of the loyalists on the other side, but it does so, Mr. Speaker, that when we have the freedom to speak, we unleash creativity thinking and we do things in a more honest way, if there is no compulsion and there is no fear.

This is very welcomed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and as a government, we are very proud that we have provided that environment in the country, the confidence for our people, for investors and for everyone to speak their mind, to criticise the Government and to move the country forward.

There was an interesting observation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, made by honourable Kirpal in his contribution. He said to the fact that in the previous government, Cabinet Ministers would get to see the budget an hour before the Budget Address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, as a Government and, again, I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership, where our budget formulation, as I have said, takes a very thorough process at the Permanent Secretary level, at individual ministerial level, with the Minister for Finance, the Cabinet Sub-Committee, culminating in the whole budget being approved by Cabinet before the Budget Address in Parliament. That, Sir, is a very transparent open engaging process that we have formulated in both, our first and second Budget, and I have no doubt that, that will be the case as we move into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, formulating a national budget is not an easy task, especially in the midst of a large public debt which constraints your ability to fix infrastructure and public services that had been neglected for many years. The gaps are even tougher, if you also inherit an economy that is recovering from a major economic setback, not only because of poor management, but because of events, like COVID-19, with the need for fiscal support to protect the fragile economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, governments, as you know very well, can only spend what they collect from taxes and other forms of revenue, as well as what they can borrow. Both taxes and borrowed money do not come cheap. Therefore, it is important that governments make the best use of these taxpayer resources where it gives the highest return, and that involves making tough decisions and policy trade-offs, and at most times, choosing what is economically correct and physically responsible rather than for short-term political survival.

At the same time, giving the critical role of government to provide essential services, it is important that the government is well funded. Otherwise, we have seen over several years that the Government actually did not have enough money to fix our hospitals, improve our roads, solve our water woes, clean our drainages, rescue our deteriorating public assets and pay our civil servants well. We may well have this situation for the future, until we fix and until we have growth, that we are able to build more fiscal spaces. That is exactly what we have done in the last two Budgets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we ensured that Government is well funded to not only fix public infrastructure and services, but to contain our fiscal deficit and put our public debt on a downward trajectory.

I know a lot has been said about Government debt and I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition tried to weave and find his own explanation and put a positive picture of what might have happened before, but the reality of the matter as they say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have earlier said, Fiji's debt to GDP ratio peaked at around 90 percent of GDP in July 2022, rising from 53 percent in 2006. By the end of July 2024, we would have brought down the debt to GDP ratio to 78 percent - a reduction of 12 percentage point in just 18 months, and they have talked about how we have done in 18 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources, in his very excellent contribution, said that in 18 months, we can only do so much, and he said how much we have done in 18 months. This was not an easy feat but a great achievement for us, as a nation, putting a path or foundation for a downward trajectory into our debt to GDP ratio.

Even more importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the fiscal reforms in the last Budget, we have fixed our revenue problem and brought fiscal deficits under control from the double-digit levels, honourable Leader of the Opposition, prior to us getting into Government. This means that as the economy grows, our debt to GDP ratio will continue on a downward path.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to continue on this course, and this is not a problem that can be fixed in a year or two. We need to be committed to a fiscal plan for, at least, the next decade. So, what we are doing, Sir, we are not thinking that we are going to be in the Government for the next one decade or two decades as some used to think, we are setting honestly and clearly the path for the next decade whoever is in Government.

The political will and national commitment to get our debt problem under control has been commended, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by international agencies, financial institutions, like the IMF and World Bank, credit rating agencies and all our development partners. So, we have a very good tick, and that provides the confidence to our investors, foreign investors and everyone else that is looking at Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been talked about on VAT. I have heard some of the honourable Opposition Members and most of the loyalists, asking why we are not reducing VAT...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The real Opposition, not the loyalists.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...that reducing VAT is not an option.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That will become very clear in the passage of time.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are worried when honourable Opposition Members, like honourable Premila Kumar, honourable Chand, honourable Ketan Lal and others, are proposing that we reduce VAT from 15 percent to 9 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are forgetting conveniently that they were part of a leadership when the VAT rate was 15 percent with no exemption. It was the push by the Opposition which is now in Government, that we forced them after the 2014 General Election to reduce the VAT. They reduced the VAT, but they did not have zero VAT on basic food items.

Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they changed it to three rates - they had 15 percent, 9 percent and zero percent, and none of them in their contribution on VAT talked about what was there before.

Plus, Sir, none of them mentioned that this Government kept the zero rate on VAT and on food items, and we added prescribed medicine with 22 items VAT free.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me tell honourable Premila Kumar that if we reduce VAT from 15 percent to 9 percent, we will lose \$600 million in revenue. For every 1 percent reduction in VAT, we lose about \$100 million in tax revenue. The question is, how are you going to compensate for this, honourable Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You did not collect.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Are you going to increase the fiscal deficit to double digit and add additional \$600 million in loan? But technically, you cannot borrow this additional \$600 million, given the availability of financing. Are you going to reduce expenditure by \$600 million, of which, none of you talked about?

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when we were in Opposition, they were asking, “Where is the Opposition’s alternative budget?” For eight years, they hounded me and said, “Where is your alternative budget?”. I kept telling them that it is not easy for an Opposition to bring an alternative budget, given the difficulty that we had to get information. Now, they are free, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What is your alternative budget? Where is it now?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public should note that a lot of the information that came from some of the Opposition Members was half information, and half information can be dangerous and misleading. It is easy for some of them to come here and say that we should reduce VAT, without saying how we would fix the revenue gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reiterate that when we increased the VAT rate from 9 percent to 15 percent in the last Budget, we had done a thorough analysis, explore different options, consulted with various experts, discussed with our multilateral lenders, and even brought it for public discussion. We did not hide it. We knew it was not an easy call, so we had to make sure that we get it right.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we just did not pluck out the 15 percent from thin air, but it was based on a thorough analysis and what was there already, as put forth by the previous government. Then we looked at our revenue needs and worked out what will ensure that government is adequately funded. We were also able to put our debt to GDP ratio on a downward path. If we had not done that, Sir, we would have been in a major debt distress by now, and most of our lenders would have stopped lending to the Government. I will talk more about VAT when I talk about the cost of living.

The other thing that the honourable Leader of the Opposition did, Mr. Speaker, was comparison of per capita debt, and that is a right thing to do. I am not saying that the honourable Leader of the Opposition was not right. But let me shed some light on the nominal debt and debt per capita per person, which a number of people have talked about.

The Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, inherited a total debt of around \$9.5 billion at the end of 2022. In terms of debt per capita, look at the total debt, divide by the total population, that is the debt per capita, Sir. This was around \$10,700. By the end of this Budget in July 2025, our total debt is projected to be \$10.9 billion, or \$12,300 per person. This means that in terms of debt per capita, the Coalition Government in three years, would have added about \$1,600 debt per person.

On the contrary, the previous government inherited a total debt of \$2.9 billion in 2006, or \$3,400 per person. During their term, they increased the debt level to \$9.5 billion, or \$10,700 per person. This is an additional debt of \$6.6 billion, or in per capita terms, an additional per capita debt of \$7,300 per person.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Compare apples with apples.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Sachida Nand who also talked about it, this is the reality when we talk about debt per capita. By July 2025, we would have added \$1,600 in additional debt per person, which they would have added about \$7,300 additional debt to every person. So, that is just an explanation on debt per capita.

Let me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, get to the cost of living because that is another issue that everyone is concerned about, and we all ought to be concerned about. Let me provide some clarification and explanation so that some of them do not go out and lie to the people about what the Government is doing.

This is a sensitive issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it is always subject to political point-scoring, but let me put through some basic economic facts. First, prices are generally set through market forces in most cases, based on demand and supply. Sellers or producers decide the price of ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Which you never understood when you were in Opposition.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...their product based on the cost of production, including labour, raw materials, transportation, storage, taxes and associated costs. And based on the level of demand and competition from other suppliers, they decide to put up whatever mark up and the final price on the product, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But the basic principle remains that no one will ever sell their product at the price below their cost of production.

Secondly and more importantly, governments can influence the price of any product only to a certain extent, and it can do so in three ways –

- (1) we can put price controls;
- (2) changing the level of taxes it applies on these products by producing the product itself; or
- (3) selling it at a loss, like Government services, including water.

So, even with price controls and changing the level of taxes, there is only so much that can be done, and there are trade-offs for these decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a government, we have looked at all these options and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications which the Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) comes under his Ministry, is constantly looking at how we can use some of these tools and policies to provide relief to our people, and that is being done. I am sure the honourable Deputy Prime Minister will be making at some of those decisions soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are always trade-offs in terms of whatever policies you choose. So, the point that I am trying to make is that it is not easy to bring down prices, and it is critical to understand what the Government can do which they did, which they do not admit what we have done. So, even for some zero rate on VAT items and quite conveniently, none of them talked about the fact that 22 items still has zero VAT - 21 basic food items and prescribed medicine.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Microwaving, that is what you always say.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Despite the fact that there is no VAT on these items, the price had increased due to increase in either production cost or other associated costs, like freight, insurance, storage, et cetera, which is completely beyond our control, and they know that. It happened during COVID. The freight cost went up three or four times and some of it stayed for a long time. So, even when you reduce the duty, even when you have zero VAT, the prices, Mr. Speaker, Sir, still went up, and other reasons. I know, honourable Usamate, in the last session of Parliament, may be a better way to describe him is honourable hogwash, talked about cassava.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order, Sir. The honourable Member should refer to other honourable Members as “honourable Member”, not as “hogwash”. Hogwash is a general term. He needs to withdraw that.

HON. SPEAKER.- You may carry on, Deputy Prime Minister, and be mindful of that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we are trying to say is that for most of the products that we consume in Fiji, as such, it is difficult to control the import prices which are determined in the global markets. Our major trading partners, including Australia, New Zealand, United States of America, have all been experiencing very, very high inflation rates due to global supply chain disruptions associated with the pandemic. Australia’s inflation was 6.6 percent in 2022, highest in 31 years, while New Zealand was 7.2 percent in 34 years, the US was 8 percent highest in 40 years.

So, given trade links with these countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is natural that the price of imports from these countries would be higher and have a bigger impact, since around 50 percent of our consumption basket is made up of imported items. So, I am trying to explain this, Sir, because our people need to understand and many of them do. It also, I think, nullifies the lies that some honourable Members on the other side have been telling our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at comparable countries, such as Mauritius, its inflation was 10.8 percent in 2022, 7 percent in 2023 and 5.9 percent in 2024. In our neighbouring Pacific countries, Vanuatu recorded inflation of 6.7 percent in 2022, 12 percent in 2023 and 6.7 percent in 2024, while Tonga noted an inflation of 8.5 percent in 2022, 10.2 percent in 2023 and 5.4 percent is expected in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our inflation rate in Fiji stood at 5.1 percent at the end of last year, 7.1 percent in April this year, but that is just in April. Our current inflation rate in June 2024 stood at 6.7 percent and is projected (this is from the Fiji Bureau of Statistics) to stabilise around 3 percent to 4 percent by the end of the year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- 4.4.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And honourable Usamate said, never in the history we have had this high inflation rate.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, 4.4.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you look at the inflation rate during their time and he was part of that government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No, I was not!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, you joined after that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In 2009, it was 6.8 percent; in 2011, it was 7.7 percent; and in 2008, it was 6.6 percent. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two Budgets, to help our people and to address the cost of living challenges, we maintained zero percent VAT on 21 items and also added prescribed medicines to make it 22 items.

Now, we have sugar, flour, rice, dhal, tea, potatoes, onions, garlic, canned fish, cooking oil, salt, liquid milk, powdered milk, baby milk, sanitary pads, soap, soap powder, toilet paper, toothpaste, cooking gas, kerosene and prescribed medicine all on zero VAT and these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are basically the first things that people buy in their baskets. In fact, this list was what we had proposed before the 2018 Elections, and they just copied the same list and included that. We are very happy that they did that. This is just ahead of the 2022 Elections.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Microwave.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, they talk about microwave, but that was the real microwave.

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

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In the last Budget, we also increased the Social Welfare Allowances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by 25 percent for those above the age of 70 years and 15 percent for those below 70 years. We increased the Government Pension and Aftercare Allowances by 15 percent. We had increased the allowances for all our *Turaga ni Koro* (Village Headmen), *Mata ni Tikina* (iTaukei District Representatives), *Turaga ni Yavusa* (Tribe Leaders), Provincial Administrators and District Advisory Councillors. We introduced the \$200 per child Back-to-School Support for all families below an income of \$50,000, assisting over 200,000 students. Honourable Hem Chand and others were actually lying when they said, “this was a FijiFirst initiative.”

HON. J. USAMATE.- Of course.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Of course, it was!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Microwave.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What FijiFirst had, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was inflation mitigation measures from August 2022 up to January 2023, and it was \$1 a day for six months, so \$180. Sir, that was an election gimmick, before the Elections. A \$1 a day for six months to give \$180 and it was paid through the school.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are lying and saying, “Back-to-School Support”.

When the honourable Prime Minister announced that, he was not thinking about the next Election last year. As soon as we came into Government, we realised that our students, our rural children, needed this support and that is why we did that. It was not an election gimmick, and it was a new measure, a flagship measure by the People's Coalition Government to help our students.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Flagship?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it is a flagship initiative by this Government.

We wrote-off \$650 million in TELS debt for 53,000 students, freeing them from the shackles of debt when they started working so that they can use that repayment money to support them. This was a deliberate policy by the Coalition Government and that idea, thankfully, was mooted by our Coalition partner, the SODELPA Party, before the Elections and we are happy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we did that.

In this Budget, we are providing over \$85 million in pay increases for 38,000 civil servants, who were deprived of salary increase since 2017. We have taken a bold step to increase the minimum wage rate to \$5 an hour, an increase of 25 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Bala and others claimed that the minimum wage increase is too slow. They should go and look at themselves in the mirror.

(Laughter)

When they were in government, it took them almost eight long years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to just introduce the minimum wage rate in 2014. Eight years to just introduce! That too at only \$2 an hour.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Then they increased it to \$2.32, and later to \$2.68 an hour in September 2017, only before the Elections. We did not do it before the Elections. Only before the Elections did they announce a four-phase increase from \$2.68 to \$4 an hour.

They are talking about why we phased it. In the 2018, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the Elections, we were campaigning for \$5 an hour and some of them were there.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Who?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They went around threatening garment factory workers, saying that Government cannot afford, when the economy at that time was better. That was the time to raise minimum wages, but they did not. So, we are increasing the minimum wage rate to \$5 based on a comprehensive consultation review by panel of experts, who had undertaken a thorough analysis and consultation with employers, unions and other stakeholders, and we are doing it in two phases as we need also to be mindful of some of the employers who need time to adjust.

The other point, Mr. Speaker, and you can see it is happening in the last 18 months already, that unions are negotiating for better conditions and internationally, Sir, including organisations, like IMF. All evidences show that in countries where you suppress unions, where you suppress their leaders and where you restrict employees, the workers of that country would suffer in terms of their pay, et cetera, and this is exactly what happened in this country for the last 16 years.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If, Mr. Speaker, workers were allowed over the years, we would not have seen this problem that we are seeing today, and that is what this Government is trying to correct.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Sugar Industry and others, talked about the highest cane price for our sugarcane farmers, adding income to our rural communities. We are paying our rice farmers \$1,000 per tonne of rice paddy. All our cash crop non-sugar farmers are receiving much higher prices for their crops, as well as subsidies, for the first time, unlike when they were only getting it for sugar.

However, for the first time in the last Budget, we had provided subsidies for weedicide and fertilizer to non-sugar crop sectors, we are extending that list in this Budget and we are continuing with our social support measures, like free education, transport assistance, subsidised electricity for households earning less than \$30,000, free medical service through private General Practitioners, et cetera. So, all those services are being provided.

Let me also tell this fact, Mr. Speaker, which will help our honourable Members on the other side to better explain these things to our people. All the support that we are talking about is going to cost the Government about \$750 million alone this year. This is going directly to supporting our people. Whether you talk about zero VAT on the 22 items, the Government would be putting in about \$250 million that we could collect in taxes into the pockets of our people, Back-to-School Support - \$40 million; Social Pension - \$78 million; Family Assistance - \$44 million; Disability Allowance - \$17 million; Child Protection Allowance - \$17 million; Electricity Subsidy - \$10 million; Water Subsidy; Transport Subsidy; Scholarships - \$150 million, Free Health Scheme, Kidney Dialysis, First Home Buyers; if you put all these together, apart from all the other benefits that people are getting, it is \$750 million. So, all the additional revenue that we have collected from the tax reform, whether it is increasing Corporate Tax, none of them talked about that, that we are not only just burdening the people, but we are being fair and equitable in terms of our tax policies.

The \$100 million additional revenue that we are collecting is all going to look after our people because we realized that before COVID and post-COVID, our people are still transitioning into more income, better jobs and, therefore, it is the responsibility of the Government. We are doing it responsibly, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Virendra Lal said that this Budget has nothing for the ordinary people for which they can be proud of.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The people are listening, Mr. Speaker. He does not want the children to get \$200. Let me say this to him, very few supporters who voted for him would not be feeling very proud of him today when they know that this is what he is opposing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about the economy because a lot of comments were made that the economy is slowing down, there is no confidence and investment is not taking place. Sir, the economy is not declining, let that be made clear. The economy is growing, and it is still growing, honourable Premila Kumar. You are an economist, or have you become a bit of an economist now?

