

# PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

### DAILY HANSARD

**THURSDAY, 8TH AUGUST, 2024**

[CORRECTED COPY]

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**THURSDAY, 8TH AUGUST, 2024**

The Parliament met at 9.36 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable S.T. Koroilavesau.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 7th August, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I am looking around and I am happy, there seems to be a hundred percent attendance this morning.

We welcome those joining us in the gallery, the students and teachers from International School, Suva. Welcome to your Parliament. We also welcome those watching proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

**PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES**

Consolidated Review Report –  
Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources 2019-2022 Annual Reports

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Committee, I am pleased to present this Consolidated Committee Report for the review of the 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 Audit Reports on public enterprises and other entities.

The 2019-2020 Report covers audits of 11 Financial Statements of eight public enterprises and three other entities. Out of the 11 audit opinions that were issued, one was from the 2015 Financial Statements, two from the 2018 Financial Statements, five were from 2019 Financial Statements and three from the 2020 Financial Statements for the various entities. The Office of the Auditor-General had issued 10 unmodified audit opinions and one modified or qualified opinion.

The 2021-2022 Report covers audits of 30 Financial Statements for 10 public enterprises and four other entities. Twenty-five were issued with unmodified audit opinions and five were issued with modified or qualified opinions.

The Committee deliberated and noted some of the significant matters that need to be brought to the attention of the House for consideration and these include:

- Addressing significant delays in submission of quality draft financial statements for audit which is warranted by those respective Boards and those charged with governance of State-owned enterprises, including the Permanent Secretary and the Minister.
  - ❖ In the 2019-2020 Report, the quality of four entities out of eleven, were found to be ineffective, while for timeliness, seven entities out of 11 were ineffective.
  - ❖ In the 2021-2022 Report, the quality of two entities out of 30, were found to be ineffective, while for timeliness, seven entities out of 30 were ineffective.
- Modified audit opinion issued for the Financial Statements audited every year on public enterprises and other entities reflected negatively on the entities concerned, its Board, the Permanent Secretary for Public Enterprises and the Minister responsible. Urgent and close attention needs to be given to address matters which have been highlighted in the Auditor's Report.
- The Auditor-General also needs to be the external auditor for all State-Owned Entities and should have the power to carry out audit, whether financial or performance, on those organisations that directly or indirectly receive funding from Government, to ensure that the findings can be reported to Parliament. Therefore, those falling outside the ambit the Auditor-General should review the decision.
- The long-term financial sustainability of some of the entities without Government assistance continued to be questioned, let alone the ability to provide an acceptable return (dividend and/or growth) per annum to Government. Hence, Management and Board should ensure to provide strategic direction for long-term financial stability of entities to minimise the heavy reliance on Government grant or assistance.
- Improving risk assessment processes to achieve the entity's objectives and forming a clear basis for determining how risks are managed and needs to be strengthened as well.
- Ministry of Public Enterprises need to improve overall monitoring of the entities, including the establishment of independent internal audit functions and a Board Audit Committee, which could assist in identifying the gaps in controls for necessary action.
- There is also potential for these public enterprises and State-Owned Entities to be a development agent and earning sector of its own, like the Local Governments, to support development and investment targets for Fiji. In the Asian Development Bank's latest Report, 'Finding Balance 2023 Key Findings for Fiji', the following was noted which, we believe, can be improved substantially:
  - ❖ Number of State-Owned Entities: 20
  - ❖ Dominant industries: power, aviation and banking
  - ❖ Book value of assets: \$4.2 billion
  - ❖ Total fixed assets in the economy: 16 percent to 22 percent of GDP
  - ❖ Average portfolio contribution to GDP: 3.7 percent
  - ❖ Average return on assets: 2.1 percent
  - ❖ Average return on equity: 4 percent

- With a \$4.2 billion in assets and average return on equity around 4 percent, again, there is potential and what we saw was that these enterprises were not strategically governed, managed and supervised in the last 10 years to 15 years, and we believe it needs a Ministry of its own.
- There is also potential for these public enterprises to be the prime contributor to our planned sovereign wealth fund, apart from our natural resources.

The Committee strongly encourages the current Executive Management and Board of relevant public enterprises and other entities to take responsibility for the deficiencies that have been found and identified, even though most of the audited reports are old and were under the auspices of the previous Minister and Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the clarifications provided, forward commitment expressed by the current Management and the Board, and improvements seen by the Committee, revealed that these entities have taken the Auditor-General's recommendation positively and are taking necessary actions to resolve significant matters that were highlighted.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Executives of the 17 public enterprises and other entities for providing its written responses to the audit issues that were raised and measures that have been put in place to resolve the issues identified.

Also, I wish to commend the staff of the Office of Auditor-General for providing technical clarifications on those issues, as well as accompanying the Committee to all the consultations around the country. A special thanks goes out to the staff of the Ministry of Public Enterprises and the Permanent Secretary, for the provision of updated figures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my appreciation as well to the honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report, namely: honourable Sakiusa Tubuna - Deputy Chairperson, honourable Jovesa Vocea, honourable Alvick Maharaj and honourable Hem Chand.

I also wish to thank honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu, honourable Vijay Nath and honourable Taito Matasawalevu, who stood in as Alternative Members, pursuant to Standing Order 115(5), and participated in the Committee consultations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I commend this Committee Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. E.Y IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the following Ministers have given notice to make a Ministerial Statement under Standing Order 40, the:

- (1) Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services;
- (3) Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection;
- (4) Honourable Minister for Justice;
- (5) Honourable Minister for Youth and Sports; and
- (6) Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

The Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes and after the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. I will also invite the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc, or his designate, to speak for five minutes. There will be no other debate.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, honourable Usamate stood up to point out that a Ministerial Statement presented yesterday was possibly an attempt to cut out a question that was going to come. This one is also the same, and I apologise to honourable Koya, this is in response or in relation to the question he was going to ask at question time. I have sent in my apology that I may not be present during question time in the afternoon, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that has given me time to give honourable Koya the information he is seeking in his oral question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

### Measures and Initiatives to Promote Productivity in the Civil Service

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, and I also welcome the students and teachers who are with us this morning in the gallery; *ni sa bula vinaka*, good morning to you all.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to make this Statement, and as I have said, it is in response to one of the questions that was relisted to be asked for oral response this afternoon.

As I have said, I will not be available. I will ask for your leave to be absent from the afternoon session to be with the Right Honourable Senator Penny Wong, looking over the Hospital under the guidance of the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, and working on how we are going to renovate the Hospital. It is very fitting that the Government of Australia will be helping us in this, as it is the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, and the war in which many Fijians left our shores and joined the Australian, British and the New Zealand Army.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service is the key arm of the Government machinery and is essential for the effective and efficient delivery of Government services and work programmes approved in the budget to our citizens. The question today is justified, so it demands a good response from Government to keep the people informed of what the biggest allocation in our Budget, those

that come under that allocation are doing for the people of Fiji.

The Ministry of the Civil Service is committed to enhancing productivity across the whole of the Civil Service. While recognising the critical link between employee satisfaction and productivity, the Ministry is implementing a series of initiatives aimed at improving productivity.

As the employer, the Government continues to provide the necessary support and opportunities to our civil servants. The labour market has evolved beyond the nation's boundaries, and significant efforts have been made to increase the value of the work undertaken by our civil servants. Many of the honourable Members here have had a stint with the Civil Service and they know how hard they work and how important their work is.

The Ministry of Civil Service is committed to creating a workplace where individuals feel valued, they take pride in their work, they are encouraged to be innovative without fear and provide an environment that the Civil Service is an employer of choice.

By fostering an environment that encourages growth, development and recognition, we hope to attract and retain a dedicated workforce that is motivated to deliver high-quality services to our people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent salary adjustment is linked to complex issues affecting the public sector workforce that impact the service delivery and welfare of our people.

There are several Whole of Government initiatives aimed at enhancing productivity, standardising processes and adopting common enabling tools and services to support efficiency, collaboration, and better coordination. These initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are part of a broader strategy to ensure that our Civil Service operates at the highest levels of efficiency and effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to begin with, we continue to experience labour shortages due to labour mobility and demand from developed economies particularly in Australia and New Zealand. The Civil Service has not been immune to this; an ongoing loss of skills in the Civil Service has led to a large number of vacancies in most specialised government agencies. This in turn affects service delivery and, in some instances, leads to existing staff carrying extra workloads to fill the gaps due to increased migration.

As the Minister responsible for Civil Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to extend our deep appreciation to those hardworking civil servants who at times have borne the extra workload as a result of vacancies. Government has also introduced an Internship and Graduate Trainee Programme (GTP) to enable graduating students from the various tertiary institutions to join the Civil Service as an employer of choice.

The Ministry intends to provide opportunities to at least 50 graduates on a yearly basis to join the Civil Service under that programme, in addition to many others who responded to advertised positions from time to time on placement basis.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the recent salary increase is a strategic employee retention measure as well, aimed at retaining our most talented and experienced civil servants. We understand that a lot of those who are receiving our migrating civil servants offer higher salaries than we can even afford.

Competitive remuneration is essential for maintaining a motivated and committed workforce. By providing fair and attractive compensation, we are better positioned to retain skilled employees who are critical to the effective functioning of Government.

The salary adjustment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, acknowledges the hard work and dedication of our

Civil servants, thereby enhancing their sense of value and also job satisfaction. A satisfied and well-compensated workforce is more likely to be productive and committed to their roles.

Recruitment is also a crucial part of our workforce strategy. Government has been working through dialogue with the public sector unions to address concerns across different sectors, including recruitment practices. This collaboration is welcomed by the unions, and the opportunity for dialogue are conducted in good faith. By working closely with unions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can ensure that the needs and concerns of our workforce are addressed, leading to a more harmonious and productive work environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are aware of workplace trends and the anticipated business transformations that will develop over time. Several initiatives have been identified to promote productivity. We are exploring flexible working hours arrangements within government agencies to manage the various challenges while balancing work responsibilities.

Flexible working arrangements can help employees achieve a better balance working environment, leading to increase job satisfaction and productivity. You saw an example or a demonstration of that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when civil servants were allowed to work from home. These arrangements can also make the Civil Service a more attractive employer, particularly for younger workers who value flexibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent Civil Service Day celebrated the achievements of our civil servants and provided an opportunity to engage with the citizens. Their views and ideas for improving service delivery have been considered. This event will now become an annual occasion for reflection and improvement and overtime hopefully our detractors will accept. Civil Service Day is an important event that allows us to recognise the hard work and dedication of our civil servants and to gather valuable feedback from the public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this year, Cabinet approved the establishment of the Fiji Learning Institute of Public Service (FLIPS). This Institute will create high-quality, future focused, learning opportunities to ensure that civil servants are skilled and be productive, thereby also helping to build an experienced workforce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FLIPS will be a centre of excellence for sharing best practices in a modern robust Civil Service through programmes tailor-made to the need of our Civil Service. This initiative is part of our commitment to continuous professional development and lifelong learning and a dynamic changing environment.

The establishment of FLIPS within this financial year will be a significant milestone for the Civil Service. The Ministry of Civil Service has initiated collaborations with the Public Service Commission within the region to explore capacity-building opportunities that will further improve performance. There is a constant need to innovate, encourage the workforce to challenge the status quo, push boundaries and excel. Investing in training and continuous retraining of our workforce and providing civil servants with future skills is crucial for efficient and effective delivery of services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, training and development programmes offered by FLIPS will cover a wider range of topics. These programmes will be designed to meet the specific needs of the Fiji's civil servants at different stages of their careers, ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in their roles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be bringing back Induction Training. You and I remember the days of Induction Training when we went straight from school into the Government Training Centre to be



somehow prepared for the Civil Service and we went in as cadets into the various departments. That will be brought back, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Customer services training, middle management and senior level leadership development programme, international relations and diplomacy training, teaching in ethics, governance and eradication of abuse and corruption.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another key strategy for achieving greater efficiency in delivering Government services cost effectively while cutting bureaucracies, red tape and standardising procedures. These measures aim not only to improve productivity, but also to create a more dynamic and responsive Civil Service that can better meet the needs of our nation.

Community of Practice Business Process Improvement (BPI) forums are being conducted to streamline processes, align procedures, reduce gaps and evaluate processes for improved service delivery, cost reduction and better utilisation of resources. Mr. Speaker, Sir, BPI forums bring together technical advisors and representatives from different Ministries to share best practices and develop streamline processes. By reducing duplication and inefficiencies, we can improve service delivery and ensure that resources are used more effectively that will increase productivity. These forums also provide an opportunity for civil servants to collaborate and learn from each other, fostering a culture of continuous improvements and emphasising the need for working together as a team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recent challenges have highlighted the need for a comprehensive functional review of the Civil Service to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness. With the support from the Australian Government, a functional review will be undertaken to identify a better performance management system and increase productivity. I wish to acknowledge and thank the Australian Government for their continuing support for capacity building in the public service. I believe that this approach will surely optimise workforce efficiency and effectiveness, establish clear metrics for accountability, and promote continuous improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, performance metrics will also serve as a basis for recognising and rewarding high performing civil servants, fostering a culture of excellence and motivating them to deliver their best impacts and results consistently. The review will provide recommendations for short term, mid-term and long-term improvements. The performance management system will include regular performance appraisals, clear objectives and goals and opportunities for feedback and development. By setting clear expectations and providing ongoing support, we can ensure that civil servants are motivated to perform at their best. The system will also include mechanisms for identifying and addressing performance issues, ensuring that all employees are held accountable for their contributions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, our approach includes measures designed not only to improve productivity, but also to retain our most talented and experienced employees, most importantly, to remove fear and give back confidence to our civil servants. By creating a supportive and engaging work environment, we aim to ensure that increased salary investments translate directly into improved service delivery. The Ministry is confident that these initiatives will drive improvements, ultimately benefitting our citizens and supporting the overall development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is committed to providing the support and resources necessary to help our civil servants succeed. By fostering a culture of collaboration, learning and accountability, we can create a Civil Service that is capable of meeting the challenges of the future and delivering high quality services to the public. The Ministry of Civil Service will continue to work closely with other agencies, public sector unions and international partners to implement these initiatives.

We are grateful for the support and collaboration of all stakeholders, particularly our development partners, and look forward working together to achieve our goals. The journey towards a more productive, sufficient and responsive Civil Service is ongoing and we are committed to making continuous and continuing improvements to better serve the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Chairman of Post Fiji and the CEO, who have just entered the Chambers. He is a former MP and Minister as well. Welcome, Chairman of Post Fiji Limited.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, honourable Members of Parliament, I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for a comprehensive update on the upgrade of the Civil Service. I have five minutes, so I am going to get straight to the point.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the Civil Service, we must respond to the challenges of today, if we are going to improve on our public sector productivity. This helps any Government that is in place because it shows you how productive they are at the end of the day, and in terms of efficiency of the Government. But what are the measurement methods that we have in place with respect to checking on this productivity?

Mr. Speaker, currently, Government is engaged in digital transformation, and that digital transformation stands at the core of a very productive Civil Service. Successive governments have faced huge problems in terms of productivity, but this is not due to the civil servants, it is also due to our inability to get ourselves a proper digital platform. I will give you an example, Mr. Speaker. Currently, the Ministry of Lands is not connected to the Registrar of Titles. The Ministry of Lands is not even connected to Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) to upgrade their system in terms of the VanuaGIS. So, if FRA puts up a new road and gives it a new name, that does not reflect in our VanuaGIS.

There are many facets of Government that are still disconnected, and this is not a complaint but is a word of advice, that the faster we get our digital transformation done, the faster we can get a Civil Service that is productive. We must redefine the public sector, we must move away from bureaucracy that still exists in 2024.

There are a lot of bureaucratic things that actually exist within Ministries. We must also ensure that we engage the new and the old public servants with respect to stopping this building of their own little castles within the Ministries – that needs to stop. We must engage and collaborate more and more within the Ministries, and I think the one thing that does all these for us is digitisation.

Mr. Speaker, we must also look at outcomes rather outputs. It is a very important aspect of it. An outcome is an impact of that particular product on the people to whom the product is intended for, and how it changes the lives of our communities for the better and this should be the focus of our Civil Service.

Mr. Speaker, we all understand that this will not happen overnight, it will take time to happen, but as I have said, it has to be through a proper digital platform. We have spoken about this earlier. The honourable Minister for Trade is hard at work, trying to dot all the i's and cross all the t's, et cetera, and get every single Ministry connected.

Mr. Speaker, it would be insane to call for our Civil Service to raise their level of performance if Government does not provide that particular support. It is imperative that we concentrate, and I

urge the honourable Minister for Finance to give as much funding as possible to ensure that the digitisation of Government is actually at the top of the calendar with respect to getting things done.

We have very good capable workers. I know we have problems with respect to migration. Many of our young Civil Servants have also migrated, that is also a problem. But we also have very good capable workers who have not achieved their full potential because we expect too much from them. Education also is a huge thing that we need to ensure that we upgrade on with respect to all our Civil Servants.

As with all services, monetary reward, Mr. Speaker, should not only be the source of that particular incentive. Deriving satisfaction from knowing that you are actually providing your services to the general public, Mr. Speaker, is a much higher reward. That should also be built in into our Civil Service culture.

Mr. Speaker, Human Resource Management is the second part of the equation, and that is something that needs to be looked at very carefully with respect to how we actually get the productivity that we want out of our Civil Service.

Mr. Speaker, it is pivotal - we must engage in motivational practices within the Civil Service so that it actually comes to the fore. We must look at serious performance management, which is actually a very complex issue, is not easily measurable and, again, we also must remember that this is an ongoing issue and it will not be a close chapter once this Government says, "Alright, we have done this now." It will always be an open book for us to look at on another day.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir I rise to deliver my response to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Civil Service this morning.

I totally agree with the honourable Prime Minister's Statement on the measures that have been taken to increase productivity and performance of our Civil Servants. It was long overdue, given the measures that have been announced in the recent Budget where there is a 7 to 10 percent increase for salary earners and also 7 to 20 percent increase for wage earners. It affects over 42,000 public servants employed in the Civil Service. It is about \$85 million allocation given, depending on their salary band. I thank the Government for recognising that, given that this was long overdue.

Mr. Speaker, making the Civil Service an employer of choice, as alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister, and a measure also that will not only increase productivity but also a retention measure where we can retain our senior Civil Servants, especially those whom we are losing out for overseas work.

I also welcome the increase of the retirement age from 55 years to 60 years and if the Government can also consider increasing that to 65, given that many at that particular age can still deliver and are more productive in their service delivery. Also, given the wealth of knowledge that they have, we should also consider increasing that from 60 years to 65 years old.

Mr. Speaker, on the issue that was raised by honourable Koya in terms of their training and digitisation, I think that has also been covered by the honourable Prime Minister when speaking on the Fiji Learning Institute for Public Service (FLIPS). They will be trained according to the need that is there, according to the work and job description that they have.

We also welcome the induction training that will also bring back cadetships, which the

honourable Prime also mentioned. That will also improve the customer service and service delivery of our civil servants, especially at the divisional level.

The idea of bringing back the Civil Service Day will also bring in a new culture and has also brought in that freedom within the Civil Service where they are able to strengthen their bonds with other Civil Servants, especially working with other Ministries and knowing each other well, which will help in the service delivery as per Ministry.

Also, the Performance Management System has been brought back and the removal of the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection. The contract system has been removed and permanent employment has given confidence to civil servants, especially going into banks to take loans and other things that gives them security at their work, and they need not fear for any renewal of contract or expiry of contract, and this also improves their performance in their work as they deliver to our people. This particular increase, as rightly mentioned by the honourable Prime Minister, will increase productivity and also service delivery.

In most of our debates during the week and even in previous sittings, we always talk about the review of Annual Reports for various Ministries. We always tend to blame previous governments or previous administrations, but it comes down to the civil servants who deliver and implement those policies. So, in providing these incentives and proper working conditions, plus other training, it will help them perform well and also deliver to the people of Fiji what has been passed by this Parliament, especially in the Budget allocation in the years to come and also in this financial year.

With those words, Mr, Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as a result of the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Prime Minister, please, take note, as he has alluded to, that Oral Question No. 140/2024 on today's Order Paper will now be dropped.

I now call on the Minister of Health and Medical Services to deliver his Statement.

#### Addressing the Burden of NCDs in Fiji

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.– Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni bula vina'a* and good morning to you all, and to our visitors in the gallery today, and those watching from home and places of work. I rise to deliver my Ministerial Statement today with a focus on the efforts that the Ministry, through the Wellness Division, is undertaking to address the burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in our country.

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) continue to be the main disease burden for our people, contributing to 80 percent of all deaths in the country and 40 percent of premature deaths.

In the recently published 'Republic of Fiji Vital Statistics Report 2016 to 2021', circulatory diseases such as hypertension, heart disease and stroke, diabetes and cancers were the leading causes of death in Fiji in both, male and female in all ages combined. For adults aged 35 years to 59 years, the leading causes of death in men and women were NCDs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NCDs also pose a significant burden on our health system and our society. The majority of admissions and treatment at our health facilities are due to NCDs and its complications.

Complications such as coronary artery disease or heart attacks, stroke, kidney diseases or kidney failure, vision impairment or vision loss and peripheral vessel disease that require surgical interventions including amputations, bring patients to our hospitals every day, and require ongoing care in our health facilities and in our homes and communities. In 2019, healthcare costs for deaths and disability from NCDs such as diabetes and obesity-related illnesses was estimated at FJ\$591million.

Mr. Speaker Sir, 95 percent of NCDs are due to lifestyle choices, and the four main modifiable risk factors of NCDs are tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet that is high in salt, sugar, fat and processed foods, and excessive alcohol consumption. These unhealthy lifestyle habits lead to four key changes in our body that increase our risk of NCDs, and they are a raised blood pressure, high blood sugars, high blood cholesterol or fat levels, and obesity or overweight.