We have revised the growth forecast from 3.4 percent to 3.8 percent, but it is still growing and there are other commentators who are saying that we may end up with a higher growth than what

we are. We are not doing it like the cooking that they used to do when they were in Government. We are being very honest because we want people to trust the Government in terms of what we say, so we are not exaggerating and saying that we are going to get 3.5 percent or 3.6 percent. When we know that we are facing headwinds from the slowdown in Australia and New Zealand, the challenges with our declining labour force and challenges in other areas, we have revised growth forecast downwards, but the economy is still growing, it is not contracting as misunderstood by some of them.

With the fiscal stimulus and economic optimism provided in this Budget, there is a likelihood that this growth, as I have said, would be revised upwards. We do not worry about what ANZ and others are saying, we are saying from our assessment that we have revised it downwards, but that there are these other variables that have realised that the growth could be much higher.

We are, obviously, taking into account the positive impact of the Budget on some of the areas which will spur private sector investment and as both my Deputy Prime Minister colleagues have said, whether it is tourism or other sectors – agriculture or commercial agriculture - there are a lot of investments almost to the tune of \$2 billion in private sector investments. As I have said, we are making sure that the ease of doing business is improved. We are fixing our Immigration and all the other bottlenecks that might be there for investment to pick up in a much bigger way.

We are seeing some major investments moving forward - new private sector interests in commercial agriculture, as I have said, outsourcing, ICT, and other new industries that will help grow the economy. Our efforts, as a whole of Government level, is aimed at raising our growth rate from the current trend of 3 percent to 4 percent or 5 percent.

Another big issue that has been made by some is the expenditure utilisation. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very honest here. We provide quarterly updates, and we are not hiding any of these from the Government or from the public. So, the big hoo-hah about the expenditure utilisation of the Coalition Government and the execution of capital projects, let me put that in context.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we might have been slow in the last few months, but we have caught up with quite a bit of it. We are now projecting that our overall expenditure utilisation to be about 94 percent by the time we close this year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What about the virement?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This includes a 97 percent utilisation of the operating budget, which is understandable, and 85 percent implementation of the capital projects. I agree that we can further improve on the execution of the capital projects, and we do not make any bones about that when we discuss these things within our own Government. The honourable Prime Minister knows it, everyone knows that execution is very, very important. But let me share the expenditure utilisation during their time in government, to put matters into context, because it is important.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Why didn't you show us the change?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what I want to show, the difference that we are making.

For the 2016-2017 Budget, capital budget utilisation, honourable Premila Kumar, was only 70.5 percent, while the total expenditure utilisation was 84 percent. For the 2017-2018 Budget, capital budget utilisation was only 77.7 percent, while total expenditure utilised was 85.9 percent. For the 2018-2019 Budget, Sir, budget capital utilisation was only 61.2 percent, while total

expenditure was 74.7 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me bring this very important point, it was not the ineffectiveness or the inefficiency of people executing the project at that time, it was because the government was running into cashflow problems.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know that, I know that. This is the briefing I got from my Ministry.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Before the 2018 Elections, they were running into cashflow problems and that is why before the 2018 Elections, they announced so many things and the execution capital was 62 percent and 74 percent overall. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2019, they had a negative growth. The economy contracted because they lied before the Budget.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Anyway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to put this into context. We are not trying to justify our execution rate, as I have said.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You have just done that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Figures are stuck.

But it is important for our Opposition colleagues to understand what was happening during their time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Tell us about virement.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Operating capital mix.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You're just avoiding!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Premila Kumar is just getting too irritating, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I will be.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because she cannot take what has been said.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Because you're lying!

MR. SPEAKER.- You just carry on, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the operational mix, some also claimed that our operating to capital mix is 73:27 is low because governments are major providers of social services, like education, health, security, judicial services which are labour intensive, such as Police and the Military. You generally require around 70 percent expenditures towards operational spending. Similarly, capital expenditure mix is around 30 percent – 70:30, as we can only budget what we can execute which is based on the absorption capacity of the government and that is true for any government. But we agree that we can do more to beef up on our spending on capital projects.

On revenue projection, this is another area where some of the Opposition Members were doubting whether our revenue projections are correct. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to clarify that the revenue projection for 2024-2025 is not too optimistic or is not simplistic. I would like to assure everyone that the revenue numbers that are being set are realistic as possible as we can. No good thinking government would want to overstate revenue for any reason because if we do that, we will get caught and struggle with cashflow problems, so we do not want to do that. That is why our projection is based on very clear analysis and figures and the policies that we have. As I have said, Government did run into cashflow problems in 2018 and 2019, so there is no real incentive for us to be too optimistic with our revenue numbers.

Given our successful revenue reforms in the last Budget, we are projecting a total revenue of \$3.9 billion, of which \$3.3 billion is tax collection, \$0.6 billion will be collected from non-tax revenues. So, we are not making any major changes to the tax, as I have said in my Budget Speech, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, I can assure the honourable Members of the Opposition that this revenue forecast is very realistic. We have worked out very clearly the non-tax revenues, particularly those that come from Government entities, like the Reserve Bank of Fiji and other agencies. These are already, kind of, determined for this Budget, so there is no dispute and worry about the level of revenue that we are likely to collect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lack of consultations on the Budget came out as a theme and honourable Ketan Lal made a big deal about it. This is a government which has had probably one of the most thorough, open, and transparent consultation process on everything that we have done so far in just 18 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, contrary to the lies that honourable Ketan Lal was trying to tell, we have done consultations during the National Development Plan, starting from the Economic Summit, Fiscal Review Committee Decisions, multiple meetings with private sector institutions, industry groups, civil society organisations, academia, students, faith-based organisations, Disciplined Forces, and targeted focus group.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-We invited you, and your former General-Secretary (I will come to him in a minute), refused to come.

In February 2024, we concluded the nationwide consultation on the National Development Plan, and this was where more than 22,000 people came from all four Divisions. Many of them came not only to talk about the plan, but we were also told what they wanted in the Budget.

So, there was a thorough Budget consultation done as part of the National Development Plan because as I have said, the National Development Plan will be launched in August, and the process has been undertaken thoroughly within the Government. For any Budget, never before has this kind of consultation done. I think they should stop lying about no consultation being done.

I am confident, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that a lot of what has come out from these consultations have been reflected in the Budget. For example, the 1,700 boreholes that we are going to put out in the next one year or two years, came from the people.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Again, in the pipeline.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not in the pipeline, it is part of the Budget!

Those are examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that came out from the consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was an issue about the taxing of property income on non-profit organisations. I wish to clarify the issue around the taxing of business income for non-profit organisations. Firstly, all donations and fundraising activities for charitable organisations are exempt from tax. Apart from this, business making cash donations to any registered charitable organisation can claim if it has a deductible expense.

Following the amendment to the Income Tax Act in 2016, non-profit organisations that were engaged in profit-oriented activities were subject to tax only for their business income component. This policy ensures fairness with the tax system, as individuals or business conducting similar businesses activities were also subjected to taxes. Otherwise, we would create a difficult playing field for everyone.

There are a number of non-profit organisations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we picked up, who were starting their commercial arms, some with good intentions and some as a means of tax evasion. This amendment was to close those loopholes where commercial organisations were setting up non-profit organisations and using that as a way to avoid taxes.

Another important factor influencing this change was the formation of, as I have said, not only by commercial entities, but other businesses as well. So, this loophole is going to be closed and that there would be a much better transparency in the way that is applied.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ministers have talked about it. We have had some good contributions from honourable Opposition Members on drug and crime, but as the honourable Minister for Home Affairs pointed out quite rightly and emotionally, that if we had dealt with this some years back, we would not be in the situation where we are in now. But I am glad that we now have an environment in this country, the political environment not only in this Parliament but outside of this Parliament where we can all work together.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Propaganda!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not propaganda, look around yourselves.

We have taken decisive action, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to setting up the Narcotics Bureau and making sure that we put in additional money into the activities of the Police and the honourable Minister talked about the major reset of our Police Force and closer collaboration and intelligence sharing with our key security partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a number of other quick points that I want to respond to, and I will try and finish as soon as I can after that.

On the point raised by When the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation was talking about the tourism receipts, honourable Sachida Nand confused himself, and he was talking about the figure of \$2.9 billion. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister was talking about the tourism receipts, and the honourable Member said, "Oh, because it is only \$2.9 billion or something, the contribution of tourism to GDP is much lower." That is not true. That is bad economics. I think you should keep away from trying to understand that because receipts is just one part of the tourism industry. There are a lot of spin-offs - hotels, transport, and so the total contribution of the tourism industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is close to 40 percent of GDP. Again, I would urge the honourable Member to refrain from talking because when you come here as a Member of Parliament, you have to make sure that what you say is correct.

Honourable Sachida Nand talked about revaluation and, Mr. Speaker, when you talk about revaluation and devaluation, it is a very, very sensitive issue because you do not want to

HON. S. NAND.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 18 - Misquoting.

MR. SPEAKER.- Hold on, honourable Member.

HON. S. NAND.- I apologise, Standing Order 81(1)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you seem to be changing every now and again. Please, resume your seat.

Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you may continue.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

What I was saying is that he talked about revaluation. This is a very sensitive matter. When you talk about revaluation or devaluation because it can trigger even a discussion of revaluation, or a suggestion of a revaluation or devaluation can ignite a lot of activities which can be very, very damaging to the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, already, our dollar has appreciated against some of our trading partners and it would be silly to suggest any kind of revaluation of a dollar and also about devaluation. I mean, when we had the devaluation in 2009, there was a major increase in prices in 2000, and it sets a trend of activities for years for us to deal with. So, I would urge him, without understanding the impact of the idea of revaluation and devaluation, he should refrain from talking about it.

The reference by honourable Bala about the EXIM Bank loan, I thought it was unbecoming of the honourable Member. In fact, it was an insult to our honourable Prime Minister and to the Indian Prime Minister because that decision of a 100-bed super speciality was announced by the honourable Prime Minister of India, together with the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji, and as a grant to build a 100-bed super speciality hospital in this country. And for him to come out and say, "Oh, this might have been traded with the EXIM Bank loan", I think honourable Bala should correct that, even outside of Parliament, that his information was wrong, Mr. Speaker, because it is very important for us to do that.

The point that honourable Usamate made, I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time, he made some very good contribution in the last 18 months, but he then traded it off by a little bit of hogwash, by talking about FNPF and the Vatukoula Gold Mine settlement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had promised in 2015 and someone said that they wanted millions of dollars. I do not think so, they were negotiating with the unions in a good faith. This is a government that has solved that problem because we provided that platform for our unions to talk to the Government to understand the imperatives of resolving that, Mr. Speaker, and that is the leadership that the honourable Prime Minister has provided on that issue because he visited them before the Election. This is a promise that we made to them before we came into Government, and we have been able to settle that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we trusted the union leaders. If you look at the history of unionism in this country, they have been responsible leaders. We have not had that kind of disruptions they were thinking about when they brought those draconian laws. We have taken all that away, we have

provided a platform and I do not think this will be used as a pretext or as a platform to settle other disputes. I think honourable Usamate is worried about dealing with the unions. If he ends up in Government the next time around, I do not know, but you will be very happy if you ever get into Government with the environment that we have created, honourable Usamate.

The FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to respond to what honourable Usamate said. All I want to say is that some of the things that the Military Government did, without consultation, without any empathy, without explaining to the people why it was going to do that, caused a lot of pain to a lot of people in the last 16 years in this country. This is a government that is not promising to write every wrong that was done but where it has the means, where it can show leadership, we are correcting that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is not just one issue. I think this is the message that our investors and our people in this country are getting, that this is a government which is not vindictive, which is not creating fear, which is determined to resolve issues that have been pending for years and we are demonstrating that. The Vatukoula Gold Mine and FNPF is a very clear indication of what we want to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contribution from, should I say, the leader of the loyalist group on the other side, honourable Koya, we can accept criticism when the intention is secure or sincere and when there are clean hands - the criticism coming from people who might have some clean hands, but not from someone who happens to be a Member of Parliament.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not getting personal. He talked about us not having any creativity, not having any innovation in the formulation of the Budget. That is laughable, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That was what he said. People have said that, honourable Bulitavu said that, but we, as a government, do not want to get into that. But when the people of this country listen to comments like that, they are jogging their memory, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the last 16 years and saying, "What was there that we had to live with, that we have now got ourselves out of it".

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is why this side is the largest Party.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Premila Kumar can continue to bask in that glory of being the largest party, but is for the people to judge.

There was a comment made about the quality of education by honourable Naupoto, I agree with him that the quality of education is very important but what he was insinuating was that the new scholarship scheme, based on merit was going to deprive students with lower marks. As the honourable Minister for Education explained, this is in the interest of all our students and those who may feel that, that information is correct, it is not correct, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

When we talk about quality of education, we are talking about improving the quality of learning and teaching environment. For the last 16 years, in the Suva-Nausori area, and the honourable Minister for Education knows this very well because as soon as he came into Government in his portfolio, he realised that and he picked that up - our quality of teaching. Honourable Premila Kumar knows this, they know this, that the staff to student ratio in our primary and secondary schools in this area is overflowing. In some cases, there are 50 students to 60 students in primary school classrooms. So, as a government, we are working with the Australian Government. We have signed

an agreement already, there is an audit being done in terms of the number of classrooms and schools that we need in the Suva-Nausori area, and that is a very, very clear target for us in the next one or two years to build more classrooms so that we reduce and improve the....

HON. J. USAMATE.- Pipeline.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not pipeline, honourable Usamate, it is happening already.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to assure all the students who are coming out of Form 6 or Form 7 that the current scholarship scheme has a place for each one of them. If they cannot get to the university, if they cannot get to medicine, engineering or a degree, there are things that they can do, qualifications that they can get, and that they will get a scholarship.

Let me now come to my friend and those who talked about Pacific Polytech. Mr. Speaker, the way they are talking about it, as if Biman Prasad has something to do with Polytech.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes.

HON. H. CHAND.- Of course.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Chand was in the Ministry of Education and he knows the process. All higher education institutions are registered and approved by an independent body, the Fiji Higher Education Commission. They registered Pacific Polytech in 2021 and they are doing a good job by replacing the defunct technical colleges that they set up and wasted \$30 million that went down the drain.

Honourable Usamate talked about the funding for FNU, so let me just explain how funding is determined for all Higher Education Institutions, including the smaller ones, Sangam Nursing School, et cetera. The submissions by these institutions do not come to the Ministry of Finance, it goes to the Ministry of Education, through the Minister for Education to the Higher Education Commission. The Higher Education Commission does its analysis, they make a recommendation, they have a formula and then it comes to the Ministry of Finance.

The Ministry of Finance can only (in a limited space), we cannot even increase it, we can only reduce it. We reduce the funding allocation, the recovery, the amount that they did not pay to USP. So, we paid \$10 million last year and \$20 million in the last budget. This budget they wanted a recovery a bit more, we have reduced it to \$5 million only. Polytech wanted \$9 million, that was reduced to \$5 million and the Higher Education Commission and all the Ministers who know about Pacific Polytech, who have gone there, and I thank the honourable Tubuna and honourable Tabuya for explaining this to them that somehow there is some conspiracy somewhere. They are training, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They invited you, go and find out from them during the Open Day. If you have that thing, go there, but do not ask me that silly question, I am explaining to you. They invited you, they sent you a letter to go there.

Mr. Speaker, the Higher Education Funding Model, honourable Usamate talked about reduction in funding for FNU. There has been a reduction in funding in the past, increase in funding

– it does not mean that next year FNU is not going to get more or Polytech is not going to have its budget increased or reduced, just like for Sangam Nursing School, they did not ask for more last year but we as a Government gave them more because we wanted them to train more nurses and because the number was there.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the kind of conspiracy that they come up with.

There was a lot of talk about investment environment - confidence. Let me just mention before I conclude Mr. Speaker, for the first time, I think after so many years that the confidence of the investors, even if some of them have it in the pipeline, but the confidence that is coming through from the investors, from the people who want to invest is unprecedented (to use their word). Let me just say this, there is a leading global commercial real estate and investment company (JLL). This is what they said, “when compared with most other markets, Fiji investment fundamentals have remained and are growing strong and highly attractive in the current environment.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- One last point before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, they made this big deal about, 18 months – what have you done? Sir, 18 months is a long time.

HON. K.K. LAL.- You have done nothing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Prime Minister during the campaign, I remember, and he stated this again that there is no way, Mr. Speaker, he did not use that word but I am going to use that, “you cannot Mr. Speaker, Sir, no government in 18 months can deal with every mess that was left to them to deal with.”

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is a fact, Mr. Speaker. The honourable Prime Minister was being very polite, I am not going to be that polite that in 18 months...

HON. P. D. KUMAR.- Still microwaving.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- All my colleagues this side pointed out very clearly what this Government has done in 18 months.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We have set this country on a path to stability, security and prosperity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by first of all thanking all the honourable Members and honourable Ministers on the Government side for their very strong involvement, participation in the formulation of the Budget. I know we have had some very good interrogative discussions during the conversation about where and how we need to do things. I would like to say thank you to all of them including the honourable Assistant Ministers for their support and their contributions in the formulation of the Budget. I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership, trust and confidence that he has in me and his Cabinet colleagues in putting out this Budget through a process that is open, transparent and accountable.

I want to thank my Permanent Secretary and all the senior staff, I asked them for their names, they did not want to give a list of all the names that I wanted to take but I have a great team. They actually feel the freedom, they feel comfortable, they are happy with the way in which we conduct ourselves within the Ministry as opposed to what some of them were going through in the past. I want to thank each one of them but my special thanks also to Assistant Minister for Finance who is also the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee for his contribution.

I want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his openness, for his willingness to participate in forums with the Government. We had a great session at the Fiji Institute of Accountants Conference and the contributions that he made on behalf of the Opposition was quite exemplary. We appreciate that. We want to thank all the Independent Members including the loyalists for their contributions.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the concurrence of the Cabinet and on behalf of the Prime Minister, I urge all honourable Members of Parliament to support this Budget and let us move ahead for the good of this country.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to Standing Order 99 (3), the 2024-2025 Appropriation Bill of 2024 which is known as the Bill No. 7 of 2024 has been read a second time. Without any questions being put, the Bill and the Estimates now stand referred to the Committee of Supply. Before I ask the Secretary-General for the next item on the agenda, just let me as a word of caution.

Honourable Members, please read carefully the directive given by the Supervisor of Elections when the deregistration has occurred for the FijiFirst Party. She is very clear into what we should refrain ourselves from echoing again. I understand it is bit difficult to shed that identity of you being a former FijiFirst parliamentarian, but again, by operation of law, you are all now deemed to be independent, subject to the expiry of the appeal period on 15th of this month.

Immediately after that, then we should be able to understand better where we stand. But again, in between time, we would like to caution the 26 honourable Members, please refrain yourselves from further identifying yourselves with something that has been deregistered by operation of law. Again, everything is still open for redress, should you seek redress, you have every right to do that, even the appeal period that we are now respecting. So, when that time comes on 15th, then you would be able to know better where we stand now.

Honourable Members, Parliament will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider each Head in the Budget Estimates. It is envisaged that this process will be completed on Thursday evening after which the Committee of Supply will then vote on the Schedules and clauses of the 2024-2025 Appropriation Bill 2024.

For the information of honourable Members, we will attempt to complete the debate and votes on Heads 1 to 21 before we adjourn this evening. I hope you will bear with us on that. For the information of all honourable Members, please take note that for the Committee stage, I will sit at the table with the Secretary-General and Members will refer to me as “Mr. Chairman”. The mace will be placed on the lower bracket, and that signifies that the Parliament is in Committee.

Honourable Members, please take further note that the Secretary-General will announce each Head separately, Members may then speak on the Head, and you may speak more than once on each Head. Please take note that in some of the Heads there will be several Programmes and Activities listed. Let me remind you honourable Members, that we will deal with these progressively, this is very important, and we will not regress or go back every now and again, trying to take us back when

we have already moved on. Activities that have been earlier discussed, that is the one I was referring to, we will not revisit them again should you be late or you have been elsewhere when the progress in the Committee of Supply stage has continued.

Honourable Members, you may also move amendments to the Estimates under the respective Heads. If a Member moves an amendment, I will call for a seconder and then debate will ensue and at the end of the debate, the mover will have a right to reply, and this will be followed by the vote on the amendment. All the votes on the amendment will be taken, please be reminded, through acclamation. The final vote on the Head, that will be taken electronically. So, when you are proposing amendments, doing explanations on amendments, when that is being put to vote, it will be done by acclamation. At the end when we finish going through the various SEGs, etcetera, we will then go back to the Head and that will be put to the vote and the vote will be done electronically.

For further information of honourable Members, amendments are limited to those permitted under Standing Order 100(2) and these are an increase or decrease, removal of the item or subhead from the Head being debated. In the past, you may know some of you sitting in the Chambers now fully understand that it was the late Speaker Luveni that use to demand that you give an explanation where will you bring the fund from, where will the fund to address the increase come from. I will not be asking you to do that because I treat each and every one of you as being adult Members of Parliament and ensure that common sense prevails here.

When there are no further amendments and debates, we will proceed to the vote on the Head and then we will continue to the next Head. Sometimes it moves very fast. Honourable Koroilavesau is renowned for moving these kinds of situations at a very fast pace. Please, take note that the amendment slips and copies of Standing Order 100 have been placed on your tables to assist you during the Committee of Supply stage. Altogether there are about 34 Heads but in terms of the numbers and how it is being numbered, there are Heads 1 to 50 which we need to get through today and tomorrow and therefore I humbly seek your full co-operation during this crucial process.

We are just going to prepare for the Committee of Supply stage and I intend to adjourn Parliament at 1.00 p.m. and when we resume, we will go straight into the Committee of Supply. I hope you can all understand that and bear with me.

In Committee

Head 1 – Office of the President

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members the floor is now open for any comments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 1-1(8) - Construction – Executive Office and the Administration Block. I have noticed that last year there was a budget of \$1.5 million and this is down to \$1 million. If we can just have an update on this and just an update if this is the end of it or will it continue to go on.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is a question regarding clarification to SEG 8.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Executive Office and Administration Block.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is the Construction of the Executive Office.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, the reduction is based on the implementation capacity of the agency and the current expenditure performance. So funding is allocated based on the

performance and this is in discussion with the President's Office.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, last year there was \$1.5 million. There is now \$1 million, is this the end of it or is this something that will be continued?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We think this will be continued. It was not used this year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It was not used?

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

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 1 - Office of the President.

Question put.

Head 1 agreed to.

Head 2 - Office of the Prime Minister

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for any comments or clarifications, et cetera.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I have a few, Mr. Chairman, Sir, on Head 2.

Firstly, honourable Prime Minister, I just wish to bring to your attention, Sir, that the implementation rate in the last financial year for the 11 months was around 63.65 percent, according to the report that we had received. I hope that this is something that can be addressed for this year.

On Programme 1-1, I see this consistent too with a few other activities, particularly on SEG 4 - Power Supply (\$460,000) and it is quite consistent right throughout the other activities in SEG 4. I just wanted to seek clarification on this allocation, Sir.

I do apologise, because I have seen this in other Programmes and Activities – Programme 1-2(4), Programme 3-1(4) and Programme 4-1(4). I just want to seek some clarification on that allocation, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, honourable Leader of Opposition. First of all, honourable Members, we are now in Programme 1-2.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, it is because that allocation is also in the other ones, but the huge amount is on Programme 1-1(4) which I have just raised.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The honourable Leader of the Opposition is seeking clarification on that \$460,000. Is there a reply?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In Programme 1 - Maintenance and Operation?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Programme 1-1(4) Power Supply (\$460,000).

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not sure what you are looking at on Page 17?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes, honourable Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's Office?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Power supply covers electricity bills for the office, particularly for the whole of the New Wing of Government Buildings and, of course, our office at Carnarvon Street. This allocation has decreased by \$50,000 and is not sufficient to cover for all the power throughout the year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, still on Programme 1-1(4), I just want a clarification on Security Expenses with an allocation of \$45,000. Is this for the honourable Prime Minister's close protection detail or this is security to do with the residence or with the office?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I think the security covers the whole of the Government Buildings.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That includes the Parliament precincts, that is covered by the Prime Minister's security?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Yes.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, that also includes the training in security detail.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Lastly, Sir, on Programme 1-1(7) – Secretariat to Truth and Reconciliation Commission (\$200,000). Has the secretariat already been appointed, Sir, or with the allocation, this is going to be the funding for that purpose?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is for the establishment of the secretariat, the initial funding.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- On that same SEG, is that entirely just for the setup? There is nothing there for programmes or activities for the Commission to be undertaken this year or that will take place in the next one?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Are we going back or going forward?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Still on Activity 1.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I, kind of, listen to the honourable Leader of the Opposition and he mentioned Activity 2 now. Can we be consistent here? Thank you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, Programme 1-2(6) – Rabi Island Council with an allocation of \$200,000. I know that something that was pending for Rabi was the Council election. Is this just the support to the normal administration or does it cover the Rabi Council Election as well?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the funding is to be used for the operational and development grants to the Rabi Island Council and also for development and operational cost. The allocation has been increased by \$95,000 which will assist the leaders to meet the administrative and operational cost of the Council, such as the Judiciary services on the island, local Police, Lands Office, health workers. The major expenditure will be the renovation of the Council Office and the Banaban House in Suva.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, on that same SEG 6 in terms of the Rotuma Island Council, I noticed that last year, they had a budget of \$500,000 and this year it is down to \$300,000.

Can an explanation be given on what is the reason for the drastic drop of \$200,000 for the Rotuma Island Council?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the funding is used for operational and development grants to the Rotuman Island Council and it is released as per MOA which has been signed. The budget has decreased by \$200,000 based on the needs of the Council as most of their requests have been facilitated in the current financial year.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Can I also explain why there was an increase in allocation last year? It is because in the previous year, the Rotuma Island Council had great difficulty in getting the funds released, a lot of the activities were not incomplete. So, when we came into the last Budget, we provided this additional funding for them to complete some of those, and then this is back to normal funding now.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. I have a question here. Honourable Ketan Lal, you want to increase the fund again?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, unfortunately, the question was already answered so I withdraw my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You do not want an increase or you have withdrawn?

The Minister has already provided sufficient explanation, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The discussions going on here does not match what you are proposing in your slip. You wanted an increase in the budget.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is related to grant to Melanesian *Vasu-i-Taukei*. I recalled in the last session, the discussion was whether they have a council, just like all other communities, and we were told that the council will be formed. I just wanted to know whether the council has been formed or not – for accountability purposes?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- They have an administrator at the moment, not the council.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My other question is on SEG 10 - Small Grants Project (\$2,000,000). My question is to the honourable Prime Minister, if he can give us a breakdown on how this fund was used for us to gauge whether the allocated amount is sufficient or not?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- That fund is allocated, Mr. Chairman, to those that come directly to the Prime Minister's Office, not through various Ministries, et cetera. Some schools come straight to the Prime Minister's Office, some villagers for their water supply, community contribution - those ones come directly and they are funded or assisted by that small grant.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If I can just add, Mr. Chairman, this allocation has always been in the Prime Minister's Office since I know and all prime ministers have this and the discretion is on the honourable Prime Minister. Sometimes when we go visit communities, they make commitments and this these are part of that allocation. Looking at what was disbursed last year, I think this is sufficient for this budget.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just a supplementary question to the Prime Minister, was \$2 million completely used or there is some money saved? Just to understand whether that amount was used up or still left to be used?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- More than \$2 million was used.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Then my next question is, where did you get the extra money if \$2 million was allocated?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- There are some grants that are not allocated directly to the Ministries and they come and they are held in the small grants projects.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I note with appreciation the increase in the budget for the Melanesian *Vasu-i-Taukei*, I think it has increased by \$30,000 and together with the special week that they will have it in November this year, it is a good recognition of their contribution. I am just wanting to know that increase of \$30,000, what exactly is it supposed to be for?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, the funding is used to cater for operational development grants for the Melanesian and *Vasu-i-Taukei* communities - the 68 communities in Fiji. The allocation has increased by \$30,000 based on the demands that are there. There has been increase demands from the communities and they might require more funds for next year.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- There is also more awareness on the existence and the needs of the Melanesian and *Vasu-i-Taukei* since we revived the Girit Day. I believe we owe it to them to have that raised profile. *Vinaka*.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Apart from that they are scattered all over Fiji and they have contributed a lot to the welfare of our country in times of need, war and everything right until now. Thank you.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 3-1. Just seeking clarification through you, Mr. Chairman, on Programme 3. I was just trying to look for the allocation of the PSB Grant. I believe that last year, \$10.4 million was allocated in which only \$6.2 million was used by FBC. But just seeking clarification, may be there is a name change, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, honourable Bia. Have you found it? You stated that you are still looking for it in this Activity.

HON. A. BIA.- It is not included in this one, that is why I am seeking clarification, Mr. Chairman, whether the name has been changed in terms of the allocation or is it in the Communication's Head?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, it is under Head 50 - because we are going to have a new policy on public service grant, therefore, it is put under Head 50, so if you look at Head 50 it is there.

HON. A. BIA.- Thank you, Sir, that is why I was seeking clarification. *Vinaka*.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Please, just confine yourselves to what is there right in front of you. We have moved to the end of the Committee of Supply right up to Head 50, honourable Bia.

Honourable Members, Programme 4-1?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, some clarification on the new IT infrastructure and I think it is fairly new. What is actually covered in this allocation in SEG 9 – Purchase – IT Infrastructure (\$234,635)?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, that will cater for the upgrade of the special server maintained at the National Archives of Fiji. Quotes were obtained from suppliers for which the cost upgrade has increased to \$234,635, inclusive of 15 percent withholding tax.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We are still on Head 2. Parliament will now vote on Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister.

Question put.

Head 2 agreed to.

Head 3 – Office of the Attorney-General

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for any comments on Programme 1-1.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is related to Programme 1-1(7) – Fiji Law Reform Commission. I can see a huge increase in budget as compared to the last financial year by \$200,000. My question is, how do you intend to use the additional sum of \$200,000 in the next financial year?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Chairman, as you know, the Fiji Law Reform Commission was moribund for a couple of years, and this Government has decided to re-establish the Fiji Law Reform Commission. The majority of that money will be expended towards operations and the hiring of new staff. The Government has a very busy legislative agenda, and the recruitment of Senior Legal Officers will enable the Commission to carry out its work.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just a supplementary question, Mr. Chairman. In the last financial year, around \$400,000 was given for the Fiji Law Reform Commission. How was that money utilised, now that you are given additional \$200,000, and what kind of number are you looking at that will be mending the Fiji Law Reform Commission?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Chairman, the majority of that money was expended on operations, as well as the hiring of staff. The majority of the staff are professional lawyers, and they are expensive to hire. Of course, law reform is a complex exercise. As I said, the Commission was dis-established some years ago, and the start up operations are very expensive. But I can assure this honourable Parliament, that the money had been well spent and will continue to be accounted for.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I think my question was not fully answered. What is the number of staff you are going to put in the Fiji Law Reform Commission and what is your budget like?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, the budget is for salaries and allowances for 12 positions, which are the Chairman, Director, one Senior Legal Officer, four Legal Officers, one Senior Secretary, Executive Officer, Clerical Officer, typist and two drivers/messengers. Let me say that, this was de-established and

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We have heard it three times, thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, but you have to understand that we are re-establishing this. This is what you do not understand.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, we did understand. Thank you, honourable Attorney-General for

explaining that, clearly understood.

Considering that it was de-established and now you are establishing it, and currently 12 positions are being created, do you think 12 positions are enough for the amount of work that you have to do, or you feel that you need additional funding?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Chairman, I congratulate the honourable Member concerned for her interest in the work of the Commission. It has a challenging role because at the risk of repetition, it was dis-established, but the needs of the Commission will continue to grow as the demands on legislative reform increase. The honourable Leader of the Opposition mentioned the Pharmaceutical Bill and I have extended an invitation to the honourable Leader of the Opposition to work across Parliament on laws that require reform. So, not just on the Government side, there is an ambitious law reform agenda and we welcome your participation in this exercise.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I personally want to thank him for his response.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I just have one more question on that issue. I am just thinking that if all the salaries are covered by this \$1 million from \$400,000 last year and \$600,000? Will they stay as project positions or will they gradually graduate to SEG1 to Personal Emoluments, these positions that you have in the Commission?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is an independent Commission as you will understand. All independent Commissions are not part of the establishment, as I said, it is separate. These 12 additional staff are from zero. As we move on, as the honourable Attorney-General said, the Commission will be allocated a budget every year and they decide how many people, and it is their request for these positions that we are funding.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, just a quick clarification on Head 3-1-1(5), there is a provision there for Drafting of Laws at \$30,000. Is that for outsourcing, or what is that specifically for? I understand you would have a Unit doing the drafting within the Chambers.

HON. G.E. LEUNG. Mr. Chairman, from time to, there are urgent Bills that require extra assistance and occasionally consultants and technical advisors are engaged for this purpose. In addition, the allocation also includes printing of laws and draft laws.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 3 - Office of the Attorney-General.

Question put.

Head 3 agreed to.

Honourable Members, I am happy that we have begun on this journey and it is now 1 o'clock and I intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch now. We will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.01 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

Head 4 - Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question to the honourable Minister is on Programme 1-2(7) - National Asset Management Framework (\$40,000). Is this Framework complete? Is it for implementation? How is this money used?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Are you asking for Special Expenditure?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- SEG 7.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me just explain, there is a net increase and it is due to the following. I will give the details so that honourable Premila Kumar does not come back again.

The decrease in the implementation of the new Budget System....

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Are you following, honourable Premila Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am sorry, Sir, my question is on SEG 7 and not SEG 9 - Activity 2(7).

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, that is what I am trying to explain.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- She is seeking more clarification on that one, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am sorry, once again.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 7 - National Asset Management Framework. Is this Framework completed? Is this money going to be used for implementation? So, basically, how are you going to use it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Implementation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just a question again on this Framework. If you can elaborate a little bit more, how do you implement this Framework? I mean, is \$40,000 really sufficient to do this work? What does the work entail?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, I could go into great details about National Asset Management Framework. Essentially what we found out what was that this was all over the place. So, this Framework is actually going to bring things together.