The Fiji 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey showed a significant level of unhealthy dietary practices in older children, adolescents and adults, which featured the low consumption of nutritious foods, and a high intake of sugar and sweetened beverages. The survey also noted that about one-third of children in Fiji between the ages of 5 years to 19 years were overweight. When uncorrected, the presence of these intermediate risk factors leads to the development of NCDs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the NCD situation in Fiji, the Wellness Division of the Ministry is tasked, amongst its many roles, with undertaking population surveys, often with the support of our partners, to assess the prevalence of risk factors of NCD and its complications in the community. Information gathered from these population surveys guide the strategies of health promotion and NCD prevention programmes that are implemented by the Ministry and the Government to address NCD in Fiji.

Recent examples of such interventions include:

- (1) The Cabinet endorsed the 'National Policy on Healthy Catering and Sale of Food and Beverages for Government Ministries and Institutions', which was launched by the honourable Prime Minister in February this year.
- (2) The increased tax on sugar and sweetened beverages and tobacco which Government had implemented in the last financial year and, again, in this new financial year.

It has been pleasing to note that many Government institutions are taking positive actions to adhere to the healthy catering policy, such as Vunidawa Hospital in the Naitasiri Province, whose pictures of deliciously colourful and balanced meals provided at the Hospital are currently trending on social media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an important NCD population survey that the Ministry has embarked on since June 2024 is the STEPS survey. This survey is a World Health Organization (WHO) STEPwise approach to NCD risk factor surveillance, which is a simple, standardized method of collecting, analysing and disseminating data on key NCD risk factors in countries.

The survey has been implemented in over 120 countries and it gathers information on risk factors with a questionnaire, followed by simple physical measurements of respondents, which is then followed by the more complex collection of urine and blood samples for biochemical analysis.

This is the third time for the STEPS Survey in Fiji, the first one was carried out in 2002, and the second survey in 2011. Ideally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, STEPS Survey should be done in every five years. The 2011 STEPS Survey was a nationally representative population-based survey of 25 years to 64-year-old Fijians, covering 2,586 individuals across Fiji.

The results of the 2011 STEPS survey showed that:

- 30 percent of adults smoked tobacco daily;
- 15.7 percent of adults consumed alcohol within the past 30 days;
- 15 percent of adults do not meet the WHO recommendations on the minimum level of physical activity for health; and
- 85 percent of adults ate less than five servings of fruits and/or vegetables on average per day.

For the intermediate risk factors:

- 32 percent of the respondents were obese while 70 percent were overweight and obese;
- 31 percent had raised blood pressure;
- 15.2 percent had raised blood glucose; and
- 35.8 percent had three or more risk factors.

The STEPS survey is among a number of important population health surveys that have been pending over the last decade which the Ministry is keen to undertake to guide its health strategies in the next five years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Ministry has commenced the third STEP Survey for Fiji.

The survey is in line with our National Health Strategic Plan and the Annual Operational Plan. For the first time ever, the Ministry has engaged the assistance and expertise of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in carrying out the survey on risk factor behaviours among male and female aged between 18 years to 69 years. Also, for the first time, during the survey, Fiji will be introducing for the rest of the world -

- (1) a cervical cancer module;
- (2) a suki and tobacco module;
- (3) an oral health module
- (4) an extended nutrition questions;
- (5) a mental health module and urinalysis.

These are all new modules under the STEPS survey and Fiji is proud to be involved in drafting and piloting these assessment modules under this comprehensive survey.

By the end of the last financial year, the survey for the Eastern Division were nearing completion, with surveys conducted in Kadavu, Ovalau, Rotuma, and Lakeba in the Lau Group. In this financial year, funds totalling \$480,000 have been allocated from the Wellness Division for the completion of the STEPS survey in the Northern, Western and Central Divisions.

On the benefits of the survey, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the results from the STEPS survey will inform on the impact of the population-based interventions for our people over the last 10 years. The result will help the Ministry to track its progress towards the Global NCD Action Plan of a 25 percent reduction of premature mortality from NCDs by 2025, as well as SDG target 3.4, which calls for reducing premature death from NCDs, including diabetes, by 30 percent by 2030.

The survey results will provide further guidance on a number of current NCD strategies by the Ministries, such as the:

- Healthy Settings Programme, which has resulted in communities declaring their villages and community halls tobacco-free settings;
- workplaces adopting Wellness Wednesdays;
- our School Health Policy and Health Promoting Schools Programme with the Ministry of Education; and
- our current effort to establish, with the support of our partner, an electronic information system for recording and reporting diabetes cases.

The survey result, together with recommendations from the recently completed Health Survey conducted by World Bank and our upcoming Health System Evaluation Exercise, will guide the Ministry's future National Wellness Strategic Plans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to conclude by reiterating what I have said previously in this august Parliament, in that, NCDs do not start when one is diagnosed inside our hospitals and nursing stations. They start with the living and eating habits that are nurtured at a young age in our homes, schools, villages, workplaces, offices and in the deliberations of this august Parliament. The NCD burden we have will require our collective effort and determination to control and stop.

I wish to encourage all Fijians around the country who are approached to participate in the STEPS survey, to fully participate and complete all the steps of the survey. I wish to acknowledge and thank all our partners who are supporting the Ministry in completing the survey in 2024. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER. – Honourable Members, I now wish to suspend proceedings so we can adjourn for tea. Mr. Sakiusa Kaitani and your colleague, you are all welcome to join the honourable Members for tea. He is a very hardworking member of the Government, whether he belongs to PAP or SODELPA. He is from Lomaiviti but born and bred in Rakiraki. We now adjourn for tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.33 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.00 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to respond to the honourable Minister for Health and thank him for his Ministerial Statement, especially on a very burning issue, that is, NCDs in our country.

Mr. Speaker, as we say, prevention is better than cure. For any country to prosper, it will need a healthy population. Unfortunately, in Fiji, it is not the case, and it is very shocking that more than 80 percent of deaths in Fiji is because of NCDs. These are very worrying numbers; both for the general populous as well for us, as policy makers. Mr. Speaker, a large chunk of National Budget is devoted towards treatment of NCDs when rightfully, more funding needs to be provided towards the prevention of NCDs.

Mr. Speaker, NCD places a huge burden on our already strained healthcare system. The Ministry of Health, for years, has devoted money, time and effort towards treating patients suffering from NCDs rather than focusing on building state-of-the-art facilities that can provide special service. Fijians have to fly out of the country to get treatment that is not available in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot and should not blame the Ministry of Health for not providing these special services. One must look at the core problem that has led to a situation that is at hand at the moment. As citizens of this country, we need to take responsibility for our health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NCDs can be prevented. We do not have to end up in a hospital once we have acquired diseases such as diabetes, kidney failure, heart-related issues, et cetera. If only we control what goes into our tummy through our mouth, we would not be caught in the web of NCDs. We need to ensure that it is everyone's responsibility to live a healthy life. We need to take our 30 minutes' walk on daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji has a very active young population. Almost anywhere, you will see young Fijians out on the field but, unfortunately, our life has come to a standstill when we reach the age of 30. This can be due to many reasons such as work, family commitment and being career focused.

Fijians at the age of 30 and above tend to get busy with work as they become career-oriented or get busy with their family life and children, and without realising it, physical activity which was almost 100 percent on daily basis during their high school and tertiary institute days has declined drastically or zero percent over a number of years. This is the time when NCDs start to knock on our doors at this stage of our life. By the time we realise it, it is too late, and we are already diagnosed with NCDs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not just the above, but we need to focus on our family members and provide guidance to those who are involved in drugs, and I must say this, *yaqona* as well. We can see how our young generation are spoiling their future by spending their entire nights having grog. This does not only deteriorate their health conditions, but also affects their social and family life.

Mr. Speaker, one of the major reasons of families getting split up is because the husbands are having grog sessions the whole night and not devoting time towards their families. It is a social issue that is creeping into our society.

Mr. Speaker, we need to even bring in new medications and not the outdated ones that are



existing in our Essential Drug List (EDL). We need to review our EDL that is used by the Ministry of Health so that we can have new medications that are available in the market to treat NCDs.

Mr. Speaker, we need to work together to combat NCDs in Fiji and I urge us, as leaders, to take the lead role. One of the things to change in this Parliament is, we need to move away from morning tea to healthy break. Now, we are having two tea breaks and one lunch break. We can have morning tea and fruits.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Healthy break.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, healthy breaks, as they do in other jurisdictions.

Mr. Speaker, I also urge us, as leaders, to take the lead role and devote, at least, one hour during Parliament session and lead by example, so having a touch rugby match between the Government and Opposition side during lunch break.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, this is not something to laugh about. If we laugh here, people will not take us seriously outside and that is why this burden is on our healthcare system. We need to lead by example, we cannot be sitting idle and expecting the general populace to be looking after their health when we do not do anything. So, from September, Mr. Speaker, I urge the Government and Opposition MPs, let us have a friendly touch rugby game for, at least, one hour per week.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think you should speak to your colleague there, honourable Ketan Lal. He was the one who pleaded in the House Committee that we bring back the lunch and everything. Maybe, he is getting good advice from honourable Koya. They want to have lunch again in the House and all that, and now you are saying 'no' to morning tea.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Fruits.

MR. SPEAKER.- Only fruits?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- No tea, no coffee?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Tea, coffee and fruits.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Healthy, healthy.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is still the same.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is still sugar.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We reduce sugar and carbs content.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You can make a separate submission.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Leader of the Group of 9 Bloc, or his designate.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to respond to the

statement from the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services. I appreciate the honourable Minister's attention to NCD and the insights provided by the STEPS Survey that was conducted. I believe the last one was in 2011 when honourable Usamate was the Minister for Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the data presented this morning is, indeed, alarming and our health system needs restructuring to meet the present health challenges and to create legislation that aids the process is undeniably a step in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, reviewing legislations and reviewing health promotion is merely part of the solutions required. Health system evaluation is a complex undertaking, and a detailed multi-pronged approach is required. The evaluation must not only involve health outcomes, but also take into account professional viewpoint, our patients' experience and the influence on the systemic social issues - the real issues affecting our people.

Importantly, health promotions should not just be about circulating message of healthy practices but should also address the social determinants of health, and this is where legislative and intellectual play a vital role in a formative policy development. We must consider vital factors, like the income level of our people, the effects of raising VAT on ordinary Fijians, the level of education, employment status and the acceptable minimum wage, also with housing condition and the access to a balanced nutritional diet which is mostly expensive, all of which influence our physical, mental and our spiritual health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to neglect these factors, we would be failing to address the root cause of many health problems in our nation. Furthermore, the focus should not be only battling the disease but also investing in preventive strategies. I strongly believe that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So, let us put our answers in the right place. By encouraging early screening, regular health check and promoting healthy lifestyle, we can help prevent NCD and improve the health outcome of our citizens.

Lastly, the data presented this morning by the honourable Minister through the STEP survey should form a bedrock of our policy decision. It is essential that the survey findings are not only considered and appreciated but to be effectively integrated into our national health intervention (as alluded to by the honourable Minister), the National Wellness Strategic Plan. So, having that strategic plan and the right resource level is required, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

While I commend the honourable Minister for Health's effort to tackle NCDs, let us not lose sight of the bigger picture. It is not just about improving our health system or creating legislation, but about building a healthier Fiji. It is a mammoth task but can be achieved if we start now. Our people are dying prematurely - wives, husbands, with their children left behind. It is a heart-breaking experience, and in many cases, children go astray in the wrong path in search for the love they lost permanently due to their loss. I encourage each honourable Member and every Fijian alike, let us work together towards a vision of a healthy Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, in listening to your debate on this issue of health, we should all be proud that today sees to the coming in of the new Emoluments Agreement, especially to do with health cover. This was one of the things that interested me in the way you were discussing the Emoluments Programme and, especially, where I came across two cases where two of our honourable colleagues almost died here - honourable Prakash and honourable Joseph Nand, who was sent on a separate case to the hospital and had to pay from his own pocket about more than \$3,000 because he was not covered.

In the previous Parliament, we used to be covered and that kind of protected us. So, please,

as from today, make an effort in trying to find the group that best suits your individual party sides, or come to an agreement that you have a common policy that covers all of you, honourable Members. I am not covered, as well as others who are not Members of this Parliament, but for Members of Parliament, you are covered under this new agreement that comes into effect this week or today. That is also something that I want to share.

Members of the public will not realise what is happening here. We have very serious cases of people collapsing, severely suffering and taken to the hospital. They are already sick, and they have to pay extra expenses again. To have test results, tests undertaken at the CWM Hospital, you have to pay from your own pockets, like honourable Joseph Nand and our colleague honourable Prakash, who is recuperating in prison somewhere in Fiji. They suffered as well, but they had to pay from their own pockets for the tests, et cetera.

Honourable Members, you do not realise this until you are admitted. You have to pay for everything, and if you are covered, be grateful to the honourable Minister for Finance that this has come through. This is to take care of you. I hope I am clear on this. There is a big work to be undertaken by each and every one of you in trying to identify what product that will work well for you and also for your own pocket.

#### Back-to-Back Meetings - Pacific Women Leaders Meetings in the Marshall Islands

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and our viewers who are watching online; *murule'a bula, namaste, noa'ia e mauri*.

I am pleased to share today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the highlights of Fiji's participation in the 15<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference of Pacific Women, the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Pacific Ministers for Women and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting. These significant events happened back-to-back from 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2024 to 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2024 in Majuro in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. I attended these forums, along with our Acting Director for Women.

Before I do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to share a personal reflection. This being the first time I have set foot in the Marshall Islands, I have only read about it, I have only heard about it, but to be present and to somewhat comprehend it, it is nothing short of emotionally overwhelming. And I am referring to the nuclear legacy that the Marshall Islands have endured and continue to deal with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Americans tested a total of 67 nuclear bombs in Bikini Atoll, and to this day, there is a concrete nuclear waste storage facility, which is apparently leaking. This is the backdrop, Mr. Speaker, to understand the context of the repercussions on the health, the livelihoods and the very survival of the people of the Marshall Islands. I wish to take this time to remember those who lost their lives in a most horrific way, and the families who continue to endure the effects of the fallout for the last few decades.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stories are told about the first nuclear bomb being detonated and the immediate fallout, and the villagers in the nearby atoll ran out as they saw what they called, "snow falling from the sky." They had never seen it before. They played in the "snow", only to experience the burning effects a few minutes later. From there, they were taken to ships where they were then observed and stayed on for months.

Mr. Speaker, I stand in solidarity with the people of the Marshall Islands as they continue to advocate against the injustices they face and the fight for climate justice, not just for the people of the Marshall Islands, but for our entire Blue Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Triennial Conference of Pacific Women, which was funded by the Pacific Community (SPC) is a remarkable assembly that brings together policy makers, women's rights and civil society organisations, development partners and relevant institutions from across our region. Since its inception more than 40 years ago, this Triennial Conference has been a cornerstone in our pursuit of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Every three years, we come together to assess our progress and advance our efforts towards gender equality. Of course, the adoption of the Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights 2018-2030 has provided a clear roadmap for our efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year's conference was especially significant as it coincided with the global commemoration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing +30). This highlights the importance of this Triennial Conference as the primary mechanism for monitoring our progress of the Beijing Declaration and the Pacific Platform for Action.

Mr. Speaker, I will share with this august House that this momentum will continue building through to November 2024, as I have mentioned, in support of the moving of the Parliament Sitting from November to December. This is happening in Thailand for the Asia and Pacific Regional review, leading up to the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March next year.

Mr. Speaker, on that note, I am pleased to report that Fiji actively participated in this Triennial Conference through engagement at multiple high level plenary sessions on relevant topics, bilateral meetings and, of course, interventions during the Pacific Women's' Ministers Forum.

Mr. Speaker, notable was the attendance of the only Pacific Head of State, the honourable Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Feleti Teo, who is also the Minister for Women. On this note, I thank our honourable Prime Minister for agreeing to act in my absence as the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, showing his continued commitment to gender equality.

Our collective discussions, Mr. Speaker, confirmed that, of course, gender-based violence continues to be a great issue for all of us. We continue to have the same statistics of two out of three women, compared to the global average of only one out of three women.

It is deeply concerning that we are underrepresented in leadership roles across all sectors in our political systems. Mr. Speaker, on this note, I wish to thank you and thank the Parliament of Fiji for hosting the Women Mock Parliament over a week ago, that saw 55 women from across the country, here, convening the second only Women Mock Parliament in the history of Fiji, the first being in 2016, Mr. Speaker. I am the only alumni that is in Parliament today and I challenge the women who attended the Women Mock Parliament that, hopefully, there will be more of them who will join us in this august House.

We are also battling the high rate of reproductive cancers, as well as ongoing issues related to HIV and AIDS and teenage pregnancy. All these challenges are happening against the backdrop of a climate crisis, which always disproportionately affect women and girls.

Mr. Speaker, as part of Fiji's Country Statement, we underline our progress in preparing for Beijing+30. Strong policies and legal frameworks have been crucial in safeguarding women's rights here in Fiji, and creating an environment where Fijian women and girls can thrive.

Notably, female students now make up 57 percent of our graduates in tertiary institutions, outplaying male students at 43 percent. However, as we all know, women are still under-represented in labour force, so it is not converting into jobs, even though we outnumber males in graduates.

Although we celebrate this educational achievement, we need equal participation in the formal economy, access to financial resources, and leadership roles in both, public and private spheres.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, we underscored Fiji's commitment to our continued work on a whole of Government evidence-based and transformative approach. As you know, we continue to implement the National Action Plan to Prevent Gender-Based Violence against All Women and Girls in developing the upcoming Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Plan.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to share that following the Country Statement, Fiji also took several important interventions. So, at this Conference, there was the introduction of a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework so that we can monitor and evaluate the work to advance gender equality in the region. And we asked that there be a creation of a knowledge hub, where we can access information, as Women Ministers do not continue forever but when there are new Ministers that come in, they can access this information and be updated as to what is happening in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, additionally, we advocated and proposed for the creation of a regional working group to specifically focus on technology facilitated gender-based violence or online which, as we know, Mr. Speaker, is now the crime of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We emphasise the importance of collaborative approaches so that we have laws and policies that hold to account not only perpetrators, Mr. Speaker, but also technology companies - large tech companies, that profit from online activity. We also need to look at our regulatory bodies, Mr. Speaker, and our laws to be reviewed so that we can protect our people from technology facilitated gender-based violence.

Mr. Speaker, if our honourable Members have not heard a word I have said up to this point, I would like to proudly share that for the very first time, after we lobbied last year at the Pacific Women Ministers Meeting, the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is leaving Geneva for the first time. They have always met in Geneva, but upon Fiji's lobbying, they have agreed to not only leave Geneva but to come to the Pacific to convene an extraordinary session, and this will be taking place in Fiji in April next year. We announced this at the Women Ministers Forum in the Marshall Islands. This proposal, Mr. Speaker, allows us to host this special session in Fiji and, of course, preparatory work will commence with SPC, the relevant Government agencies and other partners, to ensure that this extraordinary session is successful.

The CEDAW Committee, Mr. Speaker, comprises of 23 independent experts and women's rights from around the world, and they are monitoring the implementation of the Convention on CEDAW, which 12 Pacific Islands Countries have ratified.

Mr. Speaker, this is really significant, following the endorsement by our Pacific Leaders on the Gender Equality Declaration and, of course, the launch of our 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent in which gender equality and social inclusion are regional priorities.

We concluded, Mr. Speaker, the conferences and Ministers meetings with outcomes documents that encompasses reflecting on how far we have come and what are our unique challenges that we now face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this period, Mr. Speaker, we, the Ministers for Women, on behalf of our governments, affirm our commitment to the effective implementation of the Pacific Gender Equality Pledge and Beijing Declaration and Platforms for Action. And we did get personal commitment from the honourable Prime Minister of Tuvalu, that as he attends the Leaders Meeting this month, that he will certainly be our advocate to present our outcomes document.

Fiji's participation and engagement at the Triennial Conference, as well as the Pacific Women Ministers' Meeting, underscores the importance of our collective efforts in achieving our gender equality goals. Of course, the historic event of hosting the CEDAW Committee next year here in Fiji, shows Fiji's active involvement in continued advocacy and dedication to addressing the critical issues - gender-based violence, women economic empowerment, women in climate justice and, of course, women's sexual and reproductive health and rights and women's health.

We will continue to do so, Sir, as a flagship initiative and an example to the Pacific because we do a key whole of Government and whole of society evidence-based approach which our Pacific Island countries wish to learn from and, of course, fostering partnerships with our Pacific Women Ministers and Civil Society Organisations to continue progress in this regard.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker and I thank you, honourable Members, for your attention. *Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavaad and faiaksea.*

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

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen; I would like to first, thank, the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for your comprehensive update on the Triennial Conference of Pacific Women in the eighth Pacific Women's meeting.

The convening of this significant events in the Republic of Marshall Islands underscores the collective commitment of our region to advancing gender equality and human rights. The Triennial Conference of Pacific Women has long been a cornerstone for evaluating our progress and addressing the persistent challenges in achieving gender equality.

The adoption of the Pacific Platform for Action for Gender Equality and Humans Rights has provided us with a robust framework to guide our efforts. This year's conference is particularly momentous as it aligns with the global review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, re-enforcing our dedication to these critical issues. Despite the progress made over the past decade, it is evident that gender discrimination and equalities remain deeply entrenched in our societies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, women in the Pacific continue to face significant barriers, including disproportionate representation in low wage jobs, as alluded to by the honourable Minister, high rates of violence and low political representation. These challenges are complex and multifaceted, requiring a concerted and sustained effort from all sectors of society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we know, violence against women and girls is one of the world's gravest human rights violations. As alluded to by the honourable Minister, globally, one in three women experience physical and sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime. Fiji has some of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. We know that two in three women in Fiji have experienced physical or sexual violence from a male intimate partner in their lifetime.

To address this alarming rates of violence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji needed to take a bold step to accelerate prevention efforts already underway. In 2020, we embarked on the historical journey as a nation to become the first Pacific Island country to have a National Action Plan to prevent violence against women and girls.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we look forward to the comprehensive outcomes document from the Conference, it is imperatives that we consolidate the critical priorities and commitments identified. This document will serve as a strategic guide for our regional efforts over the next three years,

shaping our priorities, leading up to the 69<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and informing our statements in both Bangkok and New York.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are talking about improving the lives of our women, children and girls, I am a bit disappointed with the recent delays in the social welfare allowances recently, Sir, especially to those elderly who are vulnerable citizens who entirely rely on the allowances for their daily needs.

The Ministry's statement attributing the delay to the transition of the Government's new financial year is not sufficient to alleviate the frustration and inconvenience caused. While we appreciate the Ministry's apology and efforts to expedite the process, it is crucial that such delays do not occur in the future. Our people deserve better, and it is imperative that the Ministry of Finance improves its systems and communication to ensure timely and reliable disbursement of funds.

We ask the Ministry to prioritise the needs of our social welfare recipients and take immediate action to prevent any further delays. The wellbeing of our citizens should always be the top priority.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the efforts of all delegates, civil society organisations, development partners and UN agencies for their unwavering commitment to gender equality. Together, we can foster sustained progress towards achieving gender parity in the Pacific, ensuring that every woman and girl can exercise their human rights and live up to her full potential.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I now call on the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection.

Mr. Speaker Sir, at the outset, I thank the honourable Minister for a thorough and comprehensive update on her Report on the 15th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and the Pacific Women Ministers' Meeting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this gathering marks a crucial milestone in the region's ongoing pursuit of gender parity. Sir, I fully agree with the honourable Minister on the importance of this meeting and how vital it is towards providing empowerment and equal opportunities for women in Fiji and around the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do understand that in 1994, the Triennial Conference adopted the Pacific Platform for Action (PPA) for the advancement of women, and given Fiji's position in the Pacific, we play a key role in taking key actions regarding the PPA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this PPA we, as a nation, still have a lot of work to do, to ensure the equal participation of women in aspects of development and decision-making in workplaces and other areas of life.

As a nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must take a lead role in empowering women in the Pacific and in the Oceania Region, and Government should be at the forefront of playing an active role in providing a safe environment for our women to prosper. Sir, a woman will only prosper if we work together as a nation, the leaders and community to provide an environment that is very conducive for our women and, at the same time, boost their confidence and excel in all areas of life in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can have as many conferences as we can, engage people in numerous awareness sessions for equality towards women participation, but if we do not provide the right

environment and offer the support they deserve, we will not achieve our goals and ambitions for equality of women participation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for attending the Conference and I also would like to thank the hard work that she is doing in her Ministry. *Vinaka va'levu*, honourable *'Auvu*.

#### Initiatives Undertaken by the Fiji Corrections Service

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Group of 9 Block and its leader and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka, Saka. Bula vinaka* to those of you who are listening from the comfort of your homes and around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with profound honour and a deep sense of responsibility that I address this august Assembly today. As the custodian of justice in our beloved nation, the Ministry of Justice has been steadfast in its mission to uphold the principles of justice, integrity and accountability.

The Ministry's accomplishment over the past months are not merely milestones, but indicative of our relentless pursuit of excellence in the public service. Unwavering commitment to the rule of law and our dedication to serving the people of Fiji underpin the very initiative and every effort that we undertake.

The realm of public governance - the Ministry of Justice, stands as a beacon of hope and a pillar of democracy. Our endeavours are guided by the strategic vision. It seeks to harmonise the inspirations of our citizens with the imperative of justice and the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me outline the initiatives undertaken by the Fiji Corrections Service. The Commissioner of Fiji Corrections Service has unveiled a robust reform plan, aimed at transforming the Fiji Corrections Service organisation structure and operations. This initiative addresses critical challenges relating to leadership, staffing and procedural alignment with the budgetary allocations.

The fifth focus of the reform include:

- (1) The organisational restructuring - the organisation will review and restructure to align with the budgetary allocation approved by Parliament, addressing issues of overstaffing and leadership gaps.
- (2) Capacity building - an assessment and enhancement of capacity of Senior Managers and Corrections Officers will be conducted to support and drive the necessary reforms.
- (3) Staff training - ongoing training programmes will be implemented to ensure staff are equipped with up-to-date correctional practices, keeping pace with the evolving profiles of offenders.
- (4) Safety and rehabilitation - Fiji Corrections Service will strengthen the core functions of safety and security within the facilities while integrating effective rehabilitation processes.
- (5) Principle of Accountability Measures - there will be rigorous accountability measures which will be enforced on all levels of the service to ensure adherence to policies and procedures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to guide this reform over the next year, a transitional team comprising of experienced former Fiji Corrections Officers has been established. The mandate includes developing a detailed reform agenda and a proposed staff establishment, which will be submitted to the Ministry of Finance for consideration. At the end of the transition period, a new management team will take



over to drive improvement in the Fiji Corrections Service over the next five years.

On the realignment of security and standard of discipline, this concerns the enforcement of discipline to inculcate the habits of good behaviour, more accountable and transparent in the treatment of offenders, especially the provision of safe, secure and humane facilities in line with international best practices.

The Fiji Corrections Service is also undertaking its legislative reform and review of its own legislations. There have been discussions with the honourable Attorney-General on the review of the Corrections Act. Also, a key part of this overview is the review of the prison industries. This has been pursued to propose commercialisation of Fiji Corrections industries, transitioning them into public enterprises managed by a Board of Directors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, the Fiji Corrections Service operates several industries including joinery, tailoring, piggery, poultry and farm produce, generating about \$100,000 per month. Due to Government controlled pricing and outdated machinery, there are constraints on productivity and quality.

The rationale of commercialisation stems from the financial stability and profit retention. To increase profitability, commercialisation will allow Fiji Corrections Service to operate with greater financial autonomy, setting competitive prices and expanding market reach. We will also talk about re-investment and rehabilitation. Profits can be retained and re-invested into Corrections facilities to enhance rehabilitation programmes, update machinery and provide post-release support.

What are the expected outcomes? First and foremost are the financial benefits – increased revenue and cost saving. The commercial prison is expected to significantly boost revenue and enhance efficiency, contributing to national economic growth.

On social and rehabilitative impacts, it is important that we enhance rehabilitation and job creation. Improved training facilities and expanded service will lead to better reintegration outcomes for inmates and increase employment opportunities within the Corrections system.

The commercialisation of the Fiji Corrections Service industries presents a strategic opportunity to boost financial stability, improve rehabilitative outcomes and expand services of offering. Consultations will be with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Trade will proceed in the future.

One of the major initiatives that has been proposed is to convert the Rakiraki Temporary Corrections Centre into a permanent rehabilitation centre. The practised temporary deployment during the cane cutting season places a lot of demand on our resources. This conversion focussed on the implementation of comprehensive farming programmes designed to provide inmates with available skills and facilities and their integration into society.

Apart from cane cutting, the inmates can be engaged for planting throughout the year. They have engaged with key stakeholders, and we are working on a joint Cabinet paper with the Ministry of Sugar to secure government approval of this initiative. This project is a testament of our commitment to create a sustainable and effective rehabilitation opportunities for those in the correctional system as well as contributing to national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I touch on the challenges posed by hard drugs. The drug trade in Fiji involves two main groups - drug trafficking and drug users. Drug trafficking typically have the financial means to establish and maintain supply lines from source countries to Fiji. Meanwhile, the

user base, predominantly consist of young people including students who fall into the addiction and often become distributors themselves to support their drug use. This cycle of dependency and distribution is particularly alarming. One of the most concerning outcomes of this cycle is the rise in HIV positive cases directly linked to the sharing of needles amongst drug users. This practice exacerbates the public health crisis we are facing.

Within our correctional facilities, we are struggling to maintain the use of smuggling of drugs. Our remand centres in particular, face significant challenges due to the high turnover population. Inmates under the influence of hard drugs often exhibit aggressive behaviour, creating a volatile environment for both, staff and other inmates.

Despite stringent security measures, drugs continue to be confiscated from various drop off points around our facilities. The increasing use of needles for drug injection is primarily contributed to the spike of HIV among inmates. This, coupled with the deterioration of mental faculties among drug users presents a substantial challenge for the Fiji Corrections Service.

We remain committed to addressing these issues through rigorous measures and heightened vigilance but recognise the need for border community support. We call upon parents, educators, community leaders to join in combating this crisis. Preventing drug abuse begins with education and awareness. By working together, we can help prevent the spread of addiction and its associated harms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may highlight and acknowledge the hard work done by few individuals in the organisation namely Kalesi Volatabu, Drug Free World in Fiji. I also endorse the community leaders, church leaders for honest conversation of this issue. I also endorse the hard work done by Raymond Tabuya Foundation, who works with young drug users in Nabua.

In terms of the collaboration with development partners, in our continued efforts to enhance the Fiji Corrections Service, we have sought collaboration with international development partners. We are in discussion with the Australian High Commission and other stakeholders to secure support for constructing a specialised rehabilitation facility. This facility will cater for drug and sexual offenders, mentally ill inmates and provide skilled-based training programmes. We are also seeking a secondment of an expert from our development partners to assist in the scoping phase of this project, ensuring that we align with the global best practices in corrections and rehabilitation.

What are the future development plans for the Fiji Corrections Service? The development of a drug rehabilitation centre, the establishment of the proposed Rakiraki Corrections Centre, extension of the Levuka land boundary, establishing partnership with New Zealand to support sniffer dog capability and to restrain control training, the commercialisation and partnership with private entities, the digitisation of staff and prison records, staff training and resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to continue my Ministerial Statement but outlining some of the success stories in terms of the service by the Ministry of Justice. In 2013, a lady born on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1958 became bedridden at the age of 55. By 2018, when she turned 60, her family sought financial assistance from Social Welfare. However, they faced a significant hurdle, the need for her birth certificate. Despite visiting the Ministry of Justice's office five times, they received no response.

The previous government continually turned them away, this family had travelled all the way from a maritime island making their plight even more challenging. During one of my *talanoa* session at Raiwai Community Hall, the family brought this issue to our attention. The Coalition Government committed to addressing such injustices took immediate innovative action to assist the family. Through the concerted efforts of my Ministry, we ensured that the lady finally received her birth

certificate.

I am proud to report that she is now one of our social welfare recipients. This story is a testament of our Government's dedication to serving the people, especially those who have been neglected for far too long. It highlights the positive changes we can achieve through empathy, commitment and proactive governance.

There is another story, Mr. Speaker, I would like to share. A compelling story that illustrates the dedication, innovative approach of our current Government in serving the people of Fiji. A male child born in Fiji on 27th March, 1975, tragically passed away in Ethiopia in November 1984 at a young age of nine. His body was brought to Fiji for burial. Since 2014, his relatives have been travelling from overseas at a great expense to obtain official confirmation from our government that his birth record is now marked as deceased. Despite their efforts, the previous administration failed to take any innovative steps to assist them.

During one of my *talanoa* sessions in Koronivia on the 3rd Sunday of July last month, the relatives shared their heartbreaking story, they expressed that they had lost all hope. I advised them to visit the Registrar General's Office assuring them that our current officers are capable of thinking outside the box and willing to assist.

Following my advice, my officers at Registrar General's Office took immediate action to assist the family. They were able to confirm the deceased status of the birth record through liaison with the Fiji Corrections Service, brining immense relief and joy to the relatives. This crucial step now allows them to proceed with the necessary legal process for their family properties in court.

Mr. Speaker, this story highlights our Ministry's commitment to creating meaningful change. We are dedicated to ensuring that all Fijians can witness the positive transformation from being implemented by this Coalition Government. Our innovative and compassionate approach is making a real difference in the lives of citizens, restoring their faith in the system, enabling them to move forward with their lives.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Feel good speech.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- There is another interesting story, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I would like to share. During my *talanoa* session at Kilikali this year, a distressing case was brought to my attention.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- A 10 year old male child had been unable to enrol in any school because he did not have any birth certificate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I did this, I did that.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- For the past eight years, his family had been trying desperately to obtain his crucial document. As a result, they missed out on all the grants provided for the students by the previous FijiFirst Government.

HON K.K. LAL.- I, I, I!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The *talanoa* session at Kilikali proved to be incredibly productive. When the family opened up about their struggles, it became clear that they were in urgent need of

assistance.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Thank you Minister.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Recognising the importance of education and the right of every child to receive it, we took swift action. I am pleased to announce that the child has now received his birth certificate and he has enrolled in Year One at Saint John Bosco Primary School, Nepani. This achievement not only marks the beginning of an educational journey but also restores hope for his future.

Mr. Speaker, this story exemplifies our commitment to ensuring that every Fijian has access to their fundamental rights and opportunities.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Vinaka ex-AG!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Our Government's dedication to addressing the needs of our citizens...

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Listen, listen!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- ... especially the most vulnerable is transforming the life, enforcing a bright future for all.

Mr. Speaker, this morning, we heard the honourable Prime Minister, measures being taken to uplift the service commitment of our Civil Service. All we are saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of execution, you just have to be humane, nothing more, nothing less. Respect your officers, give them the dignity and that includes inmates who are in prison because one day they will be released.

I would like to share too, that I have had a wonderful opportunity of exchanges with some of our inmates who had spent over 20 to 23 years in prison. There are plans in terms of going into a farming project in Naitasiri and my Ministry is committed to assisting them because all we want is to see change.

I recall reading through the speech of the Prime Minister of United Kingdom. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he brought in as his Minister for Justice a businessman who had a business of employing ex-offenders. What they shared is, "we are so committed into the issue of sentencing, punishment, punishment, punishment. It is time to look the other way around and that is what we are committed to do at the Ministry of Justice and this Government is to care for those members of the society, the young, the old, the sickly who are in prison and provide them another opportunity. Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to highlight some of the activities undertaken by the Ministry of Justice.

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

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am representing the Opposition Bloc 16, that includes the plus two.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Minus two.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Shadow Minister for Justice...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- ... I acknowledge the Government's recent efforts to introduce new policies within the Fiji Corrections Service. While, Mr. Speaker, these initiatives are commendable, it is crucial to ensure that they uphold the fundamental rights and dignity of all individuals, both within and outside the prison system. Recent events and incidents such as the unauthorised release of a photo involving the suspended of Commissioner of Police ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. K.K. LAL.- ...by a Corrections Officer underscores significant concerns regarding privacy, dignity and human rights. These incidents, Mr. Speaker, Sir, although investigated by the Corrections facility, highlights a broader issue of respecting the privacy, rights of all Fijians. It is imperative that the Government implements robust measures to prevent such breaches and to ensure accountability when they occur.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hogwash.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, privacy is a fundamental human right and it is not a hogwash.

(Laughter)

Enshrined in international human rights standards and must be respected for all Fijians whether they are incarcerated or living freely in society, it is vital that our Corrections policies reflect this commitment to human rights and privacy protection ensuring that every citizen's dignity is upheld.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any new policy must, therefore, prioritise the well-being and rehabilitation efforts of prisoners, ensuring they are treated with dignity and respect. Also, reports of violence perpetrated by a Prison Officer and overcrowding in Remand Centres demand urgent attention. The use of violence within Correctional facilities is unacceptable and undermines the very purpose of this institution which is to rehabilitate and reform individuals. It is vital that we establish and enforce strict guidelines to prevent such occurrences and hold those responsible accountable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Minister for Justice, overcrowding is another critical issue that exacerbates the challenges faced by our Correctional system. It poses significant risk to health and safety of both inmates and staff while also hindering the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. We need comprehensive strategies to address this issue including exploring alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offences and investing in infrastructure to accommodate the growing prison population. It is incumbent upon the Minister for Justice to ensure that justice is served to all citizens of Fiji, regardless of their circumstances.

The recent shortcomings within the Fiji Corrections Service highlights a failure in leadership and oversight. It is the honourable Minister's responsibility to guarantee that every individual's rights are observed and protected whether they are free citizens or incarcerated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of action in addressing these issues, such as privacy breaches, violence and overcrowding in our correctional facilities, reflects a troubling disregard for human rights and justice. The honourable Minister must be held accountable, ensuring that the Corrections system operates with integrity and in alignment with our nation's commitment to upholding the dignity and rights of every individual. Failure to do so, undermines public confidence in our justice system and the Government's ability to administer fair and just policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I support initiatives aimed at improving our Corrections Service, I urge the Coalition Government to place a stronger emphasis on safeguarding privacy and human rights. Let us ensure that our policies, not only manage correctional facilities efficiently, but also uphold the values of justice and human dignity for all Fijians. *Vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- No wonder, I see your picture in the court house everyday.

I will now call on the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc, or his designate.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is difficult to be speaking after the honourable Minister for Justice and his Shadow Minister here because all that needs to be said on the matter at hand, I think has already been discussed by both of them. But I will just offer very short remarks on the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all striving to do business better, work better, be more efficient, do more with less, and in the Corrections Service, their return of investment or profit is about a successful rehabilitation and the release of inmates for a successful re-integration back into their homes and into the community. That is really the ROI for the organisation.

The functions of the organisation is as follows:

- (1) for the safe and secure custody and care of those who are incarcerated in prisons;
- (2) a very effective and humane rehabilitation programme; and
- (3) is really an organisation that is not only a professional organisation, but an organisation that is staffed or have people who have the heart to change the lives of others who have gone offtrack.

By this, I mean, they are really captains of lives - captains of lives that inmates would see, trust, believe and have the confidence to hear them and, perhaps, be influenced so that there is a change that takes place in their lives.

So, these captains of lives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key character is really to be ethic solid. You cannot be the captain of lives of others if you cannot be the captain of your own life. So, I am happy to hear there is a now a bigger effort in capacity building, in the training of staff, in these new reformed journeys that have been initiated by the new Commissioner and the honourable Minister for Justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Corrections, from my very limited experience, we can have all the best laws, we can have all the best people, but at the end of the day, it is that element of humanity - a respect for those who have gone offtrack and are given an opportunity to be taught, cared for and returned back to their homes and to their families, and they do not re-offend or come back.

That would be the biggest challenge for any Corrections organisation including Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, my appeal to the honourable Minister is that as we journey to improve the way we do business, we care for those who are under our care inside the walls. It is very important that we keep to the very basic fundamental principles of: (1) that there is greater humanity within the Corrections Service. We have the right people who are put in place as good captains of lives who are ethic solid and can change the lives of those who are under their care.

I applaud the honourable Minister and the new Commissioner for the work that they are undertaking to reform, change and move the organisation forward. I am a simple believer in changes - changes that are propelled forward, and it is about moving forward and doing things better.

I do not know any changes that takes us back, so it is very important that we have the right people in place that can drive these changes within the Corrections Service. That is the key for a professional organisation that can change the lives of others and return them back into the community successfully. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

### Update on the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, viewers who are watching this television broadcast live from their comfort zones; we stand at a crossroads. The great Martin Luther King Junior often spoke about institutional and systemic racism, saying that “true racial equality cannot be reached without radical structural changes in society”. However, if we are to unpack this in our context, whether it be race, religion, provincialism or whatever we use to segment ourselves, first and foremost, of the need for all our people to agree on what equality actually means, this was the key in the involvement of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in supporting the Ba Provincial Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival.

Mr. Speaker, the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival can be best described as a transformative event that brought together the vibrant and diverse youth of the Ba Province, allowing them to emerge into a unified force for positive change. Just as a caterpillar undergoes metamorphosis to become a butterfly, this Festival served as a pivotal moment of transformation for our young people. It was a resounding success, showcasing the resilience, creativity, unity and potential of the youth in the Ba community. The Festival provided a platform for young people to showcase their talents, build connections and contribute to the development of their communities.

Mr. Speaker, the primary objectives of this Festival is to:

- (1) Promote social cohesion and unity. By celebrating our cultural diversity, we aim to foster mutual respect and understanding among our youth, which is essential for a harmonious society.
- (2) Encourage active participation in sports. Physical activity is crucial for the wellbeing of our youth, and through these festivals, we are promoting healthy lifestyles while instilling values such as teamwork, leadership and discipline.
- (3) Provide a platform for artistic and cultural expression. Our youth festivals are an opportunity for young people to showcase their talents in dance, music and arts, thereby, preserving and promoting our rich cultural heritage.
- (4) Strengthen the respective Provincial and District Youth Councils. These festivals serve to rekindle the flames of youth development that has been dormant for the past many years, ensuring that youth become a force to reckon for community development.
- (5) Engage youth with stakeholders. The festivals service as a bridge between youth and various Government Ministries, NGOs and other stakeholders, providing access to resources and support on education, health, employment and social services.

In alignment to the Ministry’s strategic direction, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the youth festivals are a direct response to the National Youth Policy and the National Sports Physical Activity and Recreational Policy, which emphasises the importance of inclusive development, empowerment and active participation of young people in nation building.

The policy outlines several strategic goals, including promoting healthy lifestyles through sports, encouraging artistic and cultural expression, and ensuring that youth from all ethnic backgrounds have equal opportunities to thrive. These festivals serve as a platform to actualise these goals by bringing together youth from diverse communities, engaging them in sports, arts, and

exhibitions, and providing them with the tools and opportunities to showcase their talents.

As part of the Festival, the Ministry also organised a youth symposium focussed on unity, diversity and inclusivity. This symposium provided a forum for young people to discuss the challenges and opportunities related to these crucial themes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, participants engaged in thought-provoking discussions, shared their perspectives, and worked collaboratively to identify solutions that would enhance social cohesion and inclusivity in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, the Festival featured a variety of events, including the Government Ministries and company roadshow, traditional music and dance performances, and a youth symposium focussed on important issues facing today's youth.

Mr. Speaker, participants engaged in discussions, workshops and activities aimed at promoting understanding, respect and unity among individuals from different backgrounds.

In addition, to address the issue of drugs in our community, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is now ensuring that contents of Youth Festivals conducted in every Province to incorporate crosscutting objectives and the discussion of important issues that cut across our nation.

Mr. Speaker, the festivals will include sports activities for youth to involve themselves in sports, showcasing their talents and urging them to participate in sports rather than involving themselves in illegal activities.