The actual allocation this year compared to last year is a decrease of about \$10,000. What we are planning to do in terms of the upgrade of the Framework, the Framework is approved and now, it is about implementation and getting it done. It is also updating the Fixed Register and all the other things that are part of the Asset Management Framework.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We shall move on. Programme 1-3?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-3(7) – Implementation of New Budget System (\$2,700,000). I noticed that in last year's budget, you had a budget of \$2 million and

now, there is \$2.7 million. Does that mean that it is the end of the implementation? Is it a \$4.7 million in total or is this part of the money that was budgeted last year which was not being used?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The increase in expenditure is really aligned to the payment schedule. We continue to invest in the modernisation of the Financial Administrative Systems. As I have said, when we provided an update in my Ministerial Statement to improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, we are basically moving away from the manual system of formulating the National Budget. So, the Government has actually engaged the services of a Canadian company – Questica Software Inc, for the supply and implementation of the new Budget software system.

All these years, even until now in this age of technology and IT system, everything was done manually. Staff would actually feed into the Excel Sheet and look at the numbers. This is going to be a great improvement and innovation. It will make it more transparent and efficient. We have had errors in the Budget in the past, in the Budget Estimates, and it was partly arising out of a manual system. So, this is a very, very timely investment that we have made, as a government, to improve the budget system.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Was the \$2.7 million the end of that process?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it will be the end of the process.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I still have a question, Sir. My question is on Programme 1-4(7) – Gender Responsive Budgeting Programme (\$50,000). If the honourable Minister can elaborate on the programme - on this particular subject?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Which programme, is it the same Activity?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We are on Programme 1-3(7).

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Give me a second, I think you are talking about the Gender Responsive Budgeting Programme (GRBP), is that right?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What we have done, Mr. Chairman, it is like the citizen's budget. This allocation is to make sure that across all different Ministries, this framework, this understanding is included. There are different Ministries which will have allocations for budget to promote gender sensitivity, gender-based activities.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- If I may ask a supplementary question, it talks about a programme. Is it a separate reporting of gender-based activities? Is it a programme that you put it out to the public to understand what kind of budget is given to the public? I do not understand, can you explain?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The programme is essentially training as well. So, you have to continue training and making sure that there is understanding of gender-based budgeting and understanding of the budget. So, that allocation is also part of the training that will be provided.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 1-7(7) – Vehicle Management System (\$50,000). Can we have some bit of clarification on that? Is this for the whole fleet across Government? I think it is a new expenditure, I did not see it in previous years.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are right, it is a new expenditure allocation. Really, the funding is to cater for the procurement of the vehicle management system for the Whole of Government.

Currently, there is no online database and no vehicle software to manage both, leased and State-owned vehicles. Hence, this software will be used to manage both, leased and State-owned vehicles, and we are, sort of, moving towards a paperless system, as well as the provision of advice to executive management in a timely manner. It is also partly to cut down on wastages.

The system will be used by Government Fleet Management Unit to manage all Government vehicles. So, the timely reports on where the vehicles are, who is using it, et cetera, so that we have a much better handle on the use of Government vehicles both, leased and Government-owned vehicles. Currently, everything is manual.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-8?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on Programme 1-8(7) - Policy Advisors (\$270,000). If the honourable Minister can tell us who these Policy Advisors are, and how many of them will be recruited or used? Was this provision there in the last Budget, et cetera? I need more details on this particular expenditure.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, when we started with the formulation of the National Development Plan, we got a Consultant Policy Advisor from the World Bank - a Malaysian national. We did not want one consultant to just come and do the plan, so we hired two local consultants - two Economists who are both Academics. One was a senior government official before, very experienced in the planning office and was at the Fiji National University (FNU), and the other one was at the University of the South Pacific (USP). We hired them temporarily as Consultants and Policy Advisors through proper expression of interest and procurement. Both have done a fantastic job in getting the plan ready. The plan is near finalisation, as I have said already.

Once it is done, they will spend, at least, another year to help in the operationalisation of the plan - the implementation, monitoring, and as you know, we have a three-year, five-year and 20-year plan. So, in the first three years, we have said publicly that we will be addressing the basics, fundamentally going through, and part of the job would be to also look at how budgets are used, the utilisation and whether these things align with the plans. It was a very helpful step that we took to get the plan ready. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- A supplementary question on that; these Policy Advisors, do you have a plan for how long you will need them? Is it for three years?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have said another year. They were hired for two years.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, I have a supplementary question on the same SEG - Programme 1-8(7) – Policy Advisors. We also give funding to Fiji National University and other universities. Do you think it will be appropriate, honourable Minister, that we use some of those Academics who are already part of the university agreement with the Government?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you had listened to me carefully, I had precisely said that they are both University Academics, one from FNU and one from USP. We do not ask Universities to do things free for Government, we hire consultants and invariably in most of the time, Sir, we hire consultants from within local universities as much as possible and sometimes in very rare cases. I do not know about the previous government but so far, we have not hired any foreign consultant,

unless otherwise it is provided for by development partners to help us and in this particular case, that is what we have done.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Sir, under Programme 1-8(7), this allocation used to be here on apprenticeship funds, but it is not here now. Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics assure us that if it is not here, then apprenticeship funding is moved to another SEG?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is moved to another Ministry. What we have done, Mr. Chairman, we did not do much in the last Budget, we kept a lot of 'R's, we kept a lot of funding within the Ministry of Finance. In this Budget, we tried to move as much funding as possible, directly into the Ministries, instead of Ministry of Finance keeping it under 'R'. So, as much as possible, we have tried to move it directly to the Ministers so that they can get on with the job straight away. Thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is still on Programme 1-8(7) - National Economic Summit. I see the amount allocated is \$50,000, does that mean that you will be having this Summit in one of the schools or community halls?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, I think this is a silly question. We have not decided on the date, otherwise we will be here for three days, asking Government specific operational things, things that we have not actually decided yet.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I think we will move on.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-8(7) - National Development Plan (\$50,000). Can the honourable Minister elaborate, is this the same national plan which you have failed to launch which you mentioned earlier?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again, Mr. Chairman, I mean, the pigeon season is over, otherwise I would have told them, but you are shooting from the wrong angle, Sir.

We have said very clearly in the Budget Address and today, in the Right of Reply, that the plan is ready, every Minister has been consulted, it is getting ready to be printed and the honourable Prime Minister will launch the plan very soon. We will invite honourable Nath to be part of that, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, under Programme 2-1(7) - Employment and Unemployment Survey. In the last year's Budget, you had \$2.44 million but this year, there is another \$606,597. Is this just the completion of that or is just the reflection of work that was not done last year. The second question, when can we expect the results of the survey?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, honourable Usamate as a statistician would understand that these surveys occur each financial year, especially the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, as well as the Employment and Unemployment Survey, and that is all being done at the moment. That is why there is an additional allocation.

Let me, Mr. Chairman, just say that we have empowered the Fiji Bureau of Statistics now to be an independent organisation, to be able to do these things timely and appropriate budget is provided.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I do have a question. It is on Programme 2-1(7) - Household Income and Expenditure Survey (\$2,454,935). Is it just a one year programme, or you think it is going to spill over to next year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, as I have said, from all the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys we have had and you would probably know this well, it does not just finish in one year. It is like over a period of time. It, sort of, overlaps into the next year, and that is how this will be done.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am sure, as part of your planning process, you may have budgeted the total sum that will be used. So how much are you looking at as a total for this project?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, I can give you some details but not everything. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey and the Employment and Unemployment Survey are national surveys. The Employment and Unemployment Survey data is based on 6,000 households from 600 enumeration areas from all the four Divisions. The Employment and Unemployment Survey is conducted in four rounds in a period of 12 months. In the same way, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey takes a while. So, it is not something that you do it in one month or two months. The sampling process takes time, the actual conduct of the survey, takes time, and you know this.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 4 – Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Question put.

Head 4 agreed to.

Head 5- Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for any comments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6) - Turaga-ni-Koro Allowance (2,845,000). I notice that there is an increase of around \$60,000 from the amount that was there last year. Can this be clarified, what is the reason for that increase and whether all the Turaga-ni-Koro have been paid?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the increase is because of the additional responsibilities that will be given to the Turaga-ni-Koro. With the economic empowerment of the *iTaukei*, more reporting is going to come from the Turaga-ni-Koro. With the current allowance that they are given, it is really not enough when you look at the cost of living. So, we have increased it by \$50, so from \$150 to \$200. Realistically, on the ground, it is still not enough.

In regard to the payment of Turaga-ni-Koro, we try and get reports from them and that is the cause of the delay because the Turaga-ni-Koro is only nominated by the community. We make sure that they perform the duty that is given to them before we pay them because it is public funds.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, on the same SEG, we have the Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development (CATD) in Nadave which is a place where a lot of people have undertaken their training over the years. But I notice that there has been quite a significant drop in their budget of around \$300,000. Can we just have some clarification on that?

HON. I. VASU.- In that allocation, we have allocated \$370,000 for their capital projects at Nadave.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, it is due to the movement of maintenance and special expenditure to SEG 10 also.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It moved to a different SEG?

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

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7) – Review of Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development By-Laws (\$100,000). Can I be clarified on this issue?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You want the clarification on the bylaws that should be undertaken at CATD?

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Yes, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, that is to support the Ministry's effort to undertake an institutional review of the CATD because the legislation is very archaic, so there needs to be a review and that funding is provided for that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-2?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, my question is on SEG 10 - Village Transformation Initiative (\$2,000,000) - R. If the honourable Minister can elaborate on the criteria as to how he selects the village and what kind of transformative initiatives are being looked at?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this programme is targeting villages that are really not up to par with regard to their development. For villages out there in the interior, it is especially for sanitation and village improvement, as well as for those that are close to the hotels.

As I have already mentioned in my speech, it is a new programme for us. We started it last year and this is the second year. We have been informing all our Roko and Provincial Councils about the projects that is available for that, which is mostly on sanitation and beautification. How do they apply? They have the forms there in the Provincial Council Office with the Roko. They have to arrange it with them, and it comes through the normal process.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on SEG 7, there is \$100,000 allocated for Feasibility Study for Inter-island Trading Vessels. I am interested in this because we have a Department of Transport that is housed in the Ministry of Public Works. I was wondering, why is it that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is doing the feasibility study rather than the Department of Transport?

HON. I. VASU.- For this one, Mr. Chairman, there are lots of concerns from the community, especially for maritime movement in regards to shipping. So, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is taking interest in trying to make a proper study of what is really needed out there, especially for Lau and Kadavu. I understand that the private companies are doing the work now, but there are still complaints from the community. So, we have decided to make a feasibility study so that we can really see what is best for the communities out there, on understanding the type of vessel that will suit them, especially for Lau where there are a lot of concerns.

We have received concerns from people coming back to Suva because of the service out there in the community which has not been properly provided and which is why the Ministry of iTaukei is looking at ways to assist maritime communities who have been complaining in regard to shipping.

HON. J. USAMATE. – I hope you will liaise with the Department of Transport because they do a lot of those studies and they have done them in the past. It is just a suggestion. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN. – Is that a question or a point of clarification?

HON. I. VASU. – Noted, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN. – Honourable Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR. – Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 7 – Education Awareness. There is \$300,000 allocated for this programme and I also see some awareness programmes on Programme 2-1. If the honourable Minister can explain to us why you have an education awareness programme under this particular Programme 1, as well as another programme, particularly for Leadership in Programme 2 on the next page?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD. – If I can respond to that, those are two different activities. What the study shows and the presentation from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Ministry of Education is particularly for educational awareness. If you notice, it is about collaborating with the Ministry of Education on TELS, on TVET and higher educational institutions to provide tailor-made educational courses for schools. I do not want to use the word, ‘dropouts’, but for people who have fallen from the track after Form 4, 5 and 6 and a big chunk of them are iTaukei students.

Essentially, the discussion was that we should try and get them in the net so that we are able to train them. Contrary to what we have heard, a lot of those people are ending up with Pacific Polytech and other institutions. We need a much bigger awareness to get them. It is not a big amount of money, but I think the benefit would be quite a big windfall.

MR. CHAIRMAN. – Programme 2-3?

HON. J. USAMATE. – Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 2-3(10) – Survey of Mahogany Plantation in the Northern Division. I am very interested because this is a function that is normally carried out by the Ministry of Lands. When we have the periphery boundary surveys already done, there is the survey of the *mataqali* allotments inside. So, I am interested, because this would then be a duplication of what normally happens under the Ministry of Lands and what the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs is proposing.

HON. I. VASU. - Mr. Chairman, this is to assist the Ministry of Lands on the survey of boundaries, especially the disputed ones for the mahogany. For mahogany, survey should be completed by 2029. Now, the survey is still within Viti Levu so we (Ministry of iTaukei Affairs) have decided to help the Ministry of Lands with the survey in Vanua Levu.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Partly just for honourable Usamate, it is a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs because there are a lot of disputes with the land and surveying and getting the boundaries and everything workout, so it is better that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Lands work together. That is why the budget is with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Chairman, through you, just a clarification on \$950,000 here at the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and there is another \$738,000 for Mahogany Survey in the Ministry of Lands.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said, they are working together.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the Ministry for Lands will take care of Viti Levu and we will take care of Vanua Levu in the survey.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I think honourable Kirpal knows very well that surveying is really an expensive exercise.

Programme 4-1?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on Preservation of Historical Monuments whereby \$150,000 was allocated in last year's budget and in this year's budget, I do not see that any amount is allocated for it. My question is, are the monuments all fixed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is completed now.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Alright, thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, this is to do with Programme 4-1(10) – Rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage Structure (\$1,500,000), which specific structure is this?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this is to refurbish the Levuka Community Centre, the last one was just on the structure and the second one is for St. Johns Catholic Church in Cawaci. They will cover that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 5 – Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Question put.

Head 5 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, I kind of heard some sighs when I awarded the acclamation vote to those who said “no”. Remember in the past, it is the same thing. We yelled from the top of our voices in the Opposition, but it always fell on those that were more in numbers. Even if your voice is bigger, I am kidding, I will play it by ear.

Head 6 – Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7) – National Security Defence Review. This has been going on, I believe, for some time. I am just wondering, is this now the completion of the exercise, honourable Minister?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The short answer is ‘yes’.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on Programme 2-1(5) – Completion of IBMS Project. If the honourable Minister can tell us a little bit about this IBMS Project.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The IBMS is the maintenance programme.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, she only wants some explanation. Is it still ongoing?.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If I can just help; the IBMS annual fee maintenance, that is \$155,000 out of that, and the IBMS e-Passport contractual payment and oracle support for the IBMS hardware upgrade, makes up a total of \$400,000.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, through you, the only amount left is now \$21,000? In other words, are all the upgrades completed?

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- I have noticed, Mr. Chairman, that there has been a substantiative increase in the amount of money set aside for passports - an increase of \$2.5 million up to \$4 million in this Budget. Can the honourable Minister explain, why the huge increase?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Which SEG are you referring to?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Programme 2-1(5) – Passports (\$4 million). Last year, it was \$1.5 million.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- For e-passports, blank books per year, five years contract in Germany that produces the books, 40 percent at once or \$707,329 and 60 percent after delivery which is a million dollars, a total of FJ\$2 million. Then you have the shipment, which is \$2 million, service support is around €69,850. That is for yearly contract with the company for their services. Service support next year by the same company will cost us approximately \$200,000, the passport printer and enrolment kits for the new financial year is \$1.3 million and Disaster Recovery Support is \$3.5 million.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The passport number is about 100,000.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Is it that we are completely changing our passport system or what is the big jump for?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, there has been a remarkable increase that we will want because of the current passport numbers that we have - 40,000. So, we are going to increase the numbers next year.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- From 40,000 to 100,000?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister on Programme 2-1(9) - Disaster Recovery Support (\$2 million). If you can just explain what disaster recovery is this?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, that is to do with passports in case something happens and the system that prints passports collapses, or there is a malware through cybercrime. That is the amount we use for the recovery of the data that we have.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 7 - Digitisation and Modernisation of Fiji Immigration Systems and Processes (\$383,198). I believe DFAT is involved, are they assisting you with money or also with people?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Both.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, what changes are you trying to bring about in this?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, this might be a question for Parliament.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, given the threats that we face in terms of what we encounter at the border, this becomes more complicated all the time. There are ways now where we can use technology that enhances the way we safeguard the country, particularly from people that we do not need to come through here. So, we know what people are about and if people are sick. If you go to other airports, you are looking at where you have these cameras that detect if people are sick from sea, but these are for the added security measures that we will have at the airport.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 9 - e-Passport Enrolment Kit – Immigration Offices and Overseas Missions. I know over the years, e-passport is being introduced in various Missions, and I can see \$300,000 is allocated for that activity. Is it for any specific Mission that you are targeting, and if, yes, which ones are those?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, that includes e-passport kits for Suva, Lautoka and Nadi. This is, in particular, to take the kit out to those who cannot come, particularly for disabled or sick people. We have right now in Missions, like Canberra, Wellington and Washington DC, the enrolment kits that our local people in those countries go to, to try and enrol to get their passports printed there locally.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The proposed Missions for these passport kits right now are Fiji High Commission in Beijing and Fiji High Commission in New Delhi. We already have e-passport kits at Fiji High Commission in Wellington, Consulate in Sydney, Canberra, Washington, Geneva, Abu Dhabi, London and Tokyo.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 6 - Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration.