Mr. Speaker, a good testament to this was the Vueti Kadavu Youth Festival that was held in Vunisea in December last year and opened by the honourable Prime Minister. In the same event, Sir, Kadavu Rugby Union was officially launched with the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation being the first woman president. From then, we have witnessed that a lot of our youth in Kadavu are now greatly engaged in rugby and other sports with the support of the *Vanua*,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very excited to report that the Vunisea Police Station has indicated yesterday a decline of 59 percent in the cultivation of marijuana and those caught in possession of marijuana.

Mr. Speaker, the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival also included exciting competitions such as netball, rugby and volleyball tournaments, where teams competed fiercely for the top spots. The winners were awarded prizes and accolades for their outstanding performances and sportsmanship.

The Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival concluded with a symposium that brought together youth from diverse backgrounds to discuss and address issues related to unity, diversity and inclusivity. Participants engaged in meaningful discussions, workshops and activities aimed at promoting understanding and acceptance of diversity.

At the end of the three-day workshop, Mr. Speaker, Sir, participants of the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival symposium handed over their declaration to the Government of Fiji and to the Province of Ba. This declaration was carried out by all the youth of Ba who participated in this symposium, put into paper by the different races in the Ba Province. An emotional moment occurred when a young Ms. Lorenza Prakash, fluent in the Ba dialect and dressed in traditional iTaukei wear handed over their declaration to the Government and to the Province on Ba.

The impact of the Ba multiethnic youth festival, like the others before it, has been overwhelmingly positive. The festival succeeded in bringing together youth from diverse



backgrounds, fostering a sense of unity and mutual respect. It provided an inclusive platform for youth to engage in sports, express their creativity, and access valuable resources and information.

Feedback from participants and stakeholders has been encouraging, with many expressing their appreciation for the opportunity to be part of such a vibrant and inclusive event. The Festival has also sparked new initiatives and collaborations among youth groups, Government Ministries and NGOs, all aimed at furthering the development and empowerment of our young people.

The success of the Ba festival is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as well as the support and co-operation of our partners and stakeholders. It is also a reflection of the potential of our youth to contribute to the development and progress of our nation.

At the end of the Festival, the Ministry donated more than \$8,000 to the Ba Youth Council to help them in their operations. All this money was collected during the event from gate takings and other events during the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival was a celebration of unity, diversity and talent, bringing together young people from different backgrounds to create positive change in their communities. The Ministry extends its gratitude to all the teams, players, sponsors and supporters for making this event a memorable one.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, for graciously officiating the first ever Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival in Lautoka. With a significant portion of the population falling between the ages of 15 and 35, the Festival celebrated the diverse cultures and talents of the youth in the Ba Province.

I would also like to thank the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government for supporting the event in my absence.

My heartfelt appreciation also goes out to the dedicated staff of the Ministry of Youth and Sports for their exceptional efforts in organising the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival. Their unwavering dedication to fostering unity and celebrating diversity among our youth is truly commendable, and I am proud to have such a devoted team working towards the betterment of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, moving forward, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is committed to continuing the Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival across Fiji. We recognize the importance of this event in promoting social cohesion, fostering talent and providing youth with the resources and support they need to succeed.

We are also exploring ways to expand and enhance the Festival, including introducing new sports and activities, increasing the involvement of stakeholders, and providing more opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful dialogue on issues that affect them. The Ministry is also committed to ensuring that this Festival is accessible to all youth, regardless of their background or location, and we are working to bring this event even to the most remote areas of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival being conducted across Fiji, is a vital part of our efforts to empower our young people and promote unity and inclusiveness in our society. The Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival, like those before it, has demonstrated the power of these events to bring people together, celebrate diversity, and provide youth with the opportunities they need to thrive.

As we continue to organise and expand these festivals, the Ministry of Youth and Sports remains committed to supporting the development of our youth, fostering their talents, and ensuring that they have the tools and resources to build a bright and prosperous future for themselves and for Fiji.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to provide this update and I look forward to continue to work with all stakeholders to support the development and empowerment of our young people.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports for highlighting the events at the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival. Definitely, the thematic area was Honouring Ancestral Wisdom and Empowering Women and Children, and it was a platform for youth to display their talents, resilience, creativity and potential to showcase their abilities to boost their networking and build potential collaboration with other like-minded youth, as well as work towards the development and betterment of society and our nation as a whole. Such platforms are critical to also boost the awareness of critical issues faced by our youth, such as the rise in criminal activities, drug use, human trafficking and the spread of HIV which is, sort of, on the rise.

The Ba Province alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has a youth population of around 84,751 and this has shown participation of youth from the rural and the urban and had various ethnic groups involved. We can talk a lot about policies, festivals but the real demand is the call to action. If you look at it from a macro perspective about the youth, we, as legislators, cannot turn a blind eye to the issues currently faced by our youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight in Parliament the complaints of violent behaviours in schools and school students who are seen in public places in their uniforms up to 8.00 p.m. till 9.00 p.m. as well. There are youth who have been victims of drugs. I am glad to see that the question I raised in Parliament about the drugs test kits has made headlines, with the honourable Minister for Education responding to some of the questions coming to him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, youth are also victims of being harassed and blackmailed on social media and I have raised this with the honourable Attorney-General as well on how we need to secure and restrict some of our networks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier last week, I visited Naloto District School. They had water contamination issue, and I would like to thank the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and our honourable Prime Minister for his very prompt response to my email. He reached out to the school and assured the school to look into the critical issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, suicide cases for the youths are high as well. Two days ago, someone had sent me a screenshot of a message of a Form 4 student, the late Mr. Terence Powell who committed suicide as what the message states. The youth death toll on our roads is also a concern as a 21-year-old from Tavua has been the recent victim. The youths want an education system that is not enslaved to political agenda. There were complaints about the TELS 50 percent penalty as well. The youths wanted an increase in allowance to be able to meet their daily expenses, and they are calling on the Government for urgent and strict measures with the drug issue and crime rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the youths demand a better healthcare system. I am sure the whole of Fiji was aware of the recent case of the late Miss Harshika Devi. Youths have raised concerns about youth unemployment as well. Majority of the youth have left for greener pastures, and we need to overturn this brain drain into brain gain. One of the recommendations for Government is to host a Youth Innovation Summit that pioneers innovation for a sustainable future, bringing together

thousands of participants from around Fiji; a platform that engages to bring outstanding young minds of Fiji to address some of the most pressing issues and challenges and propose innovative solutions. We need to empower the youth, provide them with the toolset and engage them in impactful projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to promote dialogue between youth, Government departments, NGOs, CSOs and other stakeholders. Provide them with awards and grants to make their visions come to reality. I believe in the potential of our young people to transform our beloved nation for the better. I believe in our young people, so should all of us as legislators.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, are we doing enough for our youths? That is the question we need to ask ourselves. If this Government does not do it, we will do it in time to come. In a nutshell, young people everywhere deserve the power to get information, to connect and ask hard questions about justice, equality and opportunity and it is our job to listen to the youths and answer their concerns about education, employment and empowerment.

I support the honourable Minister's inclusive approach towards ethnic unity for all Fijians, and I assure the youths we are here to raise your voices and concerns and together we can work towards a transformative change for the betterment of our beloved nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports' Ministerial Statement on the Ba Provincial Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival that was held in Lautoka on the 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly I must commend the Ministry's initiative in organising such an event and especially in bringing together the youths from various ethnic backgrounds in the Ba Province. Ba Province is perhaps the largest Province in Fiji, which occupies the North-West segment of the main island of Viti Levu and such event will enable the Ba youth to emerge into a unified force for a positive change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by the honourable Minister that the Ba Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival aims to address the rise in criminal activities, such as drug abuse, human trafficking and the spread of HIV/AIDS among youths in the Ba Province. With all that is happening in our beloved Fiji today, I strongly believe that these social issues must continue to be addressed amongst our Fijian youths and children as it hinders the progress of our nation.

As alluded by the honourable Minister, the festival also provided a platform for youths to showcase their talents, build connections and contribute to the development of their communities. We need more of such events that will bring forth a change in the mindsets of our youths and enable them to work with groups from different ethnic backgrounds and contribute positively towards nation building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one important topic, apart from just promoting healthy lifestyle through sports that is often being overlooked is on healthy living lifestyle, simply promoting a well-balanced lifestyle to our youths. I urge the honourable Minister to include this topic in their workshops and any upcoming youth festival or event.

The Ministry must take the lead role in advocating on healthy living. When youths take charge of their health, it will bring forth positive changes to our homes, communities and the nation. As mentioned by the honourable Minister, the extending of such festivals to other provinces is greatly welcomed.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 12.31p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.31 p.m.

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on US Tuna Treaty

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to deliver my Statement on the recent signing of the Memorandum of Understanding among the governments of certain Pacific Islands States including Fiji and the Government of the United States of America regarding fishing access terms for 2024; better known as the US Tuna Treaty.

Mr. Speaker, in 1987, the Pacific Island Parties (PIPs) and the United States Government engaged in the 1987 Treaty on Fisheries between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island States and the Government of the United States of America. Currently, parties to the treaty have been voluntarily applying the 2016 Amendments to the Treaty, which was developed in Fiji on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2016.

Mr. Speaker, this Treaty was built on the aspects of fisheries access to the US per se in tuna fishing fleet in the Pacific Island countries and was reciprocated with financial distributions towards the promotion of economic development in the Pacific region. These Pacific Island Parties are the Governments of Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Mr. Speaker, the Treaty was primarily developed on the concepts of regional solidarity under the membership of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). With the FFA being the Treaty's administrator and PNG, being the depository.

Mr. Speaker, all of the members benefitted based on the abundance of the highly migratory tuna stocks within their waters and the relative US purse seine, associated with fishing activities therein. It should be noted that within the FFA membership, exists the members of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) where the greatest fishing densities occur, and where there is more to gain from the Treaty.

Mr. Speaker, please allow me to elaborate on the Memorandum of Understanding signed and agreed amendments to the Treaty. Under Article 9 of the Treaty titled the "Amendment of the Treaty" references that an amendment to the Treaty must be adopted on the approval of the parties and shall come into force upon receipt of the depository.

Mr. Speaker, in order to allow for the fishing arrangement for the year 2024 to proceed, six amendments have been made and have to be signed off by the FFA membership. The amendments cater to the following:

- (1) Facilitation of observer services which allows for Pacific Island Parties to provide observers directly to the US purse seine fleet;
- (2) Agreement on adjusted fishing days which shall have an Upfront Days payment for the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) and can be negotiated later;
- (3) Adjustment of the Exploratory Pool of which Fiji is a member shall be paid US\$6,000 for each fishing day;

- (4) The five-day notification period to the FFA/PNA/Cook Islands on a new entrant of a US vessel to the Cook Islands; and
- (5) Standard text that nothing in the MOU shall prejudice the participants to the Treaty.

Mr. Speaker, in order to fully appreciate this and the benefits to Fiji in real terms and noting Fiji's pivotal involvement in the US Treaty negotiations, through the honourable Semi Koroilavesau, we saw US\$16 million being provided each year to the FFA membership over the next 10 years based on the US Purse Seine activity in their waters.

Mr. Speaker, the present formula for distribution is:

- (1) \$315,000 is paid as a management fee to the Secretariat, that being the FFA.
- (2) \$950,000 is paid to the Secretariat to cover administration costs. Any unused funds are returned to Members with each Member receiving an equal share of any funds returned.
- (3) \$2.5 million was held by the Secretariat for Project Development Fund payments with each Pacific Island Party receiving \$156,250 under the last extension.
- (4) A payment of US\$8,469 per day paid upfront to Pacific Islands Parties that contribute days to Vessel Day Scheme (VDS).
- (5) The remaining funds are distributed equally among the Pacific Island Parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to advise that on 24th July, 2024, having acquired Cabinet's endorsement, I had signed amended texts within the margin of the 23rd Annual Ministerial Forum Fisheries Committee at the FFA Headquarters in Honiara, Solomon Islands. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been advised with the process and to provide the same to the Treaty's depository in Papua New Guinea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to-date, Fiji has received a total of US\$1.7 million, monies received to close off the last six-year licensing period which was from 15th June, 2017 to 14th June, 2023. Note that the signing event will open the way to Fiji's share of the US\$60 million, over the next 10 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the high turnover in the Ministry, these funds shall be allocated to upskill and capacity build incoming staff, and develop e-systems and reportings to allow for more ease of doing business in fisheries to our valued stakeholders and allow for an effective monitoring and evaluation system that shall properly identify the Ministry's contribution to GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in noting that this support, under the US Tuna Treaty, shall continue over the next 10 years, I will ensure that the necessary technical and structural supports are provided to our people, in relation to fisheries, reinforcing the concepts of supporting established Private Public Partnerships and co-operatives with the aim of commercialisation, whilst ensuring the sustainable development and the provision of alternate sources of protein to the nation.

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

HON I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first I wish to thank the honourable Minister for the Ministerial Statement concerning the US Tuna Treaty that was signed recently. As alluded to by the honourable Minister, the honourable Koroilavesau was given the responsibility to lead the negotiation.

It was at a very difficult time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while it was during COVID-19 when they started and most of the updates to the other member countries were done virtually because of the restrictions in travel back then. Of course, the subsequent meetings that was held in Denarau in 2021, that brought for the first time (while the negotiations were ongoing) all the parties

beneficiaries, as alluded to by the honourable Minister, the members of the Forum Fisheries Agency which has its headquarters in Honiara.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what was interesting in that meeting in Denarau was the request made by the member countries for the increase in allocation and that led to more intense negotiation. But thankfully in the 2022 meeting in Palau, they were able to come to a compromise. Instead of \$100 million, they came down to \$60 million but perhaps the big challenge then (and I am thankful to the honourable Minister for clarifying this), was in the proportion of the distribution of the funds once it is secured.

There was a lot of demand from the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) member countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of their argument that most of the purse seine fisheries activities were happening in their fisheries area. They were demanding for more of the allocation and that was one of the very sensitive issues in the negotiations. But as alluded to by the honourable Minister, regional solidarity is so important and that was the lead role that Fiji took in trying to bring everyone together, even to a stage where they considered having the old formula for what was the previous rate and then later on, they can sort that out, but I am thankful that this has been sorted out.

Madam Minister, you have highlighted how these funds will be utilised in the Ministry. Perhaps, just an advice or recommendation, as a former Minister for Fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we appreciate the funding, but it is given to the member States for a purpose, particularly for the development of the fisheries sector. When I was the Minister, I used to wonder how the funding for the Fisheries staff was sourced from because they were attending almost meeting in the region.

I later found out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that instead of using these funds for the utilisation of the development of the fisheries sector, most of these funds were just utilised for the travel purposes of the staff. I put a stop to that. I asked the Permanent Secretary who is responsible for the finance, every time there is a request for these funds, we need to discuss it because we need a lot of funding to develop the seaweed, aquaculture and mariculture. This is the purpose in which it was given, and I hope, honourable Madam Minister, that you will have a tight control over this because it will benefit us a lot in the long term, particularly in development of the fisheries sector. Thank you, Madam Minister for the statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you honourable Minister for the Statement this afternoon. This Treaty is one that is always difficult to negotiate, the 17 Member States of FFA with United States of America. The Treaty, for those who do not know, it is a treaty where we allow the US purse seine vessels to come in and fish in FFA member country waters.

Purse seine vessels, their target species is skipjack, and skipjack like in warmer waters, which means they fish more in the equatorial regions at the big EEZ of PNG, Kiribati and the Micronesian countries. Our target tuna species in Fiji is Albacore, it is deeper. Albacore likes a little bit more colder water.

In the negotiations, it is usually difficult because those that have skipjack in abundance in their waters usually asked for more, but it benefits in Fiji in a sense that that chunk of money that is distributed equally, we get a share of it because we are members of FFA, even though they do not come down to our waters to fish because our target species is Albacore.

I would like to congratulate the Ministry and FFA in general for negotiating this increase. There is always this big argument that the fish that the US purse seiners take out of our waters is

much, much more than what they are giving us as a fee for their access to our waters. And tuna is a commodity, it is almost like whale when you think about how tuna is traded around the world. Tuna is a lucrative market because it is considered as a much healthier protein option than meat. The Pacific region, especially the FFA member countries' waters is abundant in this tuna supply.

I have been part of the negotiation a few years, when I was in the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests and I understand very much the difficulty, one, in negotiating with the United States, and two, because there are the other groupings within FFA and PNA members, and those countries like Fiji who do not have Skipjack, they do not come in and fish, but we still want to have our voice in there, but we are thankful that we get a share of the funds that are distributed equally to the Member States, even though we do not get funds from the fishing base because they do not come in and fish in our waters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have one suggestion or request to the Ministry, that in the money that is allocated to Fiji, that you should think about the Maritime Surveillance Centre. It requires a lot of money to buy the software, and a lot of the surveillance now for fisheries in our waters is done from there electronically. It is much cheaper but very effective. All the vessels that come in and fish in the FFA waters have vessel monitoring systems and it will be good if you can think about also assisting that Surveillance Centre with the money that we get.

Congratulations on that negotiation and that increase is very much overdue. I am sure the negotiations in future, we will still try and get value for the amount of tuna that they take out of our waters, which is always difficult but not impossible negotiation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the point provided by the Leader of the Opposition, I think it is very important to us here, to redirect the funds to other activities. It does, kind of, touch on the very idea that it was supposed to be used for. We saw the glaring example in the COP meetings. When you sit around, they will ask, "Where are you from?" We say, "We are from Fiji." Then you ask around and found out they were funded by some groups in Fiji, SPREP, et cetera, or in the Pacific. So, we are not talking to each other, yet we are finding lots of people there. Even some have gone to the COP meeting by paying their own air fare. There is this gentleman in charge of the IRB. He paid his air fare there, he was not part of the Ministry's delegation, but he went to there to try and learn as much as possible, and we were trying to help him since he was there. I really do not know, Deputy Prime Minister, how you will scrutinise all these.

Really, it is a fairly new thing, having served for some time. You fully understand the protocol if go through, even if you want to attend this kind of meetings. If it is not part of your job description, then just stay out, let the others who should be there to be there.

I am just kind of adding to the sentiments raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. You have the fund, let us hope it is not misdirected. We do respect your decision and your appointment in that position as Minister for Fisheries.

## QUESTIONS

### Oral Questions

Monitoring & Evaluation Measures for MSMEs  
(Question No. 118/2024)

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



Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the monitoring and evaluation measures in place for the micro, small and medium enterprises that have received assistance and funding?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank honourable Tubuna for the question. Firstly, I am happy to report that the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications does conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of grant recipients. It is interesting to note that since inception of its current programme, there has been about \$107 million invested in MSMEs in terms of the broad spectrum from young entrepreneurs, women, co-operatives and the like.

The Ministry has developed quite a comprehensive programme that actually monitors the progress of MSMEs. The framework is, obviously, data driven - it works on data analysis, doing visitations and tries to measure the grant impacts in terms of employment created, livelihood supported, growth in revenue, increase export markets, for example, for the National Export Strategy (NES) and contribution to the SDGs.

Over the last two years, Sir, there has been about almost 2,000 visits covering various assistance programmes. They use a software called Kobo Toolbox to do the analysis and there are some interesting statistics or findings from the reports, for example, in terms of the Integrated Human Resource Development Programme (IHRDP) and Northern Development Programme (NDP) which have a success rate of 90 percent and 95 percent respectively. That is quite pleasing to note because they are quite popular programmes and particularly the fact that they reach right into the rural areas.

On average, IHRDP recipients creates about nine jobs whereas the NES creates about 13 jobs and NDP three jobs. On average, for the NES recipients, some of them are generating up to \$65,000 in sales and should be noted, of course, that this varies by sector as well.

I thought I just share some specific examples, just to demonstrate how impactful these programmes are. Of course, it was started by the previous Government. In 2021-2022, Mr. Samisoni Manewa was supported by IHRDP for a three-tonne manual truck. This assistance has allowed him to improve his product. A recent visit to Mr. Manewa's farm has shown a 12 percent increase in sales, which is great and it is, of course, demonstrating the impact of the funding on the farm.

Ms. Alumita Tuila of Goodness Investment was supported through IHRDP with baking equipment and is from Galoa Village in Kadavu. Through the baking equipment, she was able to produce about three batches of freshly baked loaves of bread in a day for 150 households. From that, she was then able to secure a loan from the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) of about \$5,000 to expand her business. The business expansion, of course, has been made possible through her sales. I am told she is now selling to Vunisea Secondary School as well, Sir.

I guess the monitoring of these businesses is showing that a lot of the money is being put to good use, Sir, which is positive and right now, we are trying to, sort of, create a database for the national MSMEs around Fiji. With that database, we can actually then much closely track on an automated basis the MSMEs and ensure that the money that we are investing in MSMEs is well spent.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, I understand that you would be doing monitoring and evaluation of these MSMEs. In terms of evaluation, their effectiveness and their success is one of the things that you would be able to ascertain.

If we have found ones that are effective and we ascertain that they can do better, what are we

actually doing in terms of redirecting or directing them to take them to the next level in terms of growing as a business?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for that question, honourable Member. The story about Mrs. Tuila is a good sort of example of that kind of process where we inject some initial funding and because the business is doing well, there is an opportunity to generate more funding opportunities, for example, through concessional loans through FDB.

What we are trying to do, Sir, is to guide the SMEs as they develop. Right now, one of the things that we are blessed with is that there is starting to be a lot more options for financing for MSMEs. Fijian Holdings has come up with two products, the Vanua Financing and also the Marama Financing. Before for SMEs, you have to do equity contributions. There is a product now at HFC that they just launched last week where you do not need equity. You can actually go and provide a proposal if the proposal is good, then you actually just lend the money. There is a guarantee that is in place with BLP that actually covers the equity component.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we are trying to do is to handhold the businesses from the beginning. There are some that are just so good, they actually take off quite well. A lot of time we encourage diversification of income. So, you are actually looking at other opportunities, particularly, in a village setting. You can be doing bread, like in Mrs. Tuila's case. She actually owns the shops that sells everything else in the village. So, it is sort of a progressive evolution of the business.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is, what kind of support and guidance is provided to MSMEs to help them meet the monitoring and evaluation requirements?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the current monitoring and evaluation methodology that is in place, that was in place when I got there. From what I have seen of it, it is quite robust. I think what is desperately needed at the moment there is, an actual proper tracker so we can actually know, like for example, if you ask me, how many MSMEs are in the country, I have no idea. I think that should be the starting point as we try and develop the new MSME ecosystem.

So, then we will be able to track each business, and would it not be wonderful to be able to track something from micro and you can see it become a small business and then it keeps growing. We are starting to see a lot more interest coming into the office. There are some businesses that are doing juice are doing it very well. Now they are saying they want to do restaurants, so it is how do we handhold them through that process.

There are some very good expertise, a lot of staff particularly the MSMEs space are being well experienced. They do a good job of handholding a lot of our aspiring entrepreneurs through that process. Right now, there is probably not a need to review but certainly as we need to create a database. I believe there might be a need to relook at the valuation methodology again.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, just on the back of your answer earlier on, I see all the institutions that you mentioned were basically its our own FDB, our own HFC. The question is, have you been able to get some traction from the other commercial banks et cetera because this is a huge area for us the MSMEs. We all know what they do for a country and its development. For many years, I think a lot of the commercial banks have steered clear of that particular issue. Have you been able to get some traction with these other commercial banks apart from our own HFCs and FDBs because we simply to be forever left with the burden (not a burden) but at least getting the assistance to these MSMEs.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for that question, honourable Koya. Put it this way, it is an ongoing discussion, clearly each bank has their own risk appetite, Mr. Speaker, and that dictates what to serve the market. From what I can see, HFC and FDB have actually started escalating their desire to participate in those markets.

Obviously FDB traditionally has been the mainstay of MSME support, HFC is there. It is an ongoing discussion with some of the other banks, I know BSP is very good in the MSME space. I think there is a rural banking subsidy that we provide to them so that they can create the rural presence. So even with BSP, for example, they already have an accelerator incubator programme. In a year, they will put three lots of 25 businesses through formal training from financial reporting, how to manage your business and costs. The bigger Australian banks tend to work with the larger MSMEs, so it is really down to their appetite, but it is just an ongoing discussion.

Clearly you have to do more. I think the numbers that I saw, there is about, if I am not wrong about a pent-up demand of about \$200 million or \$300 million of desire for MSME funding. It does not have a place to go. Some of the things that are happening in the marketplace, will create that opportunity for more funding and therefore more business by default an economic growth.

MR. SPEAKER.- On the issue of incubators, that was something that struck the group that recently visited Indonesia. It was the universities that drove the project of young entrepreneur bachelor students. They registered themselves and they register what they want to do. It is the university that carries them, and they are selling wonders from the various kind of things that you drink to take away your sickness by mixing herbs, ginger and things of that nature that is in the market. The only issue there is they have a very big population and they are a market to themselves, about 300 million and they are doing very well in MSMEs. I do not know if we can learn to take a leaf out from that. Perhaps on your next visit to Indonesia, I would strongly advice that you liaise with the areas that we visited, and our Ambassador in Indonesia is very knowledgeable of what is happening there.

Progress of Registration - Traditional Title Holders  
(Question No. 120/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the progress of the registration of vacant traditional title holder(s)?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 6,216 traditional *vanua* positions, 214 *Turaga iTaukei*, 1,375 *Turaga ni Yavusa* and 4,627 *Turaga ni Mataqali*. As at January 2024, 90 *Turaga itaukei* positions were filled or 42 percent, 670 *Turaga ni Yavusa* were filled or 49 percent and 2,305 *Turaga ni Mataqali* were filled or 50 percent. Therefore, about 3,065 positions were filled or 49 percent of the positions. The vacancy rate was 51 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for a long time the vacancy rate in traditional titles, positions was about 50 percent. More than half of the *vanua* structure lacked leadership. A major reason was because the procedure for filling vacant positions is always led by the *vanua*. There is no movement if they decide not to act. When a vacancy arises, members of the *Tokatoka*, *Mataqali* or *Yavusa* decides who the next title holder should be, then they inform the relevant provincial council office which in turn notifies the *Veitarogi Vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year the Gret Council of Chiefs (GCC) changed that procedure. After choosing Rewa as the pilot province for poverty alleviation, the GCC instructed the *Veitarogi Vanua*

to visit the villages in Rewa where vacancies existed. Development would be effective and meaningful only if the *vanua* leadership is strengthened by filling the vacant posts and providing the awareness and training to the title holders.

Mr. Speaker, Rewa Province vacancy rate was 57 percent, with 43 percent of positions being filled. The *Veitarogi Vanua* visited 50 of Rewa's 55 villages. The visit reduced the vacancy rate from 57 percent to 29 percent or 71 percent of all positions are now filled. The success in Rewa prompt the *Veitarogi Vanua* to visit Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove. The first was Bua, which had a 44 percent vacancy rate, but by the end of the exercise, the vacancy rate decreased to 16 percent, with 84 percent of all positions in Bua now filled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Macuata initially had a 39 percent vacancy rate, which decreased to 12 percent resulting in 88 percent of the positions being filled.

Lastly, Cakaudrove had a 59 percent vacancy rate which decreased to 12 percent with 88 percent of the positions now filled.

Last week, the *Veitarogi Vanua* visited Serua. Before the visit, Serua had 48 out of 81 positions vacant or 59 percent vacancy rate. After the visit, 67 positions are now filled with Serua vacancy rate reduced to 18 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary 258 out of 343 positions in Rewa are now filled; 331 out of 391 positions are now filled in Bua; 414 out of 470 positions in Macuata are now filled; 439 out of 499 positions in Cakaudrove are now filled; and 67 out of 81 positions in Serua are now filled. Following the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) intervention, the overall vacancy rate decreased from 49 percent to 44 percent, with 56 percent of all positions now being filled. For the first time in a long time, we have now surpassed the 51 percent mark. This was our target before the end of the last financial year, which we have achieved. We plan to visit all the provinces by the end of this financial year. At the current rate, we project that 88 percent of all positions will be filled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GCC reinstatement has been less than a year, yet its profound wisdom and guidance are already felt. We have seen the success of taking the services to the community instead of waiting for them up here in our office. We will work with the *vanua* to ensure that most of the 6,216 traditional title positions are filled.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, thank you indeed for the response and let me congratulate your Ministry and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs for the progress made, and we all know how important this is. Just a quick question, in the numbers that have been filled, you have detailed the different positions; *Turaga i Taukei*, *Turaga ni Yavusa* and *Turaga ni Mataqali*. With those that have been confirmed now, is it more with the *Turaga ni Mataqali* or *Turaga ni Yavusa* because sometimes the higher up we go, the more the complication is in our communities. Out of those numbers, is it more on *Turaga ni Yavusa* or *Turaga i Taukei* or *Turaga ni Mataqali*?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, the latest one that we have received is mostly the *Turaga ni Mataqali* that has been filled and we are working on that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister on the huge progress that is being made. This has been a long-standing issue that people have talked about at great length, and I know it also affects me from Lakeba and what happens in there in our *mataqali*, *na yavusa*. But if I heard correctly, the statement that you made was that the instruction was given by the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) to the *Veitarogi Vanua*. If that is correct, then to my mind, it seems that the GCC is having a direct impact on operational matters, or was that a my

misstatement on your behalf? If that could be just clarified?

HON. I. VASU.- Honourable Usamate, that has been the resolution from the GCC. When we took the reports of the China trip to the GCC, the plan was to trial in Rewa. When we took Rewa to be the pilot province, then they advised us if the *Veitarogi Vanua*, instead of waiting for the *vnua* to come, if we can take the *Veitarogi Vanua* to the Rewa province.

MR. SPEAKER.- Could we have something on that, honourable Attorney-General or you want to shed some more light on that? The honourable Usamate is concerned of the role that GCC plays here to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. As far as I am aware honourable Member, it is well within the remit and the jurisdiction of the Great Council of Chiefs to give advisory opinions or recommendations with respect to matters pertaining to Fijian culture and customary practices.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, just a supplementary question through you, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his submission to the House this afternoon. We usually know that the *Veitarogi Vanua* comes where there is a dispute, but I am grateful to the Great Council Chiefs that now they have come to the *vanua*. I just want to know Mr. Speaker, what sort of programmes they normally do when they come and visit the *vanua*? Do they hear disputes, or they clarify titled positions as to who should be the holder, just for the Fijians who are listening to our conversation this afternoon?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, what the *Veitarogi Vanua* will always do is, receives all the records of those who have got the request for the *Veitarogi Vanua* to look after the issues in regards to the Vanua. Then we liaise with the Roko and the timeframe that the *Veitarogi Vanua* wants to visit each province, then the Roko will organise with the *Veitarogi Vanua* the list that they have got, if they can advise them that they are coming. At the same time, they can look at the disputed boundaries and other things like that, they cover all those. Next week, they will be travelling to Kadavu.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Minister. I must thank and congratulate you and your Ministry for the great work that has been undertaken. Again, I kind of kept to myself when I look towards the Attorney-General since he was a member of the review team of the GCC before he became the AG.

The actual role is of the Chiefs collectively. When they come together, they sit, discuss and come up with these kinds of resolutions. There is a speedy way of finding a way through the hard yards, especially in the *Vanua* and I am so thankful for that since you have reduced everything down to about 18 percent or something. That is a huge achievement, and I must congratulate you and your staff for that. Thank you very much.

Payment of Additional VAT on Imported Goods  
(Question No. 121/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the additional VAT on goods received from overseas?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for that question. I was thinking of giving one very simple answer because I think the question itself is a bit flawed.

There is no such thing as additional VAT, but I know the intent of the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think the intent of the question appears to be on the recent policy changes on personal imports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Budget, the threshold for personal imports under Code 212 has been reduced from \$2,000 to \$1,000 and 15 percent VAT is now levied on that effective from 28th June.

Previously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, personal importations were treated under Concession Code 212 under Customs Tariff Act whereby the importer did not pay fiscal duty, Import Excise duty and VAT on all personal imports up to a value of \$2,000. This, Sir, before the threshold was \$500.

During Covid it was moved to \$2,000. So, what we have done Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to reduce that from \$2,000 to \$1,000, which is still much higher than the \$400 that existed prior to the COVID pandemic. So, the intention of that measure during COVID was to provide a temporary relief to those who wanted to import at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other issue with respect to this was that we found a lot of instances of misuse where certain individuals, retailers had imported and sold goods avoiding VAT, creating unfair advantage. So, you could import every week if you had the money, and some people were running businesses from home. It is not fair to those who cannot import online and use other mechanisms because they have the money. Those who go and buy locally, would obviously have to pay the VAT. So, it is a measure that will bring about equity, it is not going to treat others unfairly. That is the rationale for closing that loophole and removing that COVID measure that there.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand the rationale that he has given, but the concern is, on one hand the Government talks about the remittances they received and on the other hand, the people who live abroad have been supplementing families' income by sending food items which they cannot afford, whether it is a wedding, whether it is a funeral or whatever, whatever. But my question to the honourable Minister is which he has just said now that the VAT came into effect on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2024.

This is the Budget Book which is an official document and on Page No. 30 it says, and I quote: "VAT comes into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2024". Which one is correct, honourable Minister? Is it this book or what you are saying in Parliament?

My second question is, how are you going to provide that remedy now to the consumers?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, honourable Premila Kumar's understanding of the way in which the VAT is applied...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...and the way in which Customs duty comes into effect is the day the Budget is announced

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Why did you write 1<sup>st</sup> August?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Obviously, she does not understand what...,

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It's 1<sup>st</sup> August, here!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I said very clearly, under the Customs Tariff Act where the importer did not pay fiscal duty, import excise duty...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Admit you made a mistake. It is an official document.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Listen, listen!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...that comes into effect on the day the Budget is announced.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Why did you write 1<sup>st</sup> August?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me just say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that honourable Premila Kumar's understanding of how VAT is applying...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I do not know.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...is actually quite bad. This is an example to prove her understanding of how VAT is applied, which is actually wrong. She put out a *Facebook* post on 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2024, "this is an example to proof her understanding of how VAT is applying..."

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Is actually wrong. She puts this *Facebook* post "Unbelievable butter price has the result of 15 percent VAT. 500 gramme butter is almost the price of chicken. Everyday consumers are struggling to put food on the table, promises were made by NFP, PAP, SODELPA that they will reduce the cost of living. Unfortunately, there was nothing in the Budget towards changes here for.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Very poor!.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, VAT is a one- off thing. When it was introduced last year, first of all, it was not a 15 percent, it was moved from 9 percent to 15 percent... (Hon. Opposition Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! You asked the question, and you want to provide the answer too?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If I just explain, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- He is beating around the bush.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not beating around the bush because now, she is caught. She is caught lying as a Member of Parliament as to how VAT is applied.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when VAT was increased last year, it takes effect, after that, the increase or

decrease in the prices is not based on VAT, is based on other factors.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Answer the question!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The prices, for example, in October 2023, the landed cost went down by 12.83 (16 percent). Would she said that this was caused by increase or decrease in VAT?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And for an honourable Member to go out and put a misleading post ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely wrong!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... this is the kind of lies they tell, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, when she was asking the question, the question itself was flawed, because she does not understand the VAT. There is no such thing as additional VAT, but it is the VAT at a point in time. Anything that happens in terms of the fluctuation in prices, thereafter, is dependent on other factors, whether it is freight cost, whether it is the cost of raw materials, that is how VAT is applied.

However, coming back to the question, I have answered that, customs duty and import duty come into effect the day the Budget is announced, and I have explained this in Parliament previously.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether it came on 20<sup>th</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup>, it really does not matter to me but what actually does matter now at the moment is, after this policy was implemented, what this courier company started doing, and this is what they are telling people, is that they did not have anyone to process the VAT in their company. Now, it is an additional burden.

I have a common example, if you actually import something, on \$100, if you are paying \$15 as VAT component, there is an additional charge of \$20 as agency fee or administration fee. So there is an additional \$20 being charged by the courier companies on top of the VAT, which is a burden. It is there, I am requesting the honourable Minister for Finance to, please, investigate and if this is true, please, get the courier companies to stop charging this additional \$20.

The other misconception is, if they actually open a particular consignment, they also need a Biosecurity Officer to come and inspect with an additional \$5.25. So, they are paying much more to the courier company at this point in time to what they are paying as a VAT component, if they are actually buying something worth FJ\$100. If the honourable Minister for Finance can look into this.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to facilitate VAT payments, electronic pay systems, like M-PAiSA, MyCash and internet banking can be utilised. Freight companies are seamlessly managing this through freight companies, ensuring that there is a streamlined process without additional burden.

We have also asked the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service to deploy additional staff to assist freight companies. Options like, pre-clearance and pre-payment are available for courier companies and freight stations to enhance operational efficiency. But we will also check on what additional charges they are putting on.



HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for a lengthy no good answer. He has mentioned that customs duty and fiscal duty comes into play, in fact, it went immediately. I totally agree with it. But the question was on VAT.

VAT, as per the blue book, states that it will come into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> August. When the Budget was announced the VAT on personal imports came into effect immediately. That is the clarification we want and that is what you need to answer. Do not go beating around the bush, get to the point and answer the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- He has answered that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- He did not answer the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, he has answered your questions by stating what you have just said, honourable Sachida Nand. So, let us move on.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the blue book is very clear. What he said, is not what he has answered. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister needs to learn when he answers a question, just answer it. Stop depreciating and making personal attacks on people.

As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, have a bit of decorum. Have a bit of decorum! Have some spine and be strong and be still. Here is the question, has the honourable Minister consulted freight companies and recipients about the challenge they face due to the new personal import requirements? Because they have things cluttering up their warehouses, people are not being able to take them out because of these changes that you have made. If so, what feedback has been received on how this has been addressed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just informed them that FRCS has deployed additional staff. They are working with freight companies and there would have been initial teething problems as you introduce new systems. They are working on the freight companies, and I am sure those problems are sorted out.

#### Installation of Telecommunications Towers (Question No. 122/2024)

HON. K.V. RAVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament of the process that was undertaken to facilitate the installation of telecommunication towers in our rural and maritime areas?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, to be honest this is probably one area where we are really keen to get going but let me just to explain where we have gotten to. Basically, when I took over the Ministry of Communications, the whole Department was gutted, Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF) was really in disarray, so we had to start rebuilding those institutions. So, we went out and selected the right people.

We have a very capable Chairman, Mr. David Eyre, who is a former Telecom Senior Manager and he is there with some other well-known telecommunications people, such as Tomasi Vakatora, who was a long time Executive of ATH. They have now started to progress this exercise well.

I would like to assure the House that we are very committed to actually get the rest of the country connected. We are going to use the universal service fee which is available and there is quite a bit of money there, and we are also having conversation with some donor agencies to see whether we can top that up so we can move through very quickly.

Basically, we actually had to go out to do an Expression of Interest or tender to the telecommunications industry. That is now done. There is now conversation where we had to actually solicit some expertise from the USAid - their Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP) programme, which provide us with some expertise in terms of financial modelling to decide where we put that infrastructure. That is now all in place and I can confirm that towards the end of December, we will start deploying the towers.

Right now, because of Starlink, Sir, it has created another option for the Ministry in terms options for connectivity, so we are looking at that as well. But rest assured, Sir, I am really trying to ensure that before the end of this year we start connecting up. The idea is to connect the maritime region first and at the same time look at some of the more marginalised provinces such as Ra, Bua, so that is the kind of progress we are trying to make. This will be quite a wonderful thing to do and I just like to assure both sides of the House that are working very hard to get this done.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, with respect to the installation of these particular towers, will we also be allowing the commercial companies that currently exists in the telecommunications industry to piggyback onto these towers and provide the particular services that are required for FMA, et cetera, all the kind of stuff in the rural maritime areas?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, yes, we are looking at some other options as well. Pacific, for example, has a full solution that includes a solar system that actually powers up the tower. So that is another option as well that has been looked at. The options that can be looked at, the team is working very hard to ensure that we get to the right landing point and to honourable Usamate's point about execution, that is going to be quite important to make sure we get it done correctly.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Deputy Prime Minister for the work that he is doing in addressing this issue. It has been a longstanding issue, and Ministers will have realised as you go around for your *talanoa* session this is what people perennially talk about.

I am glad to hear also that the focus is on the rural and maritime, places where companies have been reluctant to set up towers because of the huge cost and the low returns.

Of the around when we were doing the assessments, there are about 300 blackspots all around Fiji. So, roughly in terms of the rural and maritime the blackspot areas, what percentage do you think you will be able to cover within this financial year and the next financial year?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, that is quite a good question. I do not have that data one me to be honest, but I will get that and provide it to honourable Usamate.

(Question No. 136/2024 withdrawn)

International Standards - Building and Construction Sector  
(Question No. 137/2024)

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Ministry's plans to adopt more international standards and guidelines in the Building and Construction Sector to make the industry more effective and efficient?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems like I am monopolising question time today but it is really because I did not have the chance to answer the questions from Tuesday.

Mr. Speaker, I think we can all agree that the building and construction industry is one of the most vital industries to the country and the need to continue to have sustainable practices and standards is very important in ensuring, you recall that I have been talking a lot about investment and the need to have good standards to be able to support the construction is quite important.

Historically, there was a guideline for improving building safety and resilience for new single storey houses and schools in the rural areas that was launched by with the World Bank. Also, more recently there has been standards such as the standard on re-enforcing materials which is AS/NZS 4671 that was introduced and that was just to look at reinforcement standards.

At the moment, there is a discussion going on in terms of wind load standards, Mr. Speaker, and that will be quite important in terms of the ability to have insurance cover in the future. There are some activities going on with the engineers and also the stakeholders at the moment, in terms of that particular proposed standard and once we are in a position to bring that forward, we will. Some of the other standards that we are looking at include plywood standards, Mr. Speaker, and even bamboo standards. That is just to create more options in terms of construction, particularly in terms of the bamboo standard. So that is being looked at the moment and I think overall, as we continue to evolve as an economy, the need for good building standards will become more and more important.

The Department of Trade Measurements and Standards, I call them the silent heroes in the Ministry of Trade. We do not hear them that much in terms of visibility like other fancy areas like Trade and Investment, but they are doing quite a bit of work in trying to ensure that standards in the country continue to be of a good level, good standard, because it does ensure that we have, not only resilient construction but also buildings that last.

Finally, just a note of interest, I guess the attempt to regionalise a lot of these issues, Fiji now Co-Chairs the Pacific Islands Standards Committee, which is another avenue to discuss standards and ventilate standards across the region. The Department of Measurement and Standards will continue to work with the rest of the Pacific in terms of supporting standards, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, obviously the need for improving our standards to make sure that we have good buildings that are effective and the manner in which we build buildings are effective and efficient is highly laudatory. As I was listening, Mr. Speaker Sir, I was wondering establishing the standards, there has been a lot of work done recently on the National Building Code.

National Building Code has always been under the Minister for of Health. Over the past few years, the Ministry for Public Works has taken the lead on this. I am just wondering as you look into the standards, how is that integration with the building code, how is that working at the moment?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for that question. In terms of when the consultation on the standards happen, I am trying to remember the position, but the Government architect gets involved in actually the establishment of the standards, he is also a member of the Fiji Institute of Engineers Association. That cross check and discission is currently happening. There is

another discussion that is probably going to happen very soon on the Building Code as we go forward because of some of the automation requirements we will require next year, but that is a separate exercise. For now, there is cross consultation in terms of ensuring that the standards are robust.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, it is great to see that the honourable Minister is actually going to improve the international standards and guidelines that are going to be used within the building industry. One of the most important parts of all of this is the Department of National Trade Measurement and Standards as you have mentioned rightfully, Sir, critical component; very silent but very critical component. Will you be fortifying the department so that we can actually monitor properly what comes into the country and we are compliant in terms of the materials brought to the country? Will you also be ensuring that the authorities concerned that are involved in this particular process (I am talking about the necessary councils) are brought up to speed quickly about what can be done, what can be used and what cannot be used?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The short answer is, yes, we are trying to sort of fortify the department and that is involving reaching out to some development partners to assist strengthen the expertise which is quite important.