Question put.

Head 6 agreed to.

Head 7 – Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, Programme 1-3(10) - Workers Compensation (\$6 million). Can the honourable Minister clarify the \$6 million allocated, will it deal with all the pending cases that you have in the Ministry?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, yes, for the current and pending.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Sir, just a question on the same issue; I assume that this will also take up the cases from the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF). Traditionally, Government has been responsible for paying compensation for Government workers. Will this just cover Government workers or both - workers from the Government and the private sector?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They only cover the State employees.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Since you are taking over the cases from ACCF, how will the ones for the private sector be covered?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even with the existence of ACCF, the Ministry of Employment is still doing a lot of the work, assessments, et cetera. The whole thing is in transition now. The State employees already handled by the Ministry will now be directly handled in terms of their compensation. So, this increase in budget is to provide for that.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The ACCF will still process that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on SEG 7 - Foreign Employment Mobility Services. Can we have a clarification on the reason for the increase of \$50,000?. Is that for the Liaison Officers?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes, that is to assist with the Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) and other expenses.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Programme 1-4(7) - Pacific Labour Scheme (\$400,000). Can the honourable Minister clarify this allocation?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Which one?

HON. P.K. BALA.- On page 55, Programme 1-4(7) - Pacific Labour Scheme.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, it is essentially to meet the expenses of the Pacific Labour Scheme. The demand for Fijian workers under the Programme has been growing. As the honourable Minister explained, there are two Country Liaison Officers to closely provide the support on the ground. The Ministry intends to establish a toll-free line in Australia to help the workers who were sent by the Ministry.

This allocation is for the appointment of a Country Liaison Officer and other operational costs in Australia, considering there are over 5,000 workers. Basically, the Liaison Officer as the honourable Minister had explained in Parliament, will be responsible for pastoral care and welfare support for workers on the ground, and also promoting Fiji to the approved employers in Australia when necessary.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Just a clarification, we had earlier on heard that those Liaison Officers' allocation are in the Foreign Employment Mobility Services which is allocated \$280,000. I am asking about the Pacific Labour Scheme (\$400,000), what is that allocation for?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, if I may, the \$50,000 increase was the allocation that includes operational logistics, cost for mobilising workers including cost of hiring, training venues, medical costs for pre-departure, et cetera, and transportation sometimes needed from here to Nadi, and includes cost of planned visits to New Zealand and Australia on bilateral meetings. Then the Pacific Labour Scheme which is \$400,000, is for the appointment of additional Country Liaison Officers, one in New Zealand and three in Australia, because there are 5,000 plus Fijian workers now and the Country Liaison Officers will be responsible for pastoral care and everything.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-6?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Programme 1-6(7) - Asia Productivity Organization Training Allowance, I noticed that there has been a significant increase in the budget from \$40,000 to \$100,000 - a jump of more than 100 percent. Can you just give some clarification?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the increase in allocation is to host the World Social Marketing Conference, which I have alluded to in my presentation, from 22nd October, 2024 to 25th October, 2024 at the Sofitel. We have 21 countries attending the Asia Productivity Organization (APO) Conference here and there will be 72 participants.

There will be a traditional welcome, purchase of tokens and gifts, there will be travel and accommodation expenses for our people, as well as catering for the cost of APO trainings due to the increase in face-to-face APO trainings. So, that is the increased allocation there. I also said in my presentation, Sir, that we are now the Chair of APO.

HON. J. USAMATE.- One more question, Mr. Chairman, under the same SEG 7, you have a National Productivity Master Plan. A few years ago, we signed the Productivity Roundtable Charter that was signed by Tripartite, and I do not think we have had another National Productivity Master Plan other than studies. So, I am very interested to know how this \$50,000 will be used. How will it be operated?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, this is the cost of the review of the Productivity Charter Plan and the implementation of the Master Plan, stakeholders engagement, national awareness on productivity movement, house productivity talks, symposiums and workshops and appointment of Productivity Champions in the public and private sector, as well as printing materials.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 7 – Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations.

Question put.

Head 7 agreed to.

Head 8 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, my question is on SEG 8 - Upgrade and Enhancement - Building (Overseas Missions) - \$1,000,000, if details of those Missions can be given. Which Missions are we talking about?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is to accommodate refurbishment works. The Fiji Mission priority is Fiji-owned properties - London, Canberra and Wellington.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 2-1(7) – Special Administrator (480,000), can the honourable Assistant Minister briefly explain how are the Special Administrators appointed and who are these four?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Before I allow the questions to be responded to, we have been having this topic in Parliament for quite some time. You still want clarification on this, even though you know it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is essentially the deployment of a Senior Military Officer to the Permanent Representative's Office to the United Nations (UN) in New York to handle any issues arising out of peacekeeping deployments with the UN and caters for the salary of the Officer and operational expenses.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- If I may just carry on from there, Mr. Chairman, to answer honourable Ketan Lal's question, yes, there is no change from the last allocation of \$480,000 and as the honourable Minister for Finance has already alluded to, it is to cater for all the operational costs of the Military and Police Advisor for the Fiji Mission and the current post holder is Colonel Siliva Raradoka Vananalagi.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And it is no longer Administrator, it is Military Advisor.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, just a curiosity because I have very little knowledge in this area, so the Special Administrator is now going to be the Military Advisor. My question is, why is it in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' budgeting and not RFMF budgeting?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is simply because it is going to be based at the UN and peacekeeping is coordinated by the UN. It is a UN operation so, obviously, it makes sense to have that within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I hear that the peacekeeping budget has now been moved into RFMF.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- On the same argument, why is this still here and not there?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have just said, Mr. Chairman, that it is a UN.....

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I can answer that. The Military Advisor is located in the Office of our Permanent Representative to the United Nations (PRUN) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That person is a Senior Military Officer who gets her salary here, but because of her position within PRUN, there are other things, including her accommodation, and the whole range of her work requires her to be subjected to the leadership of our Permanent Representative to the UN. That is why it is under this allocation and not with the peacekeeping. Peacekeeping is for the Fijian peacekeeping missions overseas, not including the one in New York.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Do you understand the meaning of PRUN?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Parliament will now vote on Head 8 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Question put.

Head 8 agreed to.

Head 9 – Independent Bodies

MR. CHAIRMAN.- On Programme 1-1, we have a question.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I apologise, Mr. Chairman, I withdraw my question.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 9 – Independent Bodies.

Question put.

Head 9 agreed to.

Head 10 – Ministry of Environment and Climate Change

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-2?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, I have a motion.

Head 10-1-3(4) – Implementation and Enforcement of the Environment Management Act (\$30,000), I move a motion:

To increase the allocation by another \$20,000.

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

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, this allocation is on the enforcement of the Environment Management Act and I have two other motions later as well.

Sir, we have very good laws, but we are quite weak in the enforcement. Having served in the Division and, of course, as Permanent Secretary, a lot of times we are not able to effectively enforce the laws that we have simply just because of lack of resources. That is why I am recommending that the allocation under SEG 4 on the implementation and enforcement of the Environment Management Act be increased by another \$20,000. We need to look after our environment for sustainability in the long term and that is why I am moving this motion, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, I think the current allocation is sufficient to cover the existing work that the Ministry is undertaking.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will put that to the vote.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Particularly, to enhance the Eastern Division and maritime islands, so this is kind of a new allocation, but there are other allocations in other Ministries.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- If you have nothing further to add, we will put it to the vote.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-3(8) – Naboro Landfill – Phase 2 (Cell 4), the same allocation was provided for in last year's budget but was not utilised at all. So, can we have some explanation from the Ministry as to why that allocation last year was not utilised and what are the chances of this allocation being utilised this year? Has any preparatory work undertaken already so that we can be assured that this allocation will be fully utilised for that purpose?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, yes, I think there has been substantial work already undertaken and we have provided some provisions for that work, particularly in ensuring that stage 2 of the work is completed. There are some provisions that will be fully utilised in the next financial year, and we have provided another contract for the current company for the next four years so that they can undertake the landfill at Naboro.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, just to add to that, the agreement is already signed and \$2.8 million will be paid in this financial year. The total cost is \$7.8 million, so \$2.7 million is allocated for next year's budget.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on Head 10-1-3(7), Consultancy - Development of Fiji's Container Deposit Regulations (\$45,000). The same amount and same activity was mentioned last year and this consultancy work seems to be forever. So, I would like to know or if you can tell us whether it is still in the pipeline or is it going to end this year?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, the Ministry has been allocated \$45,000 to undertake the consultancy work for the development of the Container Deposit Regulations. The Cabinet paper is currently being formulated by the Ministry, to seek Cabinet's endorsement to continue the work, and then the engagement of the consultant. So, hopefully, this will be the end of this this year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-5?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, I need some clarifications on Programme 1-5(4) - Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) - \$30,000. Thereafter, in SEG 5, again, there is another provision and I am assuming that that particular provision is for annual contribution of \$400 to CITES. Can the honourable Minister, please, specify what is the allocation of \$30,000 for?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is essentially to support the administration of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species Act 2002, and provide support to the Management Committee and the Scientific Council established under that Act, as well as meeting expenses, et cetera.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, a supplementary question; what about the enforcement, is that included in it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, the Committee and the Council will also have that mandate - to look at how this provision in the Act is enforced.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 5 - Stockholm Convention on the Management of Persistent Organic Pollutants and I see an allocation of \$1,500 only. I would like to ask the honourable Minister, how will this \$1,500 be used?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is an annual contribution to the Persistent Organic Pollutants Convention.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Subscription.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have a motion from the honourable Leader of the Opposition on Head 10-1-6.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- On SEG 4 - Environment Compliance North and West (\$8,000), I move a motion:

That the allocation be increased by \$12,000, to bring the allocation to \$20,000 for the activities in the North and the West.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I second the motion.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Again, similar to my previous motion, we need to arm our people in the various Divisions so that they can do their work effectively. I am very familiar with the work in the Northern Division because I served there as Commissioner Northern, dealing with extractive industries, particularly logging in Vanua Levu, a lot of fisheries activities as well, industrial waste, I know that we used to have a lot of issues with Fiji Sugar Corporation on their disposal.

You would recall, Mr. Chairman, Sir, that in one of the recent sittings of Parliament, I was asking the honourable Minister for Local Government about solid and liquid wastes. There are a lot of environmental issues and, again, we just need to give resources to the people on the ground so that they can do their work more effectively. That is why I have moved this slight increase, but it will mean a lot in the execution of duties at divisional level.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- The honourable Leader of the Opposition understands that all the other Departments and Ministries contribute to this one, that is the budgeted amount from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. There is nothing stopping the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Ministry of Local Government in contributing towards the total cost of that function.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again, if I may be of help to the honourable Leader, as I have said earlier, this is a new allocation and specifically target the Eastern Division and Maritime Islands. This is the first allocation and if there is a need to increase it next year, we will do that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Premila Kumar, do you want to speak on the motion?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, Sir. I just want to simply say that when it comes to environment management, we tend to believe that all other Ministries are really looking after the environment. If you look around us, simple issues, like litter. The Litter Decree is there but littering continues, although we say that there are a number of Ministries involved in looking after that.

I strongly believe honourable Prime Minister, Sir, that you need to allocate resources to the Ministry of Environment, a dedicated agency, so that they can deal with environmental issues. Normally, when it comes to Ministry of Local Government, they are too busy with their own mandate and other agencies as well tend to forget environment. We sit here and assume that other agencies will be also assisting, but it is an issue that we need to look at in depth.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is the response from the Government. We have heard from the honourable Prime Minister that it is a multi-pronged approach from the various Ministries concerned. But, again, honourable Leader of the Opposition, we will put your motion to vote. Head 10-6(4) be increased by \$12,000 to make it \$20,000. So far, they have \$8,000.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on SEG 7 - Implementation of Climate Change Act (\$500,000). In the last financial year, \$5 million was allocated for the implementation of the Climate Change Act. I would like to know how this money was used, and to see whether \$500,000 is sufficient to take this programme further.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- She is just seeking clarification.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the reduction is essentially due to the completion of the project and the total for this budget support is approximately about \$30 million. This year, the allocation was not used, so that is why there is reduction and there is no allocation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I apologise, Mr. Chairman, I am really confused here. If that can be explained again in terms of the figures because what I am saying is that last year, \$5 million was allocated. How was that used for the implementation of the Climate Change Act? Now, it has been reduced to....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is why I said it was not used and we are getting budget support from the European Union (EU). Whatever is allocated is distributed across different activities, so that is why we have not allocated anything.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I seek clarification, does that mean that this Climate Change Act will not be implemented?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, it will be implemented.

HON. J. USAMATE.- But you are not spending the money on it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This year, it was not used, and we are getting budget support from the EU, which will be spread across different activities. We do not need to allocate that this year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Last year, there was \$5 million allocated by the EU. Of course, DFAT allocated \$1.5 million as well to the Climate Change Unit. Given what is in SEG 7, Mr. Chairman, I would like to know if there are other avenues in which Government is going to source funds from because we all know that this is the biggest existential threat that we face as a country.

In my reply to your Speech, honourable Minister for Finance, I did state that Parliaments are responsible to ensure that we align to the global, the regional and even local issues and the honourable Speaker will be answerable at the IPU Meetings about what Fiji Parliament is doing. So, are there any other funding elsewhere to give assurance to our people that we are taking this issue seriously?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A very good question, honourable Leader of the Opposition, you are right and I agree with you. If you look at the whole budget of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and all the other funding support that we are getting in terms of budget support, I think there will be more than enough to support any of those activities, advocacy, representation of Fiji in these international climate change forums, et cetera.

As I have said, yes, we want to make sure that environment and climate change is mainstreamed. It is a cutting theme across all the different Ministries and a lot of the climate financing strategies now have to be linked in terms of collaboration of key ministries - Ministry of Infrastructure, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Climate Change. We are putting those strategies together, so the funding allocation is appropriate.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Apart from the European Union, are there any other?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, there are various projects, as well as budget support that we can direct to specific activities and most of the infrastructure support that we are getting is culled in terms of climate resilient infrastructure or climate resilient activities, so as I have said, it is mainstreamed now and that is how we would like to support it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, can I ask one final question because we have started with the relocation of Nabavatu Village. Please, bear with me if I have not gone through the others, so how are we going to continue with the relocation of Nabavatu Village that we have already started? Is that already allocated to a Ministry?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said, honourable Leader of the Opposition, most of the projects, loans, grants and budget support that we are negotiating that we receive, climate change, climate resilient infrastructure, climate change activities is embedded into those mainstreamed programmes. It is working very well because a lot of the funding agencies also want to see those activities embedded into the funding model that they provide for projects, so most projects would have that. The Nabavatu project is funded from the Climate Change Relocation Trust Fund.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 10 – Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

Question put.

Head 10 agreed to.

Head 13 – Independent Commissions

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for any comments.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 1-1(6) – Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (\$5,526,760). I do see an increase in their budget. Is this increase for a specific activity, and if so, what is it for?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The increase is essentially due to the following - the increase by \$275,000 to accommodate one Legal Officer, one Customer Service Officer and one Financial Analyst, three Environmental Officers, one Senior Human Resource Training Officer and one Team Leader Advocacy. Maintenance and operations have increased and \$645,000 is to cater for all that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, last year, I did raise an issue regarding the regulators for Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) were based in EFL and not at Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC). So, my question is whether that issue has been addressed or not?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, EFL determines independently the tariff rates for EFL as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I do understand that but if you look at the recent amendments that were made to the law, the regulator for wire man, electrical, et cetera, was moved to FCCC. In the last Standing Committee meeting, they did mention that they do not have the resources and the regulators are still with EFL and not with FCCC. I had raised it last time and this is a bit of an issue because people want a transparent system and not the regulator to be sitting with the main player.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think the transition is necessary. You are right. When EFL was 100 percent government owned, all that was seen as a Government agency. So that is the point that needs to be taken into account. As I have said, the tariff rate is already independently decided.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Just to add on, Sir, in terms of FCCC's current role, they set the tariff on electricity pricing which is probably what honourable Premila Kumar is alluding to. They actually have the power to determine the Independent Power Producer (IPP) pricing. There is a regulatory arm in there that looks after the wiring and that bit of it. I think that bit is still with EFL, and we probably need to understand that a bit more because I am not sure whether FCCC is the right house for it because it is a technical certification. It is almost like Civil Aviation Authority type of setup, so it might be something we have to look at.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Chairman, just to add to that, the Department of Energy together with the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), is currently conducting a regulatory framework diagnostic. It is looking at the generation, transmission, and all those elements, and the regulatory. The outcome is envisaged to separate those functions and where they would lie, and also the current regulations - the legal side. That should be completed soon, and workshops with the stakeholders in order to move that forward.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Additionally, they are also setting up a new regulatory mechanism for Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am pleased with the information given by the honourable Ministers because this is a very critical issue. Sometimes, we tend to say, "Alright, these are wiring and electrical people coming and doing wiring, or electrical goods coming into the country", which has a lot of significance in terms of the number of fires we have in the country. These are all shoddy jobs being done by some of these electrical companies, who are not regulated properly and that is creating a bit of a problem in households. Then what happens? The Government has to allocate money. When houses go up in flames, we pay some money to the family. We need to nip that in the bud, so I am very pleased with the honourable Ministers for their responses. I look forward to the work that will be completed and how you are going to make the regulation rather strong so that we do not have this problem in the future.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will move on. Parliament will now vote on Head 13 – Independent Commissions.