Also, one of the other things that is being done to actually fortify is actually trying to partner up with some of our donors partners in terms of standards. As you know, we rely a lot on the New Zealand standards and that will continue. And now we are actually in the process, now that we are actually in the process of creating a bit more of a closer relationship with the New Zealand standards one just to ensure that we are on the right track.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, just a quick question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, I raised this issue too earlier during the week about the legislations that we have because the honourable Usamate stated that the building code, although they have assigned the responsibility to the Director Building but in our legislation it is still with and from NDMO perspective, this is one of the problems as well particularly with the standards not only in the schools, but housing in the rural areas and even some in the urban areas. So, will that be something that will be part of the changes that will be considered honourable Deputy Prime Minister? The changes in the law.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was not going to open up that discussion because I had not had the conversation with the honourable Minister for Infrastructure who looks after the national building code particularly. But there are some things that are possibly going to change but what we are doing at the moment is trying to align up the standards first, make sure that they are clear. As you will recall, we have been talking about the automation of the building permit process and what we are trying to ensure is the building code and whatever requirements in there are actually aligned closely to the automation that we are trying to do. So, there is going to be a conversation, but I just have not had the chance to talk to the honourable Minister yet.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has mentioned most of the things but the component of a building code, there are two very important things which I feel should be included in there. One is water, as you know that water is very important and, in any disaster, or there is a water cut but we experience a lot of water cuts. If that happens then you will find the whole building needs to be closed because of health and safety, he did not mention that. Solar light is very important now. I hope these two components are included in the code. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the honourable Minister to please elaborate on that?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not sure whether that is a question or a statement but I will just say that we note the comments of honourable Nath and we will make sure that we have the appropriate discussions.

MR. SPEAKER.- He is trying to have that included in the building code but that should be directed towards the Minister for Infrastructure.

### **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members as usual we are nearing 4 o'clock, it is about time we do a bit of our housekeeping and for the purposes of complying with Standing Order with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of Government in Parliament to move his Suspension Motion.

HON. LEADER OF GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move under Standing Order 6:

That so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have one or two questions including the written questions and also the motions before us.

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

I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I will now suspend proceedings and we will adjourn for tea and return when the bell is sounded. The House is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.56 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.30 p.m.

State of Infrastructure – Sigatoka Valley Road  
(Question No. 138/2024)

HON. A.N. TUICOLO asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister update Parliament on the state of the infrastructure regarding the bridges and roads in remote areas, in particular, the Sigatoka Valley Road?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sigatoka Valley Road is 77.16 kilometres in length, of which, 24.8 kilometres has been sealed in multiple sections. The seal starts from Sigatoka Town till Dreke Village Road Junction, which is approximately 23.1 kilometres. The Raunitogo School, Naviyago, Nalebaleba villages and Keyasi Government Station sections have also been sealed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are nine bridges and 17 crossings along the Valley Road. It includes the newly constructed and commissioned Matawale Bridge. Recently, works have been completed in upgrading the Tokotokoniga Crossing and repairs to Draiba Crossing, as most of these structures have exceeded the 50 years design and repairs and replacements are being planned to be included. In the budget for the current financial year, sealing works have been planned or earmarked for Koronisagana Village frontage. Survey and design for seal extension works will also be undertaken from Dreke to Nabaka (3 kilometres) section and Nabaka to Raunitogo (3 kilometres) in the current financial year. Renewal of Vatanabalavu Crossing has also been planned for this financial year or earmarked. The approach deck overlay is required to extend the structural integrity of the existing crossing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the design and specification works of Naqalo Crossing near to Nalebaleba Village on the way to Keyasi has been included in this year's programme. The replacement of this crossing is required as the existing structure is not able to accommodate storm surges. During floods, there are no alternate routes, therefore, people are forced to wait until the water recedes. Logging and gravel extraction haulage in the area during the rainy weather gives more stress to the current road infrastructure. We will review the timelines for this Naqalo Crossing as appropriate given its critical role as far as the people of Navosa are concerned.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the current financial year, Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) has budgeted \$120 million for the progressive cycle and periodic maintenance of road, bridges and jetties infrastructure; and \$114.5 million for renewal of roads and services, bridges and crossings throughout the four divisions where part of this will cover the development of the Sigatoka Valley Road. In addition, \$5 million has also been allocated to the Public Works Department to compliment the FRA on rural roads, institutional and community roads.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is regarding the road condition in some rural remote areas in Lautoka. I will name the areas; Viseisei Back Road, Vuda Back Road, Vaivai, Navula, Wairabetia and Paipai. There is also one bridge which is in very bad condition, that is, Vuda Back Road. It is dry season in the West, and I believe time is right to carry out the maintenance work because this road is used by the students, the farmers, the old people and the workers. What is stopping the maintenance of road in these areas?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you honourable Member, I had prepared the answer specifically for Sigatoka Valley as per the question. That is a new question, and I have not got an update for that one in terms of the information, but definitely, that is included in the cyclical

programme and maintenance. I have to admit that it is not perfect and in terms of the delivery of the rural roads currently handled by the private contractors with the Divisional Engineer West, which I met last week, and I also went through some of the areas to plug those gaps.

As per the budget last year, we have started to receive the equipment for PWD and moving forward, definitely there will be improvements in the gaps between the current private contracts and what PWD will cover.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, this is not a question but just a comment. The Ratu Dovi Road from Coca Cola Factory to Sekoula Road, it is almost a perfect road, but FRA was repairing it and they left it in the middle of the works, therefore, causing a lot of havoc to the public and delays traffic and prone to accident. Can the honourable Minister look at that road and ensure that it is sorted out as soon as possible, please?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Is that the one in front of the Coca Cola factory onwards?

HON. S. NAND.- Correct.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I have expressed my disappointment with them and, definitely, not only you but other members of the public have expressed their concern. We have an issue with the supplier of the materials essential for making roads which is bitumen and asphalt.

The sole supplier of bitumen in Fiji and some Pacific Islands is Technix Pacific (Pte) Limited. Priority of supply depends on the volume and demand from clients. He has ran out of bitumen for the last three weeks and expect to restore supply in the next three weeks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRA has directed its contractors to source their own bitumen and some have ordered stocks to be shipped here. Long term solution, we are tendering into the local and international market. Currently, we are maintaining our sealed roads with other alternative materials. In the meantime, Ratu Dovi Road will be temporarily fixed with some asphalt overlay but will be completed when the new stock arrives in three weeks.

HON. V. NATH.- I thank the honourable Minister for his comprehensive answer. Honourable Minister, there was a plan for Nabaka bridge and the road from Valley junction to Nabaka Primary School. I believe it was a priority when FijiFirst Government was there, but you have re-prioritised your plans on that. Of course, another bridge is Waya Bridge where during heavy rain, it does get flooded. What are your plans on these two bridges and road?

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, we have moved from Sigatoka Valley to all over Fiji, but I do not have details for that. We have provided as an answer to the written questions the plans. I mean, plans are plans, if there are you know urgencies in terms of changing situations or inclement weather, that definitely will be looked at.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Take him for a road tour.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yeah, that is right.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. The honourable Minister is beating around the bush. These two Bridges that I have mentioned it is on Valley Road. Nabaka is along Valley Road, as well as Waya Bridge.

HON. V. PILLAY.- He doesn't know.

HON. V. NATH.- Yes, he doesn't know. Do not beat around the bush!

MR. SPEAKER.- It is all over Fiji now, honourable Nath. The way the questions have been put to the Minister.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- As already explained, I will look into that too.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is in Valley Road, Sigatoka. Before that, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for ...

MR. SPEAKER.- I thought you were moving to Labasa now.

(Laughter)

HON. J.N. NAND.- Thank you, Sir.

Before that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for upgrading the Caralevu/Kawakawa/Nabekavu/ Dogorua Road, thank you, honourable Minister. I would also like to thank the Minister for Sugar for upgrading and fixing the Caralevu FSC Bridge in Labasa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Kavanagasau Road which is on the East Bank of the Valley Road and runs from Laselase to Nabitu, and it goes through the settlement of Naroro, Yelava, Somosomo, Nawamagi, Nalagi, Narata, Nadrala, Kaisau, Mauvua, Raiwaqa and Nabitu. In these settlements, there are 32 vegetable farmers, 80 i-Taukei villagers, five primary schools, one secondary school and one health centre, hence with a population of more than 2,000 people. My question to the honourable Minister is that when will these roads be upgraded properly with proper drainage and at the same time, in near future, if this road can be tarsealed? Thank you.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, the short answer is that, it is included in the programmatic maintenance, as I have already explained. It is also in our list of roads as per the maintenance programme. As I have mentioned, it might probably be late or not up to what is normally expected and that is something we will work to address. Thank you.

MOU with Peace Corps Fiji  
(Question No. 139/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the Memorandum of Understanding between the Peace Corps Fiji and the Ministry?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. Firstly, allow me to provide some background information about the partnership with Peace Corps Fiji.

We signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), following the approval by Cabinet on 15th July, 2024 and the signing ceremony will be done next week on 16th August, 2024. The signing coincides with the visit by the US Peace Corps Executive Leadership next week from 13th August to 19th August, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me provide some background information. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Peace Corps was established



in 1961 by the then President John Peace Gerald Kennedy, six weeks after his inauguration as President. On the back of two World Wars, America was yearning for peace and President Kennedy, by a Presidential Order, established the Peace Corps. The Government of Fiji and United States signed an agreement on 25th June, 1968 regarding the Peace Corps programme in Fiji.

I believe many of us here know about the Peace Corps. Many of us have had the experiences with the Peace Corps. Some of us have had teachers who have been in Peace Corps and others like us in Verata, during the Verata Beef Scheme, we had Peace Corps volunteers helping us with the Verata Beef Scheme at the time.

It is an organisation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that coordinates United States of America volunteers in Fiji to work with rural communities on projects that are focussed on economic development. The Peace Corps volunteers have worked in a variety of sectors including forestry, fisheries, agriculture, business development, health, education, technology, water and sanitation and youth development, to name a few. Their goal is to support community organisations, such as women and youth groups, to improve their project design and management skills. They have had a long, active and rich history of collaboration with the Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

For the last three years, the Ministry has been a member of their Project Advisory Committee which meets quarterly and helps drive the direction of their volunteer service and relevant Peace Corps programme.

The partnership arrangement between us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, here are three main categories of the work that they are going to do. The first is they have response volunteers. They are under the Response Volunteer Programme. There is a pool of experienced professionals and former Peace Corps volunteers. There are seasoned professionals who come for a shorter term and can serve up to three to 12 months in high impact assignments identified by the Ministry.

Second, is the Virtual Peace Corps volunteers. They are experienced professionals who can spend five to 15 hours per week, virtually supporting the Ministry's teams and participants on improving economic empowerment initiatives.

An area that the Ministry is keen to tap into is the digitalisation of our project proposal online system where project proposals initiated from the District levels are automated and mainstreamed through various approving officers in the Division to the Ministry's Headquarters, and then to the Office of the Permanent Secretary for endorsement.

We note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this plan has been long overdue. Past management have deliberated on it but, unfortunately, due to certain reasons, did not eventuate but now, we could see that it could foster an enabling environment for this initiative to come to fruition.

Thirdly, the Peace Corps shares a common issue of co-operation with the Ministry on their community economic empowerment programme. While the Ministry's income generating project has been in existence for a long time, it lacks many supportive mechanisms to ensure sustainability and scaling to gradually progress from subsistence to semi-commercial and then to commercial status.

We see the Peace Corps volunteers having a great part in doing this with supporting the Ministry in project management training, income generation, financial literacy and personal money management through this partnership.

Through these proposed agreements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will support the

community economic empowerment, driven by a Peace Corps volunteer in a particular rural community through the Self-Help Funding Programme. That Peace Corps volunteer will provide the necessary capacity building, project management training and financial literacy, and monitor and report back to the Ministry of the progress of this business initiative.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Ministry is achieving its intention of Sustainable Development Goal 17 which is partnerships for the goals, that implementation of MOU between the Ministry and Peace Corps will certainly contribute to improving socio-economic opportunities and quality of life of our rural and maritime communities. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question. Some communities did have volunteers until COVID-19, their volunteers were withdrawn. Are there opportunities that they will be provided with Peace Corps volunteer since now, the MOU will be signed?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will certainly have a look at those communities that had their Peace Corps volunteers withdrawn and see how far the programme has progressed, and will take it on from there.

MR. SPEAKER.- Also including Australia, I think?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned by the honourable Minister, I think a lot of us have had experience with Peace Corps in the past. We have been taught by Peace Corps. I had the pleasure of teaching with one when I was still a school teacher for two years. I am wondering honourable Minister and you might be aware whether it is limited to your Ministry or this advent of Peace Corps is across all other sectors?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe there are some arrangements there that they can work with other Ministries as well, but this MOU is in particular to the programmes that we run in the Ministry.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the ninth Oral Question has been dropped in view of the Statement that was made earlier this morning. We will now move to the next Oral. You will notice, honourable Members, that there are lot more questions for today, given that we had a very short day on the visit of Her Excellency the President of the Republic of India.

(Question No. 140/2024) withdrawn.

Fiji's Sustainable and Resilient Recovery Programme  
(Question No. 141/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Fiji Sustainable and Resilient Recovery Programme?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. The Sustainable and Resilient Recovery Programme was supported by Asian Development Bank (ADB) from 2021 to 2022, and this Programme has continued.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ADB has been a key strategic partner for development for Fiji for a very,

very long time since 1970 and Fiji has partnered in numerous projects including roads, water, climate change related projects, budget support operations, and liquidity support for the national airline during COVID-19 and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ADB for core leading Budget Support Reform operations together with the World Bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are other possibilities now with the ADB and the World Bank and working with other development partners as well on some of the major projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are aware, the Government, on last Thursday, signed a loan agreement that will enable Government to receive a very concessional financing of US\$70million from the ADB through the Budget Support Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget support financing is a new modality for accessing finance from development partners. This has been a great support for the Government after COVID-19, and in the last so many fiscal years.

Some of these concessional financing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and budget support also refers to policy reform and it is useful for Government and for the country as a whole to use these budget support opportunities to undertake key policy reforms. In the last 18 months we have completed a number of policy reforms across different Ministries.

The programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, supports Fiji's efforts to restore fiscal sustainability and inclusive climate resilient growth, both undermined by COVID-19 pandemic and disasters. While building fiscal community and climate resilience to climate change and global shocks, it builds on the achievements of the reform programme, and one aspect of this programme was completed in 2020.

The Government policy reforms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, falls in three areas. I will quickly and very briefly talk about those three reform areas:

- (1) Public Financial Management for fiscal resilience and debt sustainability. This includes review of the Financial Management Act, formulation of the Mid-Term Debt Management Strategy as part of the Fiscal Strategy which is presented to Parliament. Of course we had the Climate Change Act, the implementation and perhaps review of that Act and establishment of new tax information system for FRCS.
- (2) Public Policy for Community Resilience included gender-responsive budgeting which has been rolled-out to all Ministries as part of the budget process. The Social Assistance Policy was also part of this public policy for community resilience reform area and also the launch of the new market-based climate risk parametric, microinsurance project which is the first for the Pacific.
- (3) Enabling environment for resilience, private sector recovery. This supported the recovery of businesses and fostered a creation of new enterprises including the establishment of a two-year subsidy loan through the RBF, new regulations under the Companies Act and National Payment Systems Act.

Some of the other details of the Budget support programme, for the Government is in coordination with other development partners is actually outlined on pages 58 to 66 of the Budget Supplement of the 2024-2025 Budget. So, if Members want to see more details, then they can refer to that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his elaboration on the Fiji Sustainable Resilient Recovery Programme. I think there has been a lot of good work done. I am particularly interested on the Public Policy for Community, the issues that you mentioned about gender-responsive budgeting, micro-insurance and the social system policy. I am just wondering, are there any plans, one of the things that we find sometimes in the past when you do something, when the good donor goes away, it tends to die down. I am just wondering whether all those things which are very important, are there plans to progress it further if it is going to be done internally within Government and how do you plan be able to do?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is a very important point that honourable Usamate has made that sometimes you have donors come in with a policy agenda, policy reform and once that is done, the sustainability is questioned, even with the projects that are funded by donors.

I can assure honourable Usamate that the on-going programme includes building on some of those policy reforms and when we complete the policy reforms as part of the budget support, we make sure that it remains part of the agenda for future budgets. For example, since last year we produced the citizens budget. It is part of the reform agenda to provide readily available information demystified from the budget language and estimates.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- There are there before as well!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The first time we started last year as far as this Government is concern. To honourable Usamate, these are continuation of some of the policy reforms that had been undertaken. But it is important as you said quite rightly that we do not just leave it once the reform is completed as part of the budget support.

Budget Support for Small-Scale Sugarcane Farmers  
(Question No. 142/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on the specific details on how the budget will support small-scale sugarcane farmers from larger producers?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, before I reply properly to honourable Pillay, I would like to go back to last night's contribution by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in the two motions about the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji and Sugar Industry Tribunal. I am very impressed with the honourable Leader of Opposition that he had spoken on one particular subject that the sugar industry, although his bleeding and has been bleeding for so many years, but there is a social responsibility on the part of Government to keep this industry going because we have got 200,000 plus people who are directly and indirectly dependent on this industry.

Mr. Speaker, but on the other side, if the sugar industry collapses, I will be out of job. One of the things that I did discuss with the honourable Prime Minister last night that we need a bipartisan approach on this industry. The honourable Prime Minister has agreed that down the line we can put up a Committee which we will be proposing shortly to Cabinet and we want both sides to work together for the sake of this industry.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Of course, we will have one each from the other side (the two blocs) unless you want to be the third one because you are saying you are independent but you do not have any sugarcane farm.

MR. SPEAKER.- We used to have that in the past, I used to Chair the Committee.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Well, I will check the register with the Tribunal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the question by honourable Pillay regarding the budget support for our small-scale sugarcane farmers, I want to offer my deepest condolence to the family of the locomotive pointsman from Tavua who lost his life yesterday after serving with FSC for more than three decades and a senior locomotive driver is admitted to the hospital in a critical condition. I wish him full and speedy recovery. The unfortunate accident happened in Tavua, Bridge No.15 where the locomotive derailed from the bridge and fell in the creek.

I also want to thank the brave firefighters and the hardworking medical teams and each and every one who provided assistance and support that was needed at the time of the accident and I am indeed grateful to them and I thank them and the whole team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the question, I want to assure the honourable Member that we value all farmers equally irrespective of the volume of cane they produce. We are committed to supporting all sugarcane farmers with detailed attention to small scale producers who make up a majority of our industry. It is imperative to acknowledge that approximately 75 percent of the 10,800 active farmers in Fiji are classified as small-scale farmers.

Our programmes are crafted to be inclusive and accessible to every farmer regardless of their production scale. This inclusivity is not just a principle but a practice that we uphold with unwavering dedication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our strategic focus of supporting small scale farmers ensures a credible assistance particularly for those who lack resources of their own as compared to their larger counterparts. For example, the majority of our farmers do not own tractors and implements necessary for sugarcane planting. To address, this Fiji Sugar Corporation has established tractor service providers in all the mill areas who assist farmers with planting without requiring an upfront payment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these service providers are later compensated under the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance Programme implemented by the Ministry. Furthermore, the programme includes a cap limited access to grants for up to five acres per farmer. This restriction prioritise small scale producers, preventing the large scale producers from disproportionately benefitting from the grant. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is fundamental to be practical.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is fundamental to be practical. To promote the commercialisation of the farms, we have developed policies that continue to support small scale farmers whilst also focussing on large scale farmers as we move towards a more commercialised industry.

We accept the recommendation by the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs in their Consolidated Review Report of the FSC Annual Reports which underscores the necessity of achieving commercial viability in the sugar industry. The traditional 10 acres farm model establish by the CSR in the 1960's is increasingly outdated in today's dynamic economic landscape. The Committee recommends formation of small-scale farms into larger farming units to enhance efficiency and productivity. While the Ministry agrees with the recommendation, we recognise the

practical and legal challenges involved. Therefore, we proactively introduced a farm sharing agreement as a temporary measure. These agreements enable larger farmers equipped with necessary resources to manage smaller surrounding farms under the profit-sharing agreement.

The sharing agreement offers significant benefits to both larger and smaller producers. The larger producers having achieved a total scale in exchange efficiency to smaller producers to this profit-sharing model. This symbolic relation not only optimises the resources utilization but also ensures that advantages of scale equitability distributed enhancing the overall productivity, profitability of the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to share that I have personally pioneered these initiatives, managing additional 11 farms alongside my farm in Labasa. This hands-on involvement demonstrates my commitment and our commitment to the practical solution that will alleviate the industry.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while our programme remains equally accessible to all farmers, we acknowledge the necessity of eventually commercialising the sugar industry. We are committed to working towards this goal, ensuring the farmers are equipped to complete and succeed in the global market. This transition is critical for the future sustainability and prosperity of our sugar industry, and we are dedicated to making it a reality. Let us all work together, embrace these plans and confidently strive towards securing a sustainable and prosperous future for the sugar industry of Fiji.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr Speaker, Sir, this season, farmers have seen a huge drop in cane production for both small and large scale farmers, mainly due to continuous heavy rain in the beginning and later on continuous dry weather. My supplementary question is, what are the required support or what plans does the Ministry of Sugar have to bring back the production to 2023 levels or higher than that?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have firstly allocated a big chunk of money from the budget proposal. That programme was there last year, and that programme continues this year as well. As we understand that we have got a special advisor in FSC, Mr. Lakshman from India. He had predicted that we will have an increase in cane production. Because of drought and from the latest figures, we may even lose a few hundred thousand tonnes of cane. This is his prediction.

Let us hope that good weather comes back and we are currently, honourable Pillay bringing in some new technologies from China. There was a team of people who came and gave us some new form of fertilizers and chemicals. They are saying that it could probably increase production if we used their chemicals, it could increase our production by 30 percent. So we brought them in and we are testing on a few farms and if it works well, then we will be in good shape.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Sir, on my own farm I have experienced a drop of 70 tonnes and I have seen small scale farmers harvesting about 70 to 80 tonnes and this year, they have gone below 50. I just hope they will be provided the required amount of fertilizers, chemical and also the order they give for rice and sugar will be given to them so that they can bring back the production next year.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is a plead. He is pleading with the Ministry.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I assure the honourable Member that we will look after all the sugarcane farmer in Fiji and as you know that we have got this new CEO with the Sugar Research, Dr. Vinesh Kumar who is very active. The last trial that he has done with the Sugar Research on Mr. George Shiu Raj's farm with the new variety of cane and new fertilizer and in

Labasa they have done on my farm. Because what is happening Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmers do not want to move away from the normal fertilizer that they have been putting, they are a bit scared. So, Mr. George Shiu Raj has volunteered to give his farm, and I have volunteered to give my farm to do the trials. If it works well, it goes for everyone.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the area of supporting small scale farmers, there is support for new farmers as well. So, I would just like to ask the honourable Minister to inform Parliament within his term of two years, what are the numbers of new farmers that have taken up the initiative of sugarcane farming in Fiji?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have the exact number but we have incentives Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the new farmers to come in and we provide them with the additional premium up \$7,500 or 30 percent whichever is lower. We have given almost to 900 farmers but to give you an exact number of how many new farmers have come in, that number I can provide later.

Update on the Co-operative Development Fund  
(Question No. 143/2024)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Co-operative Development Fund and its execution?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try and be very brief. Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Co-operative Development Fund is a new initiative from the Ministry of Trade. It is specifically trying to target assistance to co-operatives particularly and try and ensure that there is specific focus given to co-operatives.

The CDF works within the guidelines, it essentially involves the maximum grant or funding that can be provided, it is up to \$100,000. For businesses or co-operatives that are less than three years, the funding is limited to \$20,000 and of course the established co-operatives must show the normal compliance that is required in terms of tax compliance and other requirements and of course are required to provide financial statements. For newer co-operatives, the requirements are not as onerous but obviously the threshold of funding dictates what is available to them.

We are just about to advertise the grants online and through the dailies, we have already advertised all the other MSME Grants and that is already available. For those who are listening in today, please ensure that you apply, and of course, as usual the applications will go through the normal screening process and generally it involves an assessment committee that is chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Trade, that is, after the initial screening process.

One of the interesting things that has come out of this grant is the Ministry, through its IT Department, is trying to develop a software that can be used to process grants a lot faster, and should that be successful, we will roll it out with the other grant programmes as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, normally with cooperatives, there is a high failure rate, for many reasons. Normally, the reasons are related to management skills, handling money, et cetera. My question to the honourable Minister is, what measures are being taken to ensure sustainability of cooperatives, now that they will receive this funding?

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, for any cooperatives receiving grants, we generally take them through the normal business financial literacy training just to ensure that they are, sort of, ready to utilise the grant. That is normally one of the main things we insist on to give their new businesses.

There is a lot more monitoring that is now happening, even though, I think I suspect the way the cooperative movement is growing right now in the country, we will probably need a bit more resources soon. However, right now, there is enough resource on the ground to continue to do the monitoring - the handholding, counselling and advising in terms of ensuring that the grant is used properly.

HON. J. USAMATE.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, as just been expressed before, the grant, we understand, is for diversification from what cooperatives are currently doing to move into new fields. Just a simple question, what criteria do the cooperatives need to qualify, in order to be able to access the funds?

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.—Clearly because the thresholds, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if it is an existing cooperative, which has been operating for more than three years, obviously, they can provide more information in terms of their operations. So, they will have well-prepared financial statements, tax compliance is normally insisted upon and any other compliance that is required for that particular business to operate. So, those are really the criteria that is generally used for the types of assessments, and there is also interaction with the applicant, if required, to actually assess the business a bit more closely.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.— Honourable Minister, in your response to the previous question, you did mention about handholding and capacity development. Is this something that is provided from within the Ministry, or is it outsourced? We have talked about how Bank of South Pacific (BSP) provides this for their clients. So, in terms of the cooperatives, could you, please, elaborate on this?

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA. – Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do have our own resources in the Ministry that does the training for cooperatives, in terms of the initial awareness and training on financial awareness. The good thing now is that there are other support mechanisms. So, sometimes, some cooperatives might need some more training around marketing, for example, and generally, the Business Assistance Fiji has been helping as well in that regard. So, it just depends on website development and those kinds of things. But in terms of the hard-core initial training to be able to be a grant recipient, that is normally handled by the Ministry Officials, who are quite experienced.

Solutions to Mill Breakdown Issues  
(Question No. 144/2024)

HON. P.K. BALA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on how the mill breakdown issues are being addressed?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, I know honourable Bala was busy yesterday in Nadi, but had he been around in Parliament last night, he would have heard the explanations that I gave about Ba Mill. However, for the benefit of the honourable Member, I shall also let him know.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Bala's inquiring about measures taken to address the mill breakdown issues. Before we go into detail, it is crucial to understand the context in which these



Mills operate. All our mills are over 70 years old and face a number of challenges, including the persistent effects of the Sugar Technical Missions, the projects which were incomplete. The presence of the excessive trash and materials on the cane and a high percentage of burnt cane and the persistent of boiler issues and the loss of technical skills are the problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the observations that FSC has reported to us is the burnt cane. When these original mills were planned and designed, they were designed with a carrier to carry long stocks but with this burnt canes, they carry a lot of trash with the cane and when the canes are dropped in the carrier, it clogs the carrier itself.

In particular, at Ba Mill, that has been a problem for quite a while, and we have to upgrade the carrier itself. Of course, the second upgrading will be to get a new boiler because the boiler has done its age. That is the initial problem there, but much of these issues, as I have explained in the last two days, despite these impediments, the FSC Mills are passed with operating continuously for 24 hours during the crushing season, inevitably leading to mechanical problems and breakdowns.

Our Mills are probably the oldest in the world, as I have said yesterday. In my earlier written response to Question No. 123/2024 by honourable Pillay, I had emphasised that FSC has invested about \$29 million over the past five years, to ensure the Mills are operational. These investments aim to minimise inside stops and improve the overall efficiency.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I emphasised that the number of inside stops, more commonly known as breakdowns, was 2,163.6 hours in 2019 and the lowest point was in 2023 to 1,558 hours, which has substantial reduction of 605 hours or 28 percent which is a notable improvement. However, the figures are still significant, and we are committed to continually reducing the down time, acknowledging the challenges posed by our Mills which is, as I have said, essentially old infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must also acknowledge the issue of insufficient cane supply, as previously highlighted, hampers our efforts. More cane means more revenue, allowing us to plan for the establishment of the new factories and plants, be it secondhand at an approximate cost of \$125 million, or if you get a new one which will cost about \$250 million. These plants are contingent and on a sufficient cane supply, underscoring the need for FSC and the farmers to collaborate closely to meet the growth objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address the Mill breakdown issue, the Fiji Sugar Corporation has implemented strategies concentrated on preventative maintenance, inventory management and continuous improvement. Critical spare parts are procured and stored at our local mill centres, ensuring immediate availability to minimise down time.

Before crushing commences, FSC conducts thorough planned activities based on condition monitoring reports and physical analysis and it notifies potential issues earlier, allowing for timely interventions.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC consults, expressed for highly technical issues, applying temporary solutions while permanent resolutions are developed. A comprehensive listing and replacement schedule for essential machineries are maintained, with replacement typically acquiring after five or seven years or sooner, if necessary.

The Corporation properly assesses and defines the processors, effectively addressing challenges and enhancing mill efficiency. These combined efforts underscore FSC's commitment to minimising operational disruptions and ensuring the sustainable growth of the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently my Ministry had engaged a professional Indian company known as Indian Sugar Engineering Corporation (ISGEC) to carry out a comprehensive review on the three Mills. The consultants have been instrumental in providing strategic guidance, proposing remedies and conducting technical audits to optimise the milling process. Their expertise has been invaluable in enhancing operational capabilities.

Through these measures, we will ensure that FSC is dedicated to minimising downtime, ensuring personal safety and maintaining continuous mill operations. This unwavering commitment not only supports the sustainable growth of the sugar industry, but also benefits the communities in Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the beginning of the crushing season, nearly every week, there is a breakdown and machines are machines we know there will be breakdowns. But my question is when there is a breakdown, why are the lorry drivers not informed about it?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have to wait for days. Some cane lorry drivers cart their cane from Vunikavikaloa to Rarawai, which is about 150 kilometres away, and once they reach Rarawai, they find that the Mill is not working. So they have to spend days there without proper facilities. So why are these drivers not informed that there is a breakdown so that they can make necessary arrangements.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, well I sympathise with the drivers and I sympathise with the farmers. I have been getting a lot of calls myself from the drivers and farmers and they complain. But what I am saying is that when the mill is crushing, obviously, the engine does not know that something is going to breakdown right and by that time, the driver leaves his house.

I was saying last night here that the machines do not have a mouth to speak. If it is a human being, he will say my stomach is paining or my head is paining. With the machine, if you fix one thing today, you will not know what will happen to it tomorrow. What I am saying is this, somehow down the line, we will have a robot which can fix the machine from inside.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his response. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is really a critical issue. I mean, it is good for the honourable Minister to explain in detail the plans but, currently, what the farmers and lorry drivers are facing is really in a bad situation. I would say from bad to worse.

There are three things that happen when the mill breakdown. One is, less quota given to farmers, so there is delay in harvesting. Lorry drivers had to sleep at the Mill, as stated by my colleague, the honourable Member, and then farmers had to transport their cane from the Ba Mill area to Lautoka.

I agree with some of the explanations by the honourable Minister and also his explanation in terms of plans. I mean, jokes aside, for Government, it may be funny but those farmers and lorry drivers who sleep at the Mill, they know what is happening. So, is there any definite plan or any timeframe?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, have we not close the Rakiraki Mill, at least, the farmers could have a certain Mill to deliver their cane. The problem started when the Rakiraki Mill closed. Before, when the Ba Mill closes, they take their cane to Rakiraki Mill. Now, the Ba Mill closes, you take the cane all to Lautoka Mill. So, the problem started from that side. Now, we are going to rectify, so give us some time.

I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, on this side, are very serious about the sugar industry. That is what I am saying, we are getting the bipartisan thing now so that we can work together. What else you want?

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the performance of Rarawai Mill and Lautoka Mill is the worst this year, compared to previous years. My question is, what level of assurance is there to the farmers? Looking at the performance of the two Mills, that all harvested cane will be taken by the Mills this season?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can give assurance that the Mills will only close once all the canes are harvested.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for his very good answers. I just ask him not to follow the example of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the question comes here, and he talks about something else.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the mill breakdowns, the processes are interrupted, so sometimes there is a lot of sugar juice that is left there. If my understanding is correct, sometimes those sugar juices are dumped. So how is it that we are taken into account the environmental considerations, the consequences of doing that sort of thing and how is Government and FSC trying to address this issue to minimise the impact on the environment?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, lately, there was an article or perhaps the Farmers Union had put a complaint to say that the juice were dumped. But, in fact, if you have been reading the comments of the Chairman and the FSC CEO, that was not the case. It was something, not the actual juice, it was something different that was there.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What were they?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You read it, it's in the paper. I will bring the paper tomorrow, you read it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Don't lie!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not want to see the juice flowing into the river, we do not want to see the losses, and we are responsible about it. Whatever had happened was totally a different thing altogether.

You are too young. You do not know politics.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are fully responsible to see that the Mill and products amount are well specialised, and we give the money to the farmers.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a very good supplementary question asked by my colleague, honourable Bala, about the timeframe that would be taken to resolve all these issues. He, in a very sarcastic way, ignored that issue by saying that we closed the Mill in Rakiraki.

The similar situation is faced by the lorry drivers and the farmers up in Vanua Levu. Can he use the same excuse to explain to the farmers in Vanua Levu that we closed the Mill in Rakiraki. That is why you are supposed to suffer this side. Is this the level of answers coming from by the honourable Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think honourable Maharaj has not been Labasa for some time. I get reports every day, the Labasa Mill is the best Mill running so far.

MR. SPEAKER.- He is very busy.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Very busy in the Labour Ward.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, he is very busy with this young ....

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he should retract that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- He said he was busy in the Labour Ward. What is he trying to prove?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

HON. K.K. LAL.- It is unparliamentary.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is unparliamentary and it is personal, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I was attending to my family.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yellow card.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- He should get a card.

Establishment of USAID Office in Suva  
(Question No. 145/2024)

HON. S. TUBUNA asked the Government, upon notice.

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the establishment of the United States Agency for International Development Office in Suva?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an independent agency of the US Federal Government that is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance. As was pointed out, this was formed around the same time as the Peace Corps by the same President Kennedy in 1961, who thought to unite several existing foreign assistance organisations and programmes under one agency.

Sir, USAID became the first US foreign assistance organisation who primary focus was the long term socio-economic development. Sir, USAID is one of the largest official aid agencies in the world and accounts for more than half of all US foreign assistance. As an official component of US Foreign Policy, USAID operates subject to the guidance of the President, Secretary of State and the National Security Council. It has missions in over 100 countries, primarily in Africa, Asia, Latin

America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 22<sup>nd</sup> July the Biden-Harris Administration announced the US Government's commitment to deepen its cooperation in the Pacific region. One of the commitments included the opening of the USAID Pacific Regional Mission in Suva by 2023. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2023, during the visit of USAID Administrator, Mrs. Samantha Power, a soft launch of the USAID office was held at the US Embassy pending the finalisation of the Bilateral Framework Agreement, which formally establishes the USAID.

The organisation has ongoing engagements with various Government agencies and local partners on initiatives such as providing support for municipal elections, technical support on climate change, meeting obligations under Paris Agreement, expansion of digital connectivity, cyber security partnership, modernising Fiji's digital policies and cybersecurity measures and supporting loan facility to finance MSMEs to further stimulate sustainable economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has formally notified the United States via a Diplomatic Note of Cabinet's approval for the Fiji Government to enter into the USAID Bilateral Framework Agreement with the US for the establishment of the USAID Office. The Ministry is currently awaiting the USAID's availability to discuss the signing of the above-mentioned agreement.

The Bilateral Framework Agreement is the standard agreement the US enters into with countries that host USAID Offices around the world. The agreement contains provisions pertaining to the granting of diplomatic immunities and privileges to US personnel, their family members employed by the USAID, including exemptions from tax, customs duties and other similar charges.

Benefits of hosting the USAID office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is obvious. It opens up opportunities to enhance the level of bilateral co-operation between US and Fiji and improves Fiji's access to US development assistance. The office is going to be the Pacific Office, and it would serve Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, RMI, FSM and Palau.

Obviously, as the honourable Prime Minister said sometimes ago that with this, Fiji's role and status as the hub of the Pacific is going to be further enhanced. Fiji's support towards the establishment of the USAID Office also shows the strength of Fiji's relationship with the US, it will demonstrate the importance Fiji places on the commitment shown by the US Government to deepen its level of cooperation and engagement.

I also, want to take this opportunity to thank the United States of America for supporting Fiji through the Multilateral Development Banks such the Asian Development Bank, World Bank and IFC because their support including the support of Australia and other countries for Fiji and the Pacific in these multilateral institutions is very, very important.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of potential that Fiji can draw on from this move to strengthen our engagements and the establishment of the USAID Office is going to not only benefit Fiji in a big way but also benefit all the Pacific Island countries that will be served by the Pacific USAID Office here in Suva.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, my question may be a little bit forensic, I am not sure if the Minister might be able to answer or not. Some of us here may have been recipients of teachings from Peace Corps teachers. My question is honourable Minister, will our Education Ministry be benefiting from the USA with respect to some Peace Corps teachers being made available to our own schools in Fiji?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the programme is going to be all encompassing. It depends on the individual needs and request from different countries, and I do not to rule out any particular type of assistance that we could get. As the honourable Minister for Rural Development indicated earlier, there are specific projects-based support, but it does not exclude us going through USAID Office to look for assistance in other areas as well.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We appreciate the assistance that the USA will provide but we understand the geopolitics behind all these. Most of our friends are coming back into the region because of China, this is the reality. It is the geopolitics that is bringing back our partners in there. So, the honourable Minister playing smart within this, what specific areas are we looking at?

China is giving us \$300 million to assist us in our infrastructure development, Australia is giving us so many others including budget support. Let us be specific, which specific areas are you looking at in terms of getting these assistance from them? Hopefully, it is not just flying the flag for the sake of being here in the region.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometimes for those who engage with these development partners, the motivations can always be a matter of debate as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade has explained many times.

We have signed the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, there are obviously potential to get a lot of benefits in terms of trade. So, geopolitics was always there in different forms as the honourable Prime Minister says, metamorphosis does takes place even in those relationships as well but as I said to you, there are specific areas, for example, initiatives in municipalities, technical support on climate change, meeting obligations under the Paris Agreement and expansion.

The US Aid itself has certain areas but as I have said, it does not stop us not being able to put our proposals, look at specific areas but the areas that I have pointed out, these are important areas for Fiji as well.

I also said, Mr. Speaker, that the support that we get from the US and other partners within the international or multilateral banks such as the ADB, World Bank and IFC as well is important because a lot of the funding, particularly grant funding, concessional funding is contingent upon competition amongst different countries. It is always good to have major development partners support us in that. So, honourable Leader of the Opposition these are the areas, but it does not stop us from looking for other areas as well.

### Written Questions

#### List of LTA Capital Projects for 2024-2025 (Question No. 146/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport provide Parliament the complete list of capital projects to be undertaken by the Land Transport Authority in the 2024-2025 financial year, indicating the following for each project:

- (a) the project's budget;
- (b) the anticipated completion date; and
- (c) the projected benefits and beneficiaries of each project?

<sup>1</sup> HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present the response to Written Question No. 146/2024, on behalf of the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport.

Breach of Lease Conditions - Agricultural State Leases  
(Question No. 147/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament on the number of agricultural State Leases (sugarcane areas) which are in breach of State Lease conditions?

<sup>2</sup> HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 45(3), I hereby submit the answers as sought by honourable Pillay to Question No. 147/2024.

Update - Loan from December 2022 to July 2024  
(Question No. 148/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the total amount of loan raised by the Government from December 2022 to July 2024, how it was utilised, and what percentage was allocated to operational expenses versus capital expenditure?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3). If it is very urgent for her, half the information is available in the Budget book.

(Chorus of interjections)

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT –  
MINISTRY OF FORESTRY 2019-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move;

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Forestry 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 Annual Reports which was tabled on 12th July, 2024.

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

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am humbled to present the Ministry of Forestry's Annual Report of the fiscal year 2019 – 2020, 2020 – 2021 and 2021 – 2022 and provide an overview of its performances, key activities and financial status. The Ministry focuses on forest conservation, sustainable management and enhancing biodiversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 146/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.

<sup>2</sup> Reply to Written Question No. 147/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure II.

Key achievements 2019 – 2020 afforestation projects, successful planting of new forest land contributing to increase forest cover. The implementation of measures to protect endangered species and their habitats, and on community engagement, launching of community-based forestry initiatives to involve local population in conservation efforts.

Sir, in 2020-2021 on forest management, development and implementation of improved forest management practices to enhance and sustainability and resilience. On illegal logging, Sir, increase enforcement and monitoring to combat illegal logging activities resulting in reduction of illegal operations. Through climate actions, the initiative to align forest practices with climate action goals including carbon sequestration projects.

In 2021-2022 reforestation success, the expansion of reforestation efforts with the focus on degrade land and rehabilitation. For sustainable practices, the introduction of new sustainable forest practices and certification to promote responsible forest management. In technology integration, the adoption of advanced technology such as satellite monitoring to improve forest management and the conservation strategies which includes the use of drones.

Sir, there were challenges faced in the period under review from 2019-2020 as far as reforestation continued issues with deforestation of forest degraded impacting biodiversity and ecosystem services. We also had funding limitations as far as budget constraints with the scale which affected the scale and scope of conservation projects.

In 2020-2021 the pandemic impact of COVID-19 disrupt and led to the delay in some of the projects and the challenges in the field operations. As far as resources management, Sir, the difficulty in managing the allocated resources efficiently due to increase demand and reduce funding.

Sir, in 2021-2022 adverse effect on climate change including increasing frequency of forest fires and pest outbreaks. Coordination issues, there were needs for improved coordination between different stakeholders and agencies involved in forestry management.

On financial overview, the Committee noted with appreciation that the Ministry had unqualified audited opinions throughout the years of the Annual Report. Overview of the Ministry's Budget allocation that expanded across the three fiscal years was also affected by COVID-19. Key areas of expenditures included forest conservation programmes, reforestation programmes and community outreach.

The Way Forward, Sir, enhanced funding, seek additional funding with the resources to support the expansion, to expend successful programmes and initiatives, to strengthen enforcement, to improve enforcement of forestry laws and regulation to combat illegal activities and protect forest resources, provision of technical expertise and equipment for value adding products to make use of timber residues and reduce mill wastage. The initiatives provided by the Ministry in providing technical and skilled training on carpentry and joinery for resource owners is highly recommended. Youth groups who are resource owners benefit from this income generated programmes through sales of furniture and artefacts made from timber residues.

The Committee strongly recommends that this initiative expanded to other divisions and also benefit other resource owners and provide income to the individual families.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Forestry had made significant strides in forest conservation and management for the past three years. Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Chairperson. The floor is now open for debate on



the motion, and I have the list of speakers provided by the Whips, is follows:

- (1) Hon. J.N. Nand;
- (2) Hon. Minister for Fisheries and Forestry;
- (3) Hon. V. Naupoto; and
- (4) Hon. Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister's.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate before the House and in my capacity as being one of the Members of the Natural Resources Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a five-day site visit to the Central, Western and Northern Divisions was undertaken in May to provide insights into the challenges the Ministry faced, the achievements of the targeted programmes, the issues faced by the Divisions and the overall performance of the Ministry during the period under review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will briefly discuss the sites that we visited, the discussions that took place there and what were some of the pertinent issues that need addressing and some of the issues that has been addressed.