Question put.

Head 13 agreed to.

Head 14 – Fiji Corrections Service

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for any comments.

Since there are no comments, Parliament will now vote on Head 14 - Fiji Corrections Service.

Question put.

Head 14 agreed to.

Head 15- Ministry of Justice

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for any comments.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on Programme 1-1(5) - E-Transaction Cost (\$30,000). Can the honourable Minister explain the transaction that has taken place in the Ministry using this \$30,000, which was given previously, and it is being given now? Is it an ongoing cost, or is it for hardware, or what is it?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, it is an ongoing exercise.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just to add to what the honourable Minister said, it is the fees to banks for any transaction carried out on EFTOS machines for printing birth, death and marriage certificates by the Ministry.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7) - Refunds (\$20,000). Can I have a clarification on that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, it deals with funds associated to paying back to the public or parties that actually withdraw the paid legislative fees from getting the service. They pay for it, and then they withdraw without asking for the service, so they get refunded. I think that is the right thing to do.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, honourable Minister on SEG 7 - Digitisation Programme (\$100,000), is that specifically for the Companies Office or the Ministry as a whole?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, it could be for ROT. There is also an exercise with the Official Receivers Office. Last year, it was \$100,000, and this year, again, it is \$100,000.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Could you be more clearer than that?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, we are undertaking an exercise throughout the Ministry. The chief one is the ROT, but also with the Official Receivers Office.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, a supplementary question; the digitisation of the ROT, is it expected to be completed this year? I am sure there is quite a few other people here who are interested more than I?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, we are meeting with the consultant next week, and I am hopeful it will be completed.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This year?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Apart from that, the allocation is for the whole digitisation, as well as for everything that the Ministry does.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, on the same Digitisation Programme for which \$100,000 is given this year, last year \$50,000 was given, so I am a bit confused if you are saying that

the consultant will come and do the job. Does that mean that we did not use \$50,000 last year?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- It is ongoing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was used, in fact, it was almost completed. I think this additional \$50,000 is really for planning, scoping for the digitisation and the additional funding is provided for the implementation phase. I think the honourable Minister did say that, so this is just carrying it forward for implementation.

It is also about preservation of records. You are not only putting new stuff into it, you are actually going back, bringing it, digitising it and preserving it so it is not just that the project is completed. Now, it is implementation and also going back and digitising some of the records.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is, is it the digitisation of records for what because it is the Ministry of Justice? Is it the court orders or what? I do not know.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well, I can give you a general answer. The record of digitisation of Government in the past for so many years, was extremely poor, honestly.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, this is what we are trying to do now, going into different Ministries and really ...

MR. CHAIRMAN.- There is no hogwash here, honourable Usamate.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, it is not hogwash. It is washing the mess.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We are asking specific questions and we need specific answers, not 'that could be general' or 'may be'.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We are giving you specific answers.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Not that general.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, it is not general. We said it has been done, it is now being implemented with additional funding.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, if I may enlighten this Parliament, there were two failed projects undertaken by the previous Government which cost \$300,000.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You want to know that?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- So, the projects were preserved, in the end, nothing turned out. Then they did a study, and it was paid in US\$2.5 million, but nothing came out of it. So, we are actually doing what you should have done.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the question is on digitisation.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, the programme that you are talking about, the previous projects, were these projects on digitisation?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I notice in SEG 6, there is an allowance of Justice of Peace - \$30,000. I do not see such allowance in the budget for last year. I thought Justices of the Peace give their time freely. So, if you can just elaborate, what is this because I think it is a completely new expenditure?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- We undertake orientation. Our officers travel around the country, in fact. Last week, they just returned from the Northern Division. It is free, honourable Usamate, but it is for the administration cost.

HON. J. USAMATE.- But it is called Justice of Peace Allowance.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I can confirm there is no allowance paid to the Justices of Peace.

HON. J. USAMATE.- But that is the name here, 'Justice of Peace Allowance'. Is the name wrong?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, the name is right. It is just the spending of the money. It is the administrative cost, honourable Usamate.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The name here, Sir, is Justice of Peace Allowance. What he is explaining is something else.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I will look into it, Mr. Chairman.

HON. J. USAMATE.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 15 - Ministry of Justice.

Question put.

Head 15 agreed to.

Head 17 - Ministry of Civil Service and Public Enterprises

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-1, we have a motion from honourable Koroilavesau. Could you introduce your motion, please?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I move a motion:

That the allocation for Programme 1-1(8) - Upgrade and Enhancement of Quarters be increased.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I want to declare my interest, I live in a Government Quarters and have been for the last 14 years. I have raised this issue with the highest level of government, even with the honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. The only office that I have not been to is the Office of the Prime Minister. I do not really want to bother him with my accommodation.

Mr. Chairman, Sir, I am sleeping in my sitting room now. The bedrooms are vacant. The sitting room that I am sleeping in has got a big hole on one of the boards and the ply that covers the ceiling is totally gone. I have been asking this for one year.

Three weeks ago when I called the Ministry of Finance, they told me, ‘we run short of money’ so I am asking an increase. I am paying monthly rental which the Government still demands for my quarters, even though I am sleeping in this condition. I have been sleeping like this for the last one year.

I do not want to complain because I have already complained to the honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. He has tried to encourage people to repair it but I cannot complain any more. Why should I bother the honourable Prime Minister who is the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs to come and repair my house? He has got no business of how I sleep or how I wake up in the morning.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Does that include your Sitting Allowance here?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- But I am sleeping at home, Sir, I am not sleeping here.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I am addressing your letter of complaint that I have just received as well.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Through the honourable Prime Minister, this is exactly why we are bringing back the Public Works Department which the last government did away with and also in terms of the property management of government assets, including housing. That will come up in the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport budget. Part of that is also allocated there in terms of the upkeep of Government properties. I have heard the honourable Minister and have noted that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you for your response, honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport. I am concerned that this is the plight of a Member of this august Parliament and he has been complaining.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I am sure the honourable Member would remember the story about the soldier that turned up, did not shave. His Officer asked him, “Did you shave this morning?” The soldier said, “Yes, Sir.” Did you use the mirror? He said, “Yes, Sir.” Try using a razor because your problem would have been easily resolved if you had asked me and the Minister responsible for quarters. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That means, Sir, it is alright now for immediate repairs to the roof.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I am grateful.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Do you wish to withdraw your motion or shall we continue?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I withdraw my motion and I will come and see the honourable Prime Minister.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. You just made a statement that is enough there, not for someone else.

Programme 3-1?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 3-1-(10) – Shipbuilding Revival Project with an allocation of \$10 million, can this be clarified, please?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, we asked for that to be put into the budget because we are having the development of the shipbuilding and ship repair facilities being now understudy with the help of Australia. We have asked for this \$10 million to go towards that and even if we have to venture out and buy an amphibious vessel to help with the regional development and maritime, as well as disaster relief work.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 3-3(7), I seek some clarification on the Consultancy Fees, that is, \$400,000.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, that is a very complicated exercise being taken there as part of the whole of Savusavu Blue Town Concept, taking into account the development of the roads, so we need that consultancy fee available for our part of the development of Savusavu and surrounding areas.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, can I go back to SEG 10 on Fiji Rice Limited with an allocation of \$1.4 million and Food Processors with an allocation of \$1 million. You know how important these entities are. I just seek clarification from Government on what specific areas are we targeting in this year's allocation because this is important as well in terms of linkage to our rural farmers.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, the Fiji Rice Limited has been allocated \$1.1 million for the purchase of paddy. Government is also subsidizing the price of rice paddy so the price of paddy ranges from \$750 per tonne to \$850, based on the moisture content. So, it is also for the subsidy and, of course, \$287,000 is provided to farmers for fertilizer and weedicide subsidy.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just to add a little bit on that, for the fertilizer and weedicide subsidy, last year it was allocated for all the non-sugar crops under the Ministry of Agriculture. This year, we have moved the rice part of it to Fiji Rice Limited because Fiji Rice Limited is the one dealing with the farmers and we find that this would be a much better and efficient way to help the farmers. That is why an additional \$287,000 from that budget is put under Fiji Rice Limited.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The second question is on Food Processors Fiji Limited (FPFL).

HON. S. TUBUNA.- The \$1 million being allocated to Food Processors Fiji Limited is for agriculture and marine buying subsidy. The FPFL source their agriculture and marine products for both, seasonal and non-seasonal, from rural and maritime areas. The products are canned, they are frozen and sold locally and exported to the United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada and the Pacific Island countries. The provision of this subsidy will support the company by procuring high quantity of agriculture produce to meet the demand of its products and markets.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, my question is also on Food Processors. Last year, \$2 million was given to that company and this year it is reduced to \$1 million. Can you explain why, if it is to do with subsidy?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The reduction is really aligned to the expenditure trend and the Ministry has done some realignment of funds to the allocation of so-called vulnerable being overspent at the end of the financial year. I think we looked at the expenditure trend and we said that whatever is allocated instead of \$2 million, \$1 million is sufficient for this budget. Part of the expenditure control.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote of Head 17 – Ministry of Civil Service and Public Enterprises.

Question put.

Head 17 agreed to.

Head 18 – Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, before I raise my question, I just wish to acknowledge Government for the increase from \$29 million last year to around \$37 million this year, but at the same time in the implementation that was given to us by the Ministry of Finance, Sir, the implementation rate is quite low (64.55 percent) and I hope that the Ministry can look into that.

My question is on Programme 1-1(7) - Governance for Resilient Development in the Pacific (Gov4Res) Project (UNDP). This is a very important project that was started together with UNDP and if the honourable Minister can just clarify on this allocation. Which specific areas are they targeting in terms of the assistance that is provided?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sorry, if you can repeat that, honourable Leader of the Opposition?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Programme 1-1(7) - Governance for Resilient Development in the Pacific (Gov4Res) Project (UNDP) the allocation of \$1.5 million.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is a new expenditure allocation, honourable Leader of the Opposition. This is part of the UNDP Governance for Resilient Development in the Pacific Project and is to cover risk informed rural development work in Fiji for the period August 2024 to July 2025. If you look at the details of the agreement as stipulated in amendment 4 and amendment 5 of the Letter Agreement of the UNDP and the Ministry signed on 24th May, the schedule of payment for this agreement is listed as Quarter 3 - \$136,000; Quarter 4 - \$577,000; Quarter 1 - \$10,000 and Quarter 2 - \$26,000. It is a new expenditure allocation for this year's Budget.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, my question is, which specific areas are they targeting? This is not new, we have started this programme way back in 2020 with the UNDP. I am familiar with it, but my question is which specific area?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Essentially it is for rural development works, like, access roads, footpaths, water tanks, including desalination plants and in some cases ecological purification systems. So, there are a range of activities as part of that.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, as you well know honourable Leader of the Opposition, the development of minimum designs for demonstration projects on community access roads, as the honourable Minister for Finance has shared, footpaths, footbridges, desalination plants, bore holes, concrete water tanks, rain water harvesting, EPS systems, risk informing and retrofitting for Vio Integrated Rural Electrification Project, the review of the Ministry's strategic plan and procurement of national rural development database server and software.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I am glad to see on SEG 8, the Upgrade and Enhancement of Quarters (\$1.5 million). I know this has always been a challenge for our civil servants who live in rural areas. Is this targeting particular areas, or is it just shared amongst the Divisions, or is there a particular focus on which quarters would be targeted in this budget?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, it is a general upgrade for all our existing quarters on a priority basis on the ones that need the attention at the earliest. So, it is on a priority basis.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is on SEG 10 - Project Preparatory Works (\$100,000). I would like to know which projects are in the preparatory phase for which \$100,000 has been allocated?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, I will just go through what we have used at the moment, \$29,290 has been released, of which, \$26,826, which is 91.6 percent, has been used for the construction of a new Government Station at Wainua in Naitasiri. Preparatory works undertaken include, securing of land for the development of the Government Station at the site, completion of water reticulation system by the Water Authority of Fiji, completion of partial site levelling earthworks, road access and completion of the EFL grid extension at the site. For the preparatory works, I am sure this is what you are asking for, the construction and upgrade of Government Stations and Quarters planned in the upcoming years, based on the level of preparedness, so full funding will be considered in the following financial year.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, just a clarification on SEG 8 - Construction of Evacuation Centres (\$1 million). That is a very critical project. During disasters, it is very important to have evacuation centres as Category 5. In my last speech, we requested, and preparatory work was already done for Maumi and other evacuation centres. Would the honourable Minister be able to tell us which particular evacuation centre are you targeting next?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- The evacuation centres that we will target this year are Maumi, Matalaca and one in Ra - the ones that had been approved during your time.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Those are two different areas - Rokovuaka and Luvunavuaka.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, I am sorry, Rokovuaka.

HON. V. NATH.- Is that money sufficient, honourable Minister, because this is a very important project? We have seen a number of times during disasters, it is very difficult to get people together. We always have adverse weather conditions here in Fiji. Is that money sufficient for the three projects you have just mentioned?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Nath, you will notice that this \$1 million is a new allocation. In the 2024-2025 Budget, we have put in request for the completion of 13 new evacuation centres. You will appreciate that not everything will be done in one year, so it is a new allocation. What you are saying is, in the past I mean a lot of the evacuation centres are existing buildings, schools, et cetera, owned by communities so there is really a plan to build new ones.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Just to add that, Mr. Chairman, IOM is giving us \$6 million for this financial year. It is not reflected in this Budget, \$1 million is from Government and \$6 million is from IOM.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, why I am very concerned because you are the only Ministry that completed the 100 percent of your projects. The honourable Minister for Finance has just mentioned a number of projects. Can he confirm to Parliament that all the projects will be completed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think that is a silly question, Mr. Chairman. I am telling the honourable Member, we have started a programme, it is a new allocation for 13 projects in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions, we think that this is an important start. As I have said, there are lots of evacuation centres, schools, halls that are already there. The Government's effort to support some of those through the Ministry of Education through other Ministries is also happening. I cannot give you a specific answer to say this will be completed in the next two to three months.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I thank the honourable Minister for clarifying the IOM allocation because that was KOICA funded that was supposed to fund those four projects - Maumi, Rokovuaka, Narikoso and Matacula. So, this allocation probably will cater for the other 13. My question is on the Kadavu allocation on SEG 8 - Government Station \$500,000. Can the honourable Minister, just clarify this?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is in relation to the quarters.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Government station.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- This is for the 2023-2024 update, to-date \$999,000 has been released of which \$435,828 has been utilised to meet the upgrade and renovation of 17 existing government quarters of which seven quarters are 100 percent completed while 10 are still in their last phase. The remaining funds is committed to be used by the end of this financial year, delay in project implementation is due to the long rainy weather the country experienced during the cyclone period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1.5 million is allocated to continue with maintenance of quarters in 2024-2025 and this is to be phased out over the years.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- This is for 2024-2025 honourable Minister?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You went back again to 2023, 2024?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I started the update from there then I came up.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir my question is on SEG 8 and it is to do with the Saliadrau Suspension Bridge for which \$300,000 was given last year and again same amount is given this year. So, if the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management can explain to us whether that money was used last year, or the work was not completed and it has been carried forward this year?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- To-date, \$70,000 has been released to undertake the Construction of Access Roads as the Government component of the project. The construction cost of the bridge was funded by the Japanese Government, totalling \$250,000, for which the aid money was received by the Ministry in March 2023.

Initially, the Ministry of Public Works was assigned to undertake the Construction of the Suspension Bridge in the financial year 2023-2024 with the support of \$250,000 from the Japanese Government Grassroots Aid Programme. Later in the year, costing by Public Works Department increased to close to \$700,000 due to escalating price of stainless-steel components.

The Ministry for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management decided to take another alternative approach which resulted in the re-advertisement of tender in June 2024 which closes on the third week of July 2024 and with this funding of \$300,000 plus the contribution from Japan of \$250,000, the Ministry will be able to proceed with the construction works in the new financial year. The Ministry was able to construct the Access Road to the new Suspension Bridge site from the \$70,000 allocated in the 2023-2024 financial year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 3-1(10) on the allocation on Rural High Risk Water Sanitation Project. I see a significant increase and we thank the Government for that because the initial allocation was around \$500,000 and then it went up to \$750,000, now it has gone up to \$1 million. If the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management can just clarify specific geographical regions because of the various needs in those areas and what sort of projects are they targeting as well, Ecological Purification System or Construction of New Water Projects altogether?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, what I can provide is just the project brief is every Fijian has Access to Clean and Safe Water in adequate quantities. In addition, this is also to ensure that every Fijian has that right. Just an update to date \$723,555 or 90.4 percent of the total funding has been utilised to undertake the construction of 469 Sanitation Projects.