The first site visited was the Research and Training Division in 9 Miles, Nasinu. We managed to find out that there are 14 mahogany stations, and the sector is focused on making use of the residues of timber after it has been processed.

The Ministry of Forestry deals with the forests that are licensed to be harvested. In 2024, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was 48 percent sawmill recovery. This had improved from 41 percent that was achieved in 2019. It is encouraging to note that the Government and the Ministry has a desire to build a mahogany town at the Saivou Junction. We also found out that the Research staff needs further training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our next visit was to the Forestry Research Unit in Colo-i-Suva. We managed to find out that research in the Ministry is not at the desired level due to the laboratory facilities there. At the moment, this is not suitable to achieve its high level potential, but it is encouraging to note that the Government is trying to construct a research lab in Colo-i-Suva, to ease the problem of laboratory testing and lab work.

We also found out that the more mahogany and pine needs to be planted. At the moment there are 81.9 percent of natural forest which covers about 1.1 million hectares.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Ministry of Forestry Headquarters at Takayawa Building, we had a good discussion there and found out that the forest reserves need assessments. It was suggested that the community should receive direct fees from the investors and the Government funds to be issued to the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also visited the Vunimaqo Forestry Station, and we gathered information that two out of three staff positions at the Station were filled. We were informed that the station used to have a total of six staff. This indicates a shortage of personnel physically present in the field to conduct monitoring activities. Insufficient staff on the ground can hinder the Department's ability to oversee operations effectively, leading to potential gaps in the monitoring compliance with the regulation or addressing environmental concerns.

Also, there were some concerns raised by the Forester. The Forester expressed worries regarding the monitoring of native trees, particularly the mahogany field designated for Fiji

Hardwood Corporation. The primary concern revolves around the alleged non-payment of stumpage rate, royalty and also associated fees. This raises issues of compliance with financial obligation and potential, which signifies a breach contractual or regulatory agreement.

Also, we managed to find out that there is also a need to look into the mahogany industry regulation policy and implementation. We note that the Ministry is working towards that.

We also visited the Fiji Pine Limited and we managed to find out that Fiji Pine is owned 90 percent by the Fijian Government and less than 1 percent of shareholding is owned by the landowners, that is, the Pine Trust. It is encouraging to see that the dividends are paid only to the landowners and landowners get money from the stumpage, that is, 5.5 percent, plus two other payment types.

The biggest worry and problem there is the lack of trees. We found out that Tropik Woods is owned by the Fiji Pine Limited. Fiji Pine Limited almost went bankrupt post-2000, and at that time Tropik Woods had to basically run out of Fiji Pine, but it has now recovered. The major payments were done during the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government at that time, and that rescued the industry.

Nowadays, we do not have logs in Viti Levu to run Tropik Woods so they are sourcing from Vanua Levu, and looking forward to get materials from the maritime zone mostly.

We also managed to find out that there is no matured forest in Viti Levu. This situation arises because there was no planting of trees done 20 years ago. As a result, there is lack of mature forests in Viti Levu, which is Fiji's largest island, which could have provided a sustainable timber resource.

Also, the plantation in Viti Levu, is unable to meet the mill demands. Despite existing plantations in Viti Levu, they are insufficient to meet the demands of the mill.

The sawn logs in Viti Levu are unable to sustain mills. The sawn logs available in Viti Levu are inadequate and it is hard to sustain the operations of the mill.

On the setting up carriage sawmill and harvesting other species, in response to these challenges, the company is considering establishing a carriage sawmill and harvesting other species of trees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also visited the Forestry Office in Rakiraki where there are two staff manning the office. They feel that they need one or two more staff there.

We also managed to find out that they have the highest number of seedlings produced in the communities in Ra. Some of the challenging issues identified was that the landowners were not consulting the Ministry on licencing issues and procedures. This indicates the lack of communication and collaboration between the landowners and the Ministry responsible for issuing licences and regulatory procedures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also the awareness on the impact of illegal activities. This refers to efforts aimed at educating communities and stakeholders about the negative consequences of engaging in illegal activities.

We also visited Taveuni and had a good discussion with the Forest Guard there. We found out that no forest harvesting is taking place in Taveuni, at the moment.

Also, there is a very big project going on, the reforestation in Bouma, where each *mataqali* is planting 2,000 trees. Their aim is to get more *yavusa* and *mataqali* involved in their replanting of trees. There was a very good discussion about the blue line, which is the line that demarcates the place where tree felling should stop.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the forestry sector has vast areas of operation and needs more resources such as technical expertise in the outer stations, transportation and staff quarters. Some machines are very old and they need new machinery to ease the workload.

The Acts are old and need to be fast-tracked and reviewed, and more awareness on the full utilisation of the funds for Land Owning Units.

More police engagements is needed because of thefts of logs in the forest. The Ministry to strengthen monitoring on the cutting of timber in the forest.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Chairperson, honourable Tunabuna, and all the honourable Members of the Committee and the Secretariat Team led by Madam Akanisi for the preparation of this Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to visit these sites. I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, and ladies and gentlemen; firstly, I would like to thank the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Forestry 2019-2022 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has continued to deliver on its mandate over the past three years, despite the challenging circumstances that Fiji has faced. I would like to take this time to highlight some of the Ministry's important achievements, which is a testament of the hard work of the Ministry and its collaboration with our stakeholders and landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, the continuation of the 30 Million Trees in 15 Years Programme, which was officially introduced in January 2019, in the 2022-2023 financial year, a total of 4.8 million seedlings were planted. The seedlings planted included native species, pine, mahogany, teak, sandalwood, mangroves and fruit trees.

Since the beginning of the Programme, Mr. Speaker, more than 19.1 million trees have been planted, including almost a million mangroves within more than 17,200 hectares of land. This means that we have planted more than 60 percent of our target in less than six years of the total 15 years.

This tree planting initiative contributes to Fiji's green economy and recovery from the ongoing impacts of climate change and is helping the country meet its international commitments through the REDD+ initiative and the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme.

Mr. Speaker, through this programme, we are also contributing to reforestation of degraded forest. This is an attempt to utilise degraded forests to address broad thematic areas of need in Fiji, including carbon stock enhancement, connecting forest corridors, coastal restoration, food security, flood mitigations, stabilisation in riparian systems, catchment restoration, enrichment planting, community woodlots, and industrial planting.

Mr. Speaker, the numbers achieved are a positive testament to the diligent work being carried out by the Ministry with the support of our communities and also our partners - Fiji Pine Limited, Fiji Pine Trust, Fiji Hardwood Corporation and the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to highlight, again, the Ministry's work on our Maritime Pine Schemes. The Maritime Pine Project has supported communities to develop their pine resources, as well as processing timber for houses across Fiji's maritime communities.

Through investments in machines, skills training and an inventory of pine resources, the project aims to ensure the sustainable utilisation and management of maritime pine resources, generating significant value and volume of wood products and improving the livelihoods of our maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has continued to make excellent progress on Fiji's Emission Reduction Programme. Fiji's Emission Reduction Payment Agreement is a pledge to reduce Green House Gases (GHS) emission from within the agriculture, forests and other land use sector by 2.5 million tonnes, as its contribution to the global target of reducing global surface warming of 1.5 degree Celsius above pre-industrial temperature under the Paris Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, our REDD+ readiness assessment was completed in 2022 and this supported the Fiji Government's engagement in a carbon trade agreement under the Emission Reduction Payment Agreement. Our team has identified 15 different sites that could be used in the Emission Reduction Programme, as well as plantation areas.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Forestry has completed our National Forest Inventory, and this will provide policy on sustainable use of forest resources. In light of this, the growth of forestry-related exports in particular, has been optimistic.

The Ministry moved from a manual system to an online digital licencing system for exports and imports. In 2021, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics data showed that wood related exports exceeded \$100 million for the first time, with the value more than doubling between 2019 and 2021.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, to note that the contribution of the Forestry sector extends beyond forestry and logging itself, including other value adding processes. The total economic contribution of the Forestry Sector is \$140.4 million, which is equivalent to 1.4 percent of Fiji's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry also continues to support the development of small-scale cottage industries in Fiji. This has included the registration of a cooperative in Sote - Gaunavou, which has also received approval from the Ministry of Trade to use the Fijian Made Brand. This co-operative, Mr. Speaker, manufactures beds made from mahogany for Courts Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to congratulate the Ministry in obtaining an unqualified audit opinion for all their reporting years in the Consolidated Report.

Last but not the least, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the former Minister, honourable Ravu, for his guidance and leadership. I would like to thank our development partners, the Government, for their continued support in assisting the Ministry to continue to work towards the sustainable management of Fiji's forests. Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr. Speaker.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my short contribution to the motion at hand. The Forestry Sector is a very important sector for Small Island Nations like ours. There is a big connection from the forest right up to the reef, with the Ridge to Reef Programme that I see in the

Report. I would like to congratulate the Committee for this Report and is also available to the public. It contains a lot of very good information for those that want to delve deeper into the Forestry Sector. And there is always competition, if you like, between trying to earn money out of our forest and, at the same time, conserve it.

It is because of our forest that we have very clean drinking water, and we leave those forests to stand so that they preserve our water sources. I would just like to float this idea that in order to compensate those that allow their forests to stand so that we can enjoy clean drinking water, I hear the WAF is going to be a commercial company and, perhaps, if two cents from every dollar that we pay for water bill goes into some sort of a fund to compensate the forest owners who will have to leave their forests to stand so that we can enjoy clean water in Fiji, would be an idea.

We thank those forest owners who allow their forests to stand so that we can enjoy the clean water that we do. If we value our forests, yes, we earn money from our exports but if we also put a dollar value to all the services that our forests provide - protecting our land, climate change, keeping our water sources clean, the dollar value goes very high. So, we should not be too disappointed when we see the amount of money that we get from what we sell out of our forests products. But if we put money into the other services that our forests provide for a small island nation where the ecosystem is so fragile, the dollar value is so high.

I thank the Ministry for the big work that they do in looking after this very critical sector for our nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Committee for this Report. I like the wealth of information that is in there, which is not only for us here in Parliament, but it is also available to the public. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Committee for the excellent Report that they have presented. Basically, I would just like to cover three areas that have been highlighted in the Report.

One of the recommendations that has been made is on the review of the legislation/regulation/policies. Given the overarching ambit of the Ministry covering so many legislation, perhaps, they need to strengthen the legal aspect and may be appoint a legal officer to specifically address some of the legislation that needs to be amended within or under the Ministry.

I noted some of the achievements that have been made. One of the activities, one of the projects that I saw here is 'say no to legal logging' pledge, which was initiated by the Permanent Secretary in 2022, aimed to curb illegal logging through community and public awareness in collaboration with the Fiji Police Force. By the end of 2022, 324 pledges were received.

There was another project, the planting of 30 million trees. I think that has been alluded to by the honourable Minister. So far, they have planted 18 million trees.

The Ministry plans to re-strategise its forest beat process and community engagement through plantation establishment, their protection and community initiatives. I noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of evidence in the linkage between some of these projects, perhaps, that is an area that needs to be strengthened.

Another area that has been highlighted was empowering the landowners. I think that has been also alluded to by the honourable Minister - empowering landowners and support cottage industries for *iTaukei*. In the 2023-2024 Budget, the Ministry of Forestry was allocated a budget of \$200,000 to support forest businesses. The lessons that we have to learn from the failures in the past was the

need to have someone to be undertaking business management particularly *iTaukei* and those people who are wanting to go into business.

There has been the call for the involvement of *iTaukei* in business, but I think with the need to ensure that we have adequate technical capacity to manage this. I think honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for External Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communication has already talked about MSMEs, BAF has an important role, but you need to have adequate technical and financial capacity to manage some of these new initiatives.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was looking through the report and one of the areas that I was always interested in is, agroforestry. I think I have already mentioned this in the past. Agroforestry combines growing trees with other food crops and cash crops. It is an approach that communities can use for better managing their *vanua* from ridge to reef for the benefit of everyone. Agroforestry is not a prescription or formula that is developed and imposed from outside, it is an approach where people can learn the principles and develop their own system, their own special combination of trees and other crops that is suitable for the environment and meets the needs and aspirations.

Agroforestry does not take away the best land that farmers are already using successfully to grow their crops. Agroforestry can be used to restore degraded land which has been exhausted by too much burning or taking away too many crops without replenishing the soil with fertiliser crops, rotation of fallow period. Agroforestry can help to bring marginal and underutilised land into profitable production.

The trees in agroforestry do various useful things. At the beginning, we plant fast growing trees like *vaivai* which helps to stop the soil erosion. They improve the soil with nitrogen and organic matter and they provide shade to protect the other trees, seedlings, and crops as well as suppressing lusher and other weeds. Next come fast growing hardwood trees like teak and *tavola* that provide fence post and building post for houses and other buildings. After a few years, the main trees like *vesi* and *tavola* become mature providing permanent shade and protection as well as timber for local use or for sale.

We do not need to wait for the trees to grow large, in the gaps between the trees, we grow crops that will give quick returns in the market like cassava, sweet potatoes and pineapple. As the soil becomes better, we can produce *dalo* and *yaqona*, as well as fast growing fruit trees like *papaya*, banana and *vudi*. The next trees start to produce fruits and nuts, we can initiate other crops such as avocado, *vutinikana* and noni. Then we can get other products from *ivi*, *tavola*, *dilo*, et cetera. There will be sustainable income from Agroforest at all stages as it grows.

This is not a new thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Our grandfathers used to practice this. This is the farming systems but now we are facing so many challenges, maybe this is the time to adopt some of these traditional knowledge. An important strategy in agroforestry development is to ensure markets and market chain connections for all the products as the system is established.

We already have buyers for main agroforest products, such as coffee, cocoa, vanilla, noni, *dilo*, et cetera. Coffee and cocoa can provide the foundation for the system with large established markets available that can be relied on for many years. Some of these products can be partially processed in the community, adding value for extra income to their community members, because agroforestry involves selecting many possible trees and products. There is less risk of saturating any market and the prices do fall because of the changes in the market. Producers can change to alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has a growing domestic market as well as different export destinations which increases options and resilience. The new opportunity for farmers and community is developing with the carbon markets. The companies around the world produce a lot of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide will pay farmers and communities who have land available to plant trees. These trees capture the carbon dioxide and turn it into wood and carbon in the soil.

Once a long-term agreement is set up with the help of the Government, the overseas companies will pay communities who undertake agroforestry get some money each year for the carbon they have captured in their trees. In this way, agroforestry offer farmers and communities a new way to farm that improves their environment and assures diverse source of income for the entire community.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the honourable Members for their contributions and support for the debate this afternoon. I also wish to extend our deep appreciation to the staff of the Ministry of Forestry for the use of their resources including facilities and staff during COVID-19. I have nothing else to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. I want to thank you all for your great contributions, especially the honourable Prime Minister, being able to go through his difficult arrangements for the day, yet still able to come and join us again. I thank you, Sir. I thank each and every one of you for the questions you have prepared and also the reports on the Committees. The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.23 p.m.

## ANNEXURE I

**Reply to Written Question No. 146/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport (Ref. Page 1612)**



**MINISTER FOR PUBLIC WORKS, METEOROLOGICAL SERVICES & TRANSPORT  
(Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau)**

Reply to Question No. 146/2024 is as follows:

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud honourable Usamate for the written question raised on the list of Capital Projects to be undertaken by the Land Transport Authority (LTA) in the 2024-2025 financial year.

The LTA received a Capital Expenditure budget of \$10.7 million for the 2024-2025 financial year. Listed in the table below are the details of LTA's capital projects with the anticipated period of completion and the benefit and beneficiaries of each project.

Project	Budget (\$)	Anticipated Completion Date	Benefits	Beneficiaries
<b>IT Integrated System – ongoing project</b>	3,500,000	The project is anticipated to be completed within five years. The first phase of the project ex website and payment module is to be developed by 31 <sup>st</sup> July, 2025	This project will expand the operational business and continuously improve customer service delivery to meet the current digitization goals. This will allow improved internal and external communications, focussing on customer response management, as well as future-proof IT external communications, as well as future-proof IT Infrastructure, to meet the digitization goals.	The beneficiaries are the customers and the Authority, as this project will assist in streamlining business processes and improve customer services.
<b>Labasa Restoration – ongoing project</b>	1,500,000	Project is anticipated to complete in the 2025-2026 financial year.	Project will improve customer service for the North. This will be a fully-fledged office and services will improve accessibility, enhance customer service and will allow economic development. This project will ensure that the Authority's customer service in the North will improve, as this will be a fully-fledged office, more conducive working environment for our staff and customers.	Project will ensure improvement in customer service, as this will be the Authority's fully-fledged office and more conducive working environment for our staff.
<b>Supply and Implementation of Production and DR HCI with</b>	2,710,000	The expected completion date of this project is 30th June, 2025	Backup solution will be implemented to create a robust, scalable, and secure infrastructure that will	The project will benefit its customers and the Authority.



<b>Immutable Backup Solution</b>			ensure business continuity and data integrity. Hyper-converged infrastructure (HCI) simplifies IT management and reduces costs by integrating computing, storage, and networking into a single system. Immutable backups ensure data integrity and security by preventing alterations, providing robust protection against ransomware and accidental data loss.	
<b>Korovou Weighbridge Office</b>	90,000	The Authority intends to secure a land for this project by 2024 and 2025 financial year.	Establishing new LTA weighbridge offices can help Improve Traffic Safety by ensuring that vehicles comply with weight regulations. It also helps to protect Infrastructure by monitoring overloaded vehicles. Weighbridge offices help maintain roads and bridges by ensuring that vehicles adhere to weight limits, thus extending the lifespan of these structures and reducing maintenance costs. Korovou Weighbridge office will facilitate better enforcement of vehicle weight regulations, ensuring that transport operators comply with legal requirements.	The project will benefit the road users and drivers and the Authority, to ensure regulatory compliance. It will also help FRA, as the road conditions will be maintained.
<b>Taxi Meter Testing System</b>	500,000		Taxi meter testing system will ensure accuracy in fare calculations, compliance with regulations and maintaining trust with customers. This will also allow prevention of overcharging passengers, leading to fair and transparent transactions which will contribute to a reliable and reputable taxi service that prioritises customer satisfaction. The system will have regulatory compliance, reduce turnaround time for inspection of taxis equipped with taximeter at the LTA and will assist reduction in customer complaints concerning overcharging of fares.	The Customers/ passengers utilizing taxi services since correct fare will be charged and the other beneficiary of the project will be the LTA since the taximeter testing system will improve enforcement capacity in identifying taximeters which are calculating incorrect fares.

<b>Supply, Installation and Integrated of Red-Light Speed Camera Back Office Software and Hardware</b>	1,000,000	The expected completion date of this project is 22nd July, 2025.	A photographic infringement management system protects intellectual property by automating the detection of unauthorized use of images, thereby safeguarding revenue and reducing legal risks. Additionally, it streamlines enforcement actions, ensuring swift and efficient resolution of infringement cases.	The beneficiaries will be all stakeholders including customers as they will be receiving immediate notification once an infringement is noted. Drivers and pedestrians benefit from improved road safety due to the presence of red-light and speed cameras. This can lead to a decrease in accidents and traffic-related injuries. The Government and LTA will benefit from the data collected, which can be used for urban planning, traffic management, and improving infrastructure.
<b>Supply and Installation of Portable Speed Camera</b>	443,040	The project is expected to be completed by 30th April, 2025.	JCT devices enable seamless communication and collaboration among employees, teams, and stakeholders, enhancing teamwork and productivity. JCT devices facilitate effective customer engagement and support, enabling organizations to better understand and meet the needs of their clients, leading to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty. Efficient use of JCT equipment can lead to cost savings through streamlined processes, reduced operational expenses, and increased productivity.	Staff and operational teams benefit directly from improved ICT equipment, which enhances their ability to perform tasks, manage workflows, and access necessary data and applications effectively. Adding on, this indirectly benefits from more efficient and effective service delivery by LTA. For instance, better ICT infrastructure can lead to improved services such as faster processing of transport-related applications or more effective communication channels.
<b>Supply and Installation of Portable Speed Camera</b>	1,000,000	The anticipated timeline is 31st January, 2025.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ reduce fatal accidents significantly;</li> <li>▪ ability to capture violations in remote and no network areas where fixed cameras cannot be implemented;</li> <li>▪ ability to capture other drivers' behaviour on the roads; and</li> <li>▪ boost revenue for the Government of Fiji.</li> </ul>	LTA benefits from enhanced traffic enforcement capabilities. Portable speed cameras help in monitoring and controlling speeding, which supports their mission to improve road safety and manage traffic effectively.  Law Enforcement

				Agency (Police & LTA) gain from the increased ability to enforce traffic laws more efficiently. Portable speed cameras provide flexibility in deployment and help in capturing speeding violations, contributing to more effective law enforcement.
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>10,743,040</b>			

## ANNEXURE II

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**Reply to Written Question No. 147/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources (Ref. Page 1612)**  
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**MINISTER FOR LANDS AND MINERAL RESOURCES**  
**(Hon. F.W.R. Vosarogo)**  
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Response to Question No. 111/2023 is as follows:

The Ministry has a total of 5,285 active State agricultural leases, of which, a total of 1,836 are for sugarcane farming. This total only includes leases for the Western and Northern Divisions, as the Central/Eastern Division do not have active sugarcane farming lease.

Out of the total number of active sugarcane farming leases, 260 are in breach of their lease conditions. Further breakdown of this is tabulated below:

Division	Number of Active Agriculture State Lease	Number of State Agriculture lease for Cane Farming	Number of Sugar Cane Farming lease in breach of lease conditions
Western	3,533	1,324	226
Northern	851	512	34
Central/Eastern	901	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,285</b>	<b>1836</b>	<b>260</b>

Breach of lease conditions is an issue that presents the Ministry with challenges to resolve, and which the Ministry is working towards. Plans to resolve or address these issues include:

1. consistent and vigorous monitoring of agricultural leases;
2. issuance of a Public Notice on section 37 of ALTA in the local media and website, as a form of deterrence to farmers who are in, or intend to breach their lease conditions; and
3. impose heavy penalties on non-cultivation.