The Ministry for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management will continue with the Construction Installation of Ecological Purification System and Sanitation facilities and the increase is just due to the increase in requests from around Fiji that we have received.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, it is a supplementary question related to the same. My question is, just a while ago, the honourable Minister for iTaukei mentioned that under Village Transformation, they are taking sanitation projects. Now, we hear that the Minister for Rural Development is also doing some sanitation projects. Why is it not placed in one place for sanitation-related matters, if the honourable Minister for Finance can clarify that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think it is a very good question. What we are moving away from is centralising everything which used to be kind of a *modus operandi* in some sense. So, the Ministry of Rural Development undertakes rural housing projects as well. The village setup is different to settlements, so I think the Ministry of Rural Development is also well placed to do some of these as well in terms of the other projects, particularly the rural housing projects, and we do not want to just burden one Ministry to do everything in every setting and every circumstances and the requirements are also very different. It just helps to allocate this in different Ministries. Sanitation is like a mainstream issue, so every Ministry in the whole of Government is concerned about proper sanitation.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Just to add to that, Mr. Chairman, because of the nature of the Ministry, we look after all rural communities, not only just the iTaukei communities.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I also wish to clarify on that allocation because health is a big player in this particularly because of typhoid areas. That is why I asked about the geographic region because health has what they call the “red zones”, and that should always be the priority because we had the outbreak in Ra and other places.

On SEG-10, Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance Subsidy, I know that this is beneficial to the maritime islands particularly. If the honourable Minister can just give an outline of how this was taken up by the four geographic Divisions last year?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It was rolled out to the areas mostly around the coastlines of Fiji in Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and the maritime islands. The initiative now is known as the Seafarers Entrepreneur Assistance or SEA Subsidy, which furthers our longstanding commitment to the self-studying culture in our maritime communities.

Around 90.4 percent of the total funding has been utilised. We see that most of this was utilised in the Northern and Western Divisions, the Eastern Division as well, so the Central Division is slow on the uptake in the last financial year. We will look at updating that and see how we can increase our commitment to the Central Division in this financial year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 3-2?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I was basically looking at the Rural and Outer Island Programme on SEG10 at a sum of \$3 million. Firstly, I would like to ask the honourable Minister, there does not seem to be any project that is under this heading. Basically, it is a wider heading on Rural and Outer Island Programme (ROI) but it does not indicate what programme it is. If he clarifies that, then I would be able to raise my motion.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, out of the \$2.5 million provided under ROI in the financial year 2023-2024, the Ministry was able to expend \$1.72 million or 78 percent of the total funding allocated. More than 103 kilometres of rural farm roads were constructed - 75.5 kilometres of rural farm roads were constructed in the Northern Division, connecting the interior of Macuata and Cakaudrove Provinces. The road construction cut across three different major routes, including Nakedra/Sese Road, Nasasa to Valevoni Road and connecting access to Nabuasosoqosoqo. More than 77,000 families were directly assisted under this new rural farm road in the North.

In the Western Division a total of 16.9 kilometres of new farm roads were constructed, covering the highlands of Ba, spreading across Nadala, Vatalevu, Nadrau, Natawa, Navunitawa and Nausocoko.

In the Central Division, a total of 5.9 kilometres of farm roads were constructed in the Province of Namosi, including the villages of Mau, Nakavika and Vunidavo. The Ministry was also able to upgrade five kilometres of farm roads in Navuloa, Nasaumatua and Vunivunisa in Levuka.

Assistance were also geared towards the fisheries and forestry sector with a total of 48 projects which includes seven in the Central Division, 17 in the Eastern Division, 12 in the Northern Division and 12 in the Western Division, and are earmarked to be completed in this financial year.

The Ministry has also obtained tender approval in March 2024 for three years which will support land preparation for agriculture, complementing the existing interventions.

Sir, the 2024-2025 budget of \$3 million is allocated to continue with the implementation of this Programme. It will be phased out over the years. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, since the ROI Programme is being mentioned here, I was wondering if I could put a motion to increase the allocation. I am just thinking of the maritime islands such as Matuku and Moala. Those two islands have constructed their roads but basically it is overgrown, and it is not being used for the last four years or so. Also, the South end of Kadavu from Nabukelevu where there is a farm access roads are nearly required to be built. I thought if there is no sufficient fund to cover those maritime islands, I would ask for a raise.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, when we were discussing this with the Ministry and the Permanent Secretary, we were mindful of all other allocations within the Ministry and the capacity to actually execute and do all these. We think that we are actually increasing the budget from \$2.5 million to \$3 million, and given all the other activities within the Ministry, we think that the increase for this year is a right allocation.

Perhaps, more could be considered, and I am sure there are other programmes for the maritime islands that the Ministry is also looking at, so I think it will be like farm roads, et cetera. That is all ongoing and the Ministry of Agriculture has a number of programmes. FRA has a number of programmes, so I think there is enough money allocated so I would say to the honourable Member, we can look at some of things next year.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Sir, is there is allocation and I just feel guilty because every time I go out to these two islands of Moala and Matuku, I forgot the other islands. They request for the upgrade of this road because it has already been built and is overgrown because the roads are not being used. So, if the allocation is there, then I will withdraw my motion to increase the allocation.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, \$3 million is sufficient for us to cover all these works.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You withdraw your motion honourable Member. We have a motion on Programme 5-1 by honourable Koroilevasu. Before I offer the floor to the honourable Koroilavesau to elaborate on his motion, I will offer the floor first to you, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, you have gone past Programme 4-1, so we will just flow with that.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, this is another area of neglect, especially in the maritime isolated communities, not only in Lau, Lomaiviti and Kadavu, but also in the Western and the Northern maritime islands, Cikobia and the islands close to Vanua Levu.

During my visit to these islands, I have seen the struggles that they have gone through, especially, the damages that they had gone through the cyclones. They basically just put roofing irons together and are living under those conditions. If there is an allocation for the rural housing, if that does not include that, then I will propose to put a motion to increase the allocation to look after those isolated communities in the islands around Fiji?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Minister, there is an allocation of \$3 million here, with the same as the other one we have just addressed.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, the \$3 million budgetary allocation, we believe, is sufficient to cover all the requests that will be coming this year. It depends also on the capability and the capacity that we have within the Ministry to handle this work. That is why we have limited it at \$3 million, and it is done according to the applications that we receive from the members of the public, because this is done on the one-third and two-third model.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, if it is my thinking that these communities will be assisted through whatever is being allocated here, then I do not need to move a motion again.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I can discuss that with you later and see how many of those are there.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister, because the design probably has changed from the previous one, so with the new design what is the one-third? People will be listening now, for those who will be interested to be included in this programme? What is the one-third contribution now?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, the design you are talking about honourable Leader of the Opposition is the 24 by 16 design that I believe has started in the past and that is what we are continuing with at the moment. It has its own ablution facilities just beside it, and we are continuing to work on seeing the needs of the people, as people start travelling overseas and come back, their needs start to change. So, we are trying to take that into consideration as well to see how we can do some other designs and may be they can afford it.

We are also working and exploring with FNPF, if we can get the one-third contribution from them. The Scheme 3 using the wood timber, they have pine or mahogany as their contribution and that is also part of this model that we are using. You are asking how much is the one-third contribution? I think at the moment it is about \$12,000 and above, looking at the kind of designs that we are working on.

Also working on termite free kind of designs require retarded and CAT 5 certified design as well.

Question put.

Head 18 agreed to.

Head 19 – Republic of Fiji Military Forces

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-3?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-3(5). Just a clarification from the honourable Minister on the Rapid Response Infantry Combat Group. I think this is a new group within the 3FIR. Just seek some clarification on this.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- This is a 3 FIR company within the 3rd battalion, specifically readiness for HADR Deployment in particular, and special capability in other areas, counter-terrorism and other special requirements that Fiji Police do not have that the Military needs to build capability for, so counter-terrorism is one of those.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Sir, that \$300,000, I think it is for their ..

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is actually for the sustainment of the company. It is part of the battalion but to keep that company going and their training for their rapid response course would require that kind of funds to keep them going, especially the training.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I recall that in one of my private visits to Sinai, the honourable Leader of Opposition was in charge of this Rapid Response Unit.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, if I may also add, you are right to suggest that also to procure special equipment for them for the role that they are needed for.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-5?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- If the honourable Minister can give a clarification. It does not really have a number on Programme 1-5 but it just says, Aid-in-Kind - Procurement of Patrol Boats (Japan) - \$6 million.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, Japan is donating patrol boats. It is not anything close to the old TTBs or the current Guardian-class, these are exactly the same type of boats that the Fiji Police Force have - the small coastal boats, and also the rubber dinghies. That is what Japan is providing for us next year.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you Mr. Chairman, Sir, I am satisfied.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. The much smaller ones I suppose, not from the ones that you are used to captaining.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- These are for coastal waters only. These are the small boats that the police have.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The police have it, Sir.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is a grant from Japan, Sir, it is free.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I think they have just come out of that situation, they are now building aircraft carriers, et cetera.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I apologise, I think the use of the words “patrol boat” will give the technical experts a little bit of, they will be querying but they are not patrol boats that we would normally have here.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, on SEG 8 it is very interesting for me that we have HADR Storage with the Territorial Force \$100,000. Can you please elaborate what that is about because I do not see it in last year’s Budget too?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, HADR is one of the functions in peace time of the RFMF in assisting the State. The TF is one big aspect of that, the units have their own special areas where they store their HADR equipment and with the Territorial Force in Nasinu, they need to have a HADR facility also constructed for their benefit for that are currently manning the TF unit and also for the Territorial Forces that will be deployed if there is a need to do that.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Thank you Mr. Chairman, Sir, it is on Programme 2-2(5). I see that there is \$50,000 for Official Passports for 2 FIR for Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) but I looked at the next one which is 1 FIR, those that are serving in Golan and Iraq. there is no facility there for Official Passport even though they need it also. My question is whether that \$50,000 for the Official Passports that is under the 2 FIR MFO covers also the other two mission areas where they will need passports also?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question and it is exactly correct. That is the passport that is kept by RFMF or other missions it is

included in this case under 2 FIR MFO.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- For the whole lot?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, for the whole lot.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I would just like to ask the honourable Minister on SEG 5 under the heading of “Purchase - Personal Equipment”. It is just that there is Stores and Service for \$200,000 and there is another heading of Purchase - Personal Equipment at \$1 million. I just want a clarification of what is that Personal Equipment is?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- This is the procurement of Personal Equipment for support services staff deployed to Golan and Iraq. This includes cover rolls, long johns, winter gloves, winter socks, summer socks, boot calf black, boot scarf, tactical gloves, elbow pads, knee pads, ballistic glasses, survival kits, first aid kits, camel pack, runaway pack, fleece jackets, desert scarf, towel, towel green and uniform green.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will now move on. Parliament will now vote on Head 19 – Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

Question put.

Head 19 approved to.

Head 20 - Fiji Police Force

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is actually related to SEG1 on Personal Emoluments. I understand the Minister was having some discussions prior to Budget to get the police salary increased. Did it eventuate?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, I thank the honourable Member for the question, not in this particular budget this year.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- For the RFMF and Fiji Police, the Job Evaluation Exercises had already been done and salary progression was given. The Fiji Corrections Service did not have that, so we provided these additional \$12 million and in this budget, their salary progression is provided, just like those 5,000 civil servants that had already had a step up.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sorry Sir, but we have passed that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Maybe I went too fast and I did not see you waving your hand.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on Programme 1-2(7) - Transnational Crime Unit. I see very little money set aside for Transnational Crime Unit which is just around \$4,000, so if the honourable Minister can explain.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, the Transnational Crime Unit is only one set segment of the Transnational Crime Unit that is available in the other border agencies that I know. Sir, FRCS has got one, but these fundings that we have is primarily for the Police and the Unit. It is actually quite a small unit and they work very closely with FRCS and also other border agencies including Customs and Airports Fiji Limited.

HON. V. NATH.- Programme 1-6 (5) - Search and Rescue Services which is only \$5,000. Can the honourable Minister elaborate on it because I feel it is less compared to the money given to the Pacific Institute, this should increase because I have seen Police Officers during rescues where they work overtime and get wet.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- He seeks clarification on the figure, honourable Minister. It is too low according to him.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is already increased.

HON. V. NATH.- Honourable Minister was talking about Programme 1-6(5).

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is actually an increase.

HON. V. NATH.- It is only \$5,000.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I think it is sufficient for this financial year, \$5,000 for Search and Rescue Services. Not only the Police that is responsible for it but the Navy takes the lead role in search and rescue operations.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, through you, last time I was fishing in Vatu-i-Ra passage and I have seen people have lost. Unfortunately, I think they were crossing to one of the islands and the engine went off. There were about eight people in one boat, a 21 footer Fibre and lucky we were there fishing around Vatu-i-Ra Island and we managed to hold them. They did call the relevant officers in Western side but unfortunately nothing was done. So, what I thought if funds are available or made available, to increase there would definitely be more assistance to the Police officers.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, I think we have increased the allocation this time and it should be okay for now as far as we are concerned.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think what he means this is just for coordination but there is another \$250,000 in the Ministry of Home Affairs' budget. So search and rescue does not just mean that it is only for people there but there are various other allocations within the Ministry to support that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, but for that particular incident, honourable Nath, any Minister could have been the first respondent to that case.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman very well said. But, unfortunately, the network in that area is zero. It is a black spot, they could not connect. When they drifted a little bit further, they could not connect to anyone. They drifted off the Vatu-i-Ra passage alongside Yadua closer to Natovi. They could not connect to anyone. We had to go for miles to assist them. If the honourable Minister said it is okay then no problem.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, observation and a question to the honourable Minister. I was looking at the other programmes previously, I know we cannot go back but just an observation. I have seen in the previous programmes and activities you have Dog Handlers Allowance and in the Northern Division there is no Dog Handlers Allowance. We do not have a Dog Unit in Northern Division? There are plenty dogs there I am sure the Police trained dogs. Vanua Levu is a very important section of Fiji.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- What dogs are you referring to?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, the honourable Member is right, we do not have one in the North but plans are there to also reintroduce the dogs in Taveuni that is where we had them, not in Labasa but in Taveuni. Not the tracker dogs but the sniffer dogs.

HON. K.K. LAL.- So these are the drug sniffing dogs?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, that is part of their job, including sniffing money as well, but they sniff people.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I thought you had another question too? Observation and question, that was what you mentioned.

HON. K.K. LAL.- The question was to introduce the Dog Unit in the Northern Division or no?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The short answer is, yes, Mr. Chairman.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I do not have a SEG to mention, but the discussion is so interesting that I wanted to ask the honourable Minister, last year you introduced a new programme called Beat Patrol. Is that programme still continuing? Over the year, did you find that programme effective?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, Beat Patrol is the normal work of the police. We allocated a special amount last year of \$700,000 to help the police. The responses I am getting right now is that there is a much greater and a bigger presence of the police out there. That does not mean that the issues have stopped, the issues are still there, but there is a greater presence out there. Much of that is to do with the new recruits, I think the 400 police men and women that we have just churned out. We have reallocated resources as well from staff and allow more police beat on the street. I think it is effective, we have just signed an agreement with the Government of China for the supply of around 100 Caravans. This is for police presence everywhere; for permanent and short term deployment so to speak. Temporary presence of the police in the six locations with communications, et cetera. I think that is going to help the police beat in a big way.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-9(4), Minor Improvements - Building (\$1 million). Just a question on this, is this targeting the police quarters or office buildings because one of the things that they have always been crying for, for quite a long time, just like Government quarters is the state of the police quarters as well? I just wanted clarification of this. What are the plans too in terms of looking at their request for the state of their quarters?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, this \$1 million is not for the quarters, this is really for work places. I know that when there are minor plumbing works or minor repair works that are required in the quarters, as they do everywhere, they would go and respond to it. But, for this particular one, once we facilitate urgent minor repairs that is required at the Police Stations or Community Posts, office partition and works to be undertaken by police building and maintenance unit. So, the funding for accommodation or police barracks has to come through a different allocation.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 1-9(5) – Standard Forms and Registers (\$470,000). I understand there may be some registers that we require but one part of the Government or the Ministry is moving towards digitalisation, will your Ministry also move towards that direction?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, the short answer is, yes. That is one of the big areas under the police reset. One of the advantages is that through our partnership, particularly with the AFP and the embedding of their officers to help ours, comes along with it a line of resources that would take forever for us to acquire for our police. We are talking about things like camera jackets for police and other special equipment that we are unable to cater for, but we would like to have them quickly. Yes, we are going down that path, honourable Member.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Sir, there have been a lot of complaints where certain Police Stations that have police patrol cars, at certain times they broke down and they were given one replacement vehicle. For example, the interior division where Muaniweni is, will your Ministry be looking into the matter of trying to get additional vehicles for other Police Stations like in the interior and not big vehicles from other stations and relocate them to where it is needed?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I thank the honourable Member for those concerns. I think, previously in our discussions, we talked about particularly Police Posts that do not have vehicles. This is something that we are trying to address. Well, I have addressed that with the Commissioner of Police because it would appear that the allocation of vehicle is one of the areas that the Fiji Police Force can improve on.

One of the things, particularly, for Police mobility, in this same study, we want to ensure that our vehicles that are allocated to Police are given to the right place and the right number of vehicles and the kind of vehicles. I am not sure how much study has been done in the past but this is definitely one area in terms of the reset that we want to do. Yes, definitely, we will make sure that the allocation of vehicles are effective for services to the people.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, again, this is to do with SEG 4 about the issue raised earlier about the minor improvements and there being a million dollar available for building. My question relates to the Central Police Station (CPS) at Totogo. From what I understand, subject to correction from you, is that there is a particular portion of that building that is a heritage building. The rehabilitation or reconstruction of that, is it included in that million dollars?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- This fund is allocated for the maintenance and improvement sector of the Fiji Police to look at repairs in Police Stations and Police Posts, as I had alluded to earlier. It would include CPS as well but CPS, as you know, is something that Government would have to consider into the future. I think there is always been some debate about the useful use of that area. There are plans at the moment but the location of CPS is actually now best use of that particular piece of real estate. So, in terms of the maintenance you have asked if they require repairs, for CPS, that is why this fund is there.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Supplementary question, Sir. I do understand there is a building in there that has heritage status.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Right.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It was relative to that. So, Totogo has a building in there that has heritage status. Is there any funding available in this budget to ensure that that heritage status can get repaired?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Not specifically as a matter of heritage but because it is a building that is there in the Police Station, if it erodes, then this sum can also be used by the maintenance section to go and repair it. I know, like the Police Officers Mess, is one of those that is actually on one of the heritage sites. If it needs maintenance, it is small, then it can be taken care of with this sum of money.

Question put.

Head 20 agreed to.

Head 21 – Ministry Of Education

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for comments. Programmes 1-1.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on SEG3 – Travel. Can the honourable Minister for Education explain the sudden increase in Travel Budget from \$250,000 given last year, to \$450,000 this year?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the increase includes local and overseas travels for the Minister and the Assistant Minister, as well as the Permanent Secretary and other staff local travel. It also includes those that attend workshops and meetings abroad.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, on SEG7 - Workshop/Consultation/Conference, can we use universities and also schools that are already available for that instead of using \$90,000?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Minister, if I can help on that.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Can you just clarify the question again?

HON. K.K. LAL.- So, it is on Programme 1-1-(7) - Workshop/Consultation/Conference costing \$90,000.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, this allocation is a decrease from last year and it is a workshop that is done, together with the other agencies, like the United Nations and this is the contribution from the Ministry of Education.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, it includes other things like workshops, seminars, training for integrated FEMIS, data analysis interpretation, OMRS, HR procedures and Procurement. So, a lot of internal training also happens with the Ministry of Finance as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I have two questions. First on SEG6 and SEG7. I will start with SEG6 - Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Grant increased from \$2.6 million to \$4.2 million. If the honourable Minister for Education can explain how this additional grant will be utilised?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the increase is intended for the Commission to carryout intensive survey to identify and register all non-registered higher education institutions operating in Fiji and the survey includes a nation-wide campaign and other related works.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, a supplementary question on that, I am a bit confused because my question is on TSLs - SEG6 - Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (\$4.2 million).

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the increased budget is to cater for the salary increase, increase in building rent. They are moving to a new location, HR Development Plan, Website upgrade and Mobile Apps.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you. My last question is on SEG7 - Implementation of National Action Plan - Gender Based Violence Against Women and Girls where \$50,000 is allocated. My question to you is, how were these grants used last year and how will it be used this year? What outcomes are you trying to achieve from this funding?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, the utilisation rate for last year was around 90 percent, basically, on awareness and education campaign that is provided to teachers and stakeholders of the school. So, this is what we will continue to do in terms of women in leadership and other similar training programmes.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programmes 1-2?

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman on SEG5, I have noticed an increase of \$244,000 for library services. How will this money be utilised?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Library Software.

HON. H. CHAND.- Library Services on Activity 2(5)?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You mean National Library Week?

HON. H. CHAND.- No, Library Services. I have seen an increase of around \$244,000. It is Special School Library Scheme (\$50,000)?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- This allocation will be used to purchase resources such as books, tables, chairs, shelves, rugs for the school library setup and we will work within this approved budget.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, there is a motion here by honourable Ketan Lal. It is to do with Programme 2-1(6). Would you mind elaborating on your motion?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman I move:

That Head 21-2-1(6) - Free Education - Government Primary Schools: Year 1 - 8 (\$260,000) be increased.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I second the motion.

HON. K.K. LAL.- The current funding jeopardises our commitment in providing quality education for all children, particularly those from lower income families. Adequate funding is essential for ensuring that primary schools have necessary resources, so these are teaching materials, infrastructure and support services to deliver a high standard of education.

Mr. Chairman, by increasing this budget, we can enhance the learning environment, produce various education and promote equal opportunities for all children.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, while the Honourable Minister for Education is looking at that, I am not sure what he means by that motion. I mean, the overall budget has been determined based on proper statistics - how many students are there, how many classrooms are there, so the general statement about improving quality, et cetera, that is whole of Government approach for honourable Minister for Education's effort. So, I think the allocation is adequate, as the Minister will tell himself.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- The allocation is adequate Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The allocation is adequate, honourable Ketan Lal. So, are you withdrawing your motion?

HON. K.K. LAL.- No, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. So, we will put that to the vote.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-3?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is on Programme 2-3(7) - Verification for Students' with Disability, a new budget item. My question to the honourable Minister is, how do you intend to use this data?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Sir, these are most of the mainstream schools that we have currently that have students with the special needs. Sometimes, they are not being probably identified and this is a programme that is used to identify through the assistance of the respective schools, Heads of School and allow them to be classified not only in the mainstream school but become a special inclusive school as well.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 3-1.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is, on Programme 3-1(1) – Personal Emoluments. I see that this has been reduced from last year's budget to \$50,358. So, if the honourable Minister can explain this reduction.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, in Programme 3-1(1), there is an overall increase to address the increase in teachers that are eligible for the increase. The separation in terms of the respective call centres, they may have some showing a decrease but overall, there is an increase in SEG 1 allocation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Perhaps, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance can explain.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Minister is right but I can just give you the details. This budget was increased to \$1.8 million in the current financial year to cater for the recruitment of 84 teaching positions. So, these teachers will now be paid from Programme 3-2 and Programme 3-3 so that is why it shows the reduction on the budget this year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have a motion here from honourable Premila Kumar. Would you introduce your motion, Madam?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my motion is to decrease SEG 5 which is rations by \$1.4 million.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I second the motion, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Would you elaborate on your motion, Madam?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, each year, the Government allocates around \$2.8 million in ration support to Government schools. However, no such support is extended to non-Government schools that offer boarding services. For instance, boarders at Natabua High School pay \$70 per term, ACS pays \$50 per term, which includes food. However, boarders at schools like Ballantine Memorial School, just an example, and there are many others, are charged \$300 per term plus \$100 PTA levy.

Now there are children from extremely poor families travelling as far as Rakiraki to enrol in these schools. These are non-Government schools. Typically, we have found children attending Government schools funded by taxpayers' money, they come from families of ex-students, doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, army officials, and people who are in the executive positions, even politicians. These are the leads of our society and these families can pay for their children's boarding fee. That is my argument.

A means test is the best way to address this disparity. As highlighted by the honourable Minister for Women and Children, as she said welfare must start with the families, there is no better place to begin than by making well-to-do parents pay for the food rations or pay a slightly higher boarding fee. Additionally, students studying in non-Government schools who come from poor families, actually they do deserve a level playing field. Why cannot the taxpayer's money allocated to these schools be redirected to schools like Ballantine Memorial School just to help the poor families who are trying to send their children to get the education? So that is my proposal, Mr. Chairman.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, I find the logic a bit hard to understand from honourable Kumar. Every school has all kinds of students. It is not quite true for her to say, Government schools have invariably, there might be. I went to a Government school and 90 percent or at least 70 percent to 80 percent of us at that time came from rural backgrounds, farming backgrounds and poor households, subsidised by the Government. So, I think that is a bit of a generalisation.

Even in non-Government schools, you have a mixed group. I was surprised that you want a reduction. I think what you should have suggested, in fact the per capita grant to all the other schools are there, it would be better. I think this is something that we can look at in the future, but to suggest a reduction in this, might be a bit illogical, because I suspect that a lot of students in these Government schools also come from very poor families.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, I do not agree with the motion that has been put to reduce the boarding school and food supplies. I think the amount that has been provided is sufficient, maybe not enough in terms of the number of students that are attending the schools. We also trying to encourage the schools through the provision of tractor that was made to assist in the provision of their food supplies. We are also looking after non-Government Schools as a boarding school per-capita too has also been given for Non-Government Boarding Schools. I think that is the responsibility of a government being the manager of Government schools that we need to look after the students that are in schools in a manner that they can be able to provide good results in terms of their education.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I just want to say to the honourable Minister first that here we are not talking about per-capita grant. Every school gets per-capita grant. I am specifically talking about boarding schools and not every school is a boarding school. So, what I have seen that when it comes

to the Government boarding schools, the ration is provided. It is a itemised where is when it comes to the Non-Government boarding schools, it is not there.

What I am trying to say is this that if we really want to create a level playing field, we should do a means test; that is all. Any school whether Government or Non-Government, if the parents can afford, we should increase the boarding fee for them. And any child, no matter which school or boarding school they go to, if the parents are not earning enough they cannot support that assistance, that is where we should assist them.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Given that the explanation has been provided by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and as well as the honourable Minister for Education, we will now put this to the vote. The motion is to decrease the rations by \$1.4 million that is for Programmes 3-2(5).

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I just wanted to make a comment, if I can, Sir? I would suggest that the defeated motion, I ask Government to look at all boarding schools and see if they could be assisted in the same way that the Government Schools are assisted in provision of funding for rations. Why I am saying that, Sir, I was educated at Lelean Memorial School and the same this happens. We eat what we call *tavioka kadralla*, tinned fish with curry cassava. So, basically because we have to pay our school fees to be able to survive. The school fees that we pay, we go and buy cartons of tinned fish and we ration it. We eat dhal and rice. All I am suggesting is Government could consider assisting rations for Non-Government Boarding Schools.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, my question is on Programme 4-1-(5), if the honourable Minister for Education can explain there is no allocation for Development and Rollout of Moral and Civic Education? If he can give us some information in relation to how this money was used last year and whether this activity has been completed?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- What SEG is that, Madam?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- SEG 5 on Civic and Moral Education

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- It is not in the Budget book. I can get back to you to get the update on something that is not in the Budget book for this year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It used to be there but it is taken out.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was a one-off programme and it has been completed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, because that programme was rolled out when I was there, the whole idea was to continue with Civic and Moral Education not only up to Class 3 but it should continue till Class 8 and then Life Skills will come in at secondary level. The fact that I see there is no more funding, so I am sort of a bit concerned whether there is a continuity of that programme for the whole of the primary school or because we have reached Year 3 and that is it. We are not going to go forward, so maybe the honourable Minister for Education will clarify that to me later on. That is fine.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 6-1(8) as far as Upgrade and Enhancement is concerned, I cannot see Vatuwaqa Primary School on the list because for this particular school, some rooms were damaged and destroyed and that was way back in December 2022. Can the honourable Minister explain, please?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, the Vatuwaqa Primary School as we know the history was burnt down in 2022 and later last year we had requested for the Fire Report which took time to be submitted to the Ministry of Education and it came after the Budget submission. This used to be a Government school but is now being operated by Trustees as honourable Hem Chand would be aware.

The need for the school is well noted and this is something that would be considered in the Social Infrastructure Programme of the Vuvale Partnership that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance we were part of the launching last week. However, we are still awaiting the suggestions and the request from the Trustees of the school which we are trying very hard to find and locate where they are right now. So, that is why it has been missing because they need to initiate the request because it is under their guidance.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, if I can just add, I had spoken on this when I responded to the Budget Address and I know the honourable Prime Minister was not here. I appeal to him again if maybe we just go and find a way to build it quickly otherwise the very good buildings that are standing now will just keep on deteriorating. I appeal to you Sir, that we can go and do this.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, just an addition to that, the current students that used to school in that school are in the other schools nearby whilst the discussions are ongoing regarding the rebuilding of the school. Going forward, we would like to see whether that school is enough for just a primary school or if it can also accommodate primary, secondary and possibly TVET or whatever can be allowable in that limited space that is there.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 8-1? Honourable Usamate has got three motions, all to do with Programme 8.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I actually put in three motions that are all related, so I can just refer to them altogether, if that will be okay?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Is it of the same too? Programme 8?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, Mr. Chairman - same Programme and same Activity.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Okay, I will allow that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My motion is in relation to first of all reduce the grant to Pacific Polytech by \$3 million because I believe that, that money is better utilised elsewhere.

The other part of my motion is to take out the \$5 million USP Outstanding Grant from the University of the South Pacific and both of these funds (\$5 million plus \$3 million) to be added on to the Fiji National University.

I believe that this is the way that we can try to address the skill shortages that we have. The reason that we are trying to provide money for Pacific Polytech was because they provide TVET short term training programmes. Those short term training programmes have been done by FNU for

ages for a long time all over Fiji. The programmes at FNU lead to formal qualifications. A lot of the one-day programme, two-day programmes are done by smaller institutions. They do not accumulate into a formal qualification. When you carry out training, there are various levels of competency at which trainings undertaken.

If you carry a one-day training, the only thing that you can get out of it is knowledge which is the recall, which is the lowest form of knowledge. If you want to have training programmes that lead to someone becoming employable, you need to do that in a more systematic manner and that is what we have at FNU. You have the NTPC, you have all their various programmes that provide their training programme. So that is the gist of my motion, Sir.

To reduce the money from Pacific Polytech (\$3 million), remove the outstanding grant for \$5 million going to USP, that \$8 million to give it to FNU so that they deliver the kind of service that this country needs.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Ketan Lal has withdrawn his motion as well.

Honourable Minister, you have any comments to make on these three motions.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Chairman, on the motion by honourable Usamate, I strongly oppose the motion to reduce the Pacific Polytech basically because that is all the funding for higher institutions are being monitored and managed by Higher Education Commission and in this particular instance, the number of students that have graduated from Pacific Polytech in the last year is over 1,200. I think that is quite a big number for an institution that has recently been started. But even the funding that has been given, it is not a handout to all these institutions. There are proper mechanisms in place by the Higher Education Commission to ensure there is the real purpose in terms of the achievement of this funding.

The Higher Education Institute is part of the criteria for handing out this funding is for them to provide a destination survey to ensure that those graduates from Pacific Polytech inclusive, FNU, need to highlight whether graduates that come out from institutions are actually employed in the job market, Mr. Chairman. So, I do not agree with the motion by the honourable Member.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD- Sir, this is one of the most ridiculous motions that I have ever had to speak on this Parliament. I mean, this is coming from an honourable Member who was part of a government that terrorises Higher Education Institutions in this country. They completely restricted academic freedom, they interfered in the governance structure of tertiary institutions, including the University of the South Pacific. They did not pay the grant, they did so many damage to Fiji and the region as a result of that.

There are issues at FNU during their time, their interference and today with this motion, they want the Government to interfere in the independent process for determining funding for Higher Education Institutions.

We have a Higher Education Commission there which monitors, registers, which looks at the number of student qualifications. There is a qualification framework, so I do not know what is wrong with these people. I just cannot understand what is wrong with them in trying to attack institutions which are providing qualifications

Mr. Chairman, I do not know where they get this rubbish from. The Higher Education Commission monitors the qualification. They have so many steps of qualification where people have. The honourable Minister for Education is right when he says that the Higher Education Commission determines this and if they have any big issues, they should look go and get the details from the Higher Education Commission on how these institutions are registered, how they are monitored, how they are reviewed and how the funding model works.

Mr. Chairman, this is really a silly motion and we do not support it. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You want to speak on the motion too, honourable Ketan Lal?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Sir, my motion was the same, maybe if I can contribute something.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, no, we handle these three first. These three here have been put into one. Honourable Members,

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for Education for his contribution and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. I think we need to be reminded that I am a Member of Parliament. I sit here, I represent people just because we have an institute and organisation that says this needs to be done. As a Member of the Parliament, I have the right to say what I want to say. I do not need the Deputy Prime Minister or anyone else to tell me I did not answer that.

I am also a person that contributed to the development of the Higher Education Commission. It is the organisation that was under me that developed the first National Qualifications Framework. I was fundamental, I know it through and through. That is an area that I understand, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, you need to understand that. I have the right as the Member of Parliament to say what I want to say, and I know that business.

I believe that what has been happened, the decision is wrong. I believe that decision is wrong and I do not need you to question my intelligence and my authority to say what I want to say in this Parliament. I do not like the fact that you belittle people who go against what you say. You have to learn to respect others in this Parliament.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that my motion will help to alleviate the struggles that we have in this country, to develop competent people and that is why I stand by that motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, I will now put that to vote. The motions are three being motions put into one.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes, honourable Ketan Lal?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, I have a question.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have finished with this. I am sorry. When I raised the question for you to reply, you said you have finished. That is being handled by honourable Usamate. I am sorry honourable Ketan Lal.

Honourable Members, that concludes the Committee of Supply for today. We began from Head 1 and we finished off with Head 21.

Parliament will now vote on Head 21- Ministry of Education.

Question put.

Head 21 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, we have now concluded voting from Head 1 to Head 21. We will now adjourn the Committee of Supply until tomorrow.

Honourable Members, I will have to go and resume my Speaker's Chair in order to adjourn Parliament.

The Parliament resumed:

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today and thank you so much for all your contributions. I thought it was a smooth one until what erupted during the very tail end of our sitting today.

Thank you so much for today and Parliament is now adjourned until 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.14 p.m.