

# PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

### DAILY HANSARD

**FRIDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER, 2024**

[UNCORRECTED COPY]

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## FRIDAY, 6<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.59 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

### PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Defence and Immigration; the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts; the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports; the honourable S.T. Koroilavesau; the honourable A.A. Maharaj; and the honourable V. Nath.

### MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 5th September, 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.

### COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

#### Welcome

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

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the students and teachers of Totoya District School from Totoya. Welcome to your Parliament and I hope that the proceedings this morning will give a clearer idea of how your Parliament works.

*Dou bula vinaka mai na wekai keitou mai Totoya. Dou mata vinaka mai. Au vakavinavinaka vakalevu ni ko ni yaco sara mai eke, ena nomuni Vale ni Bose, mo ni mai raici ira na nomuni Lewe ni Bose Lawa, ka vakarogoci ira talega. Vakanuinui vinaka vei kemuni ena nomuni tiko voli oqo.*

[Greetings to our relatives from the Island of Totoya. We welcome you this morning. We are, indeed, grateful to receive you at your Parliament, and to witness firsthand and hear the deliberations from your Members of Parliament. We sincerely hope that you will enjoy your visit.]

#### 5th Pacific Islands Parliamentary Group Conference (PIPG)

For the information of honourable Members, Fiji will host the next 5th Pacific Islands Parliamentary Group Conference (PIPG) from 25th August, 2025 to 29th August, 2025. May I request that you lock in those dates so that we can have as many honourable Members as possible

participate in the Conference.

### Pacific Blue Identity

You may have realised that we have been having a lot of debate, especially from the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations and the group that he leads, and the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the group that he leads known as SIDS but, again, the honourable Prime Minister has been devoting his time a lot in trying to unite the whole of the Pacific under one common identity and, that is, the border that we have - the Pacific Blue. There is only one identity, honourable Members, and we need to identify ourselves with that identity, that we hold dearly to us, because otherwise our voice will not be heard, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, including myself.

Honourable Members, if you go out to these international meetings, you try as much as possible to get the voice of the Pacific through. There is only 13 island countries in the Pacific region, but if we bring in Indonesia, there is more. Indonesia has 7,000 islands, so it will be great if we can rope them in under that one identify which we share.

### Written Responses

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received Written Responses from the following Ministers:

- (1) Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport for Written Question Numbers 101/2023; 114/2023; 124/2023; 125/2023; 134/2023; 65/2024; 76/2024; and 87/2024, all asked by honourable Usamate.
- (2) Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration to Written Question Numbers 39/2023; 88/2023; 123/2023; 182/2023 and 194/2023, asked by honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua; Written Question Numbers 144/ 2023 asked by honourable Virendra Lal; and Written Question Number 10/ 2024 asked by honourable Kiran.

Honourable Members, the responses have been conveyed to the respective honourable Members and copies are available in the Parliament website. I thank the honourable Ministers for furnishing the Written Responses and I am pleased to confirm that there are no overdue written responses. Thank you, honourable Members, we will proceed to the next item.

### **PERSONAL EXPLANATION**

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to seek your leave to assure your honourable and respected Chair, and to allay the concerns you have raised yesterday about the various findings of the Committees, and you encouraged Government to carry out follow-up actions.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier in the week, I had mentioned that it might be appropriate for Government, and I quote from what I mentioned in the last paragraph on Page 1715 of the *Daily Hansard* on Monday, 2nd September, 2024:

“I was just thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that, perhaps we can look at the procedures in our parliamentary processes, particularly with the Public Accounts Committee and the various recommendations they make, particularly also in the case where we are looking at

almost generational reports that cover so many years and all the enterprises.”

At the end of it, we voted, “We will now vote to note the contents of the Report”. We, at Parliament, could say that we have done our duty, who noted the Report. But you encouraged us yesterday, Sir, to carry out what needs to be done, particularly those that come close to omissions or commissions that are almost culpable, but beyond our power to determine whether they are or not, and that should be carried forward from just noting the Report. I just want to assure your honourable Office that the Government is serious about that, and we will follow up on those Committee Reports. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you very much, honourable Prime Minister. I thank you so much for your response on that matter. Once again, the three Committees have raised their concerns in this august Parliament. We, as Members, in listening to our colleagues as Members of those Committees, fully understand where they are coming from. We understand the nature of their responses and yesterday, the diatribe continued, so as to say, I was not informed, you are not present, even though emails and copies of emails were made available. Again, what is there in our role as Members of Parliament?

We have another avenue available to us, and it is whether the Cabinet or the Cabinet Sub-Committee, with the honourable Prime Minister, make the directive in this august House and trying to kick in the new format of seeing that things of this nature are fully addressed by this august House. We have the powers of scrutiny and oversight, and that is something that we have attested but we have got them all in order in the Standing Orders. All I was asking is to bring that to your notice, honourable Members. There are ways and avenues of skinning the cat.

I thank you most sincerely, honourable Prime Minister, for your response this morning. Do not worry, Sir. As Prime Minister, as soon as you stand, we will have to all wait and hear what you are about to deliver in this august Parliament, whether is it an instruction, or it is something that you have asked to be done immediately. We thank you, Sir.

## **PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS**

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

### Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance 2023 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 07 of 2024*);
- (2) Accident Compensation Commission Fiji 2022 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 93 of 2023*); and
- (3) Savusavu Town Council 2013 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 40 of 2024*).

## **QUESTIONS**

### Oral Questions

Criteria on Cadet Training in Schools  
(Question No. 205/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the criteria used by the Ministry to approve Cadet training in schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for this question, given that it can be a great testament of this cadetship training at the school level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had requested that I be given a time to provide a Ministerial Statement on extra-curricular activities in schools, which includes cadetship training, rugby and athletics, that are currently involving students and school resources, to allow for a brief and better reflection of what is being carried out in schools.

In the history of cadet training in schools at that time, there was only a limited number of schools who have its intended purpose. But now, there are about 30 schools that are currently involved in cadet training. In line with the SDG4, this is now part of the lifelong learning so I assure you, honourable Members, that I will make a Ministerial Statement in the next Parliament Sitting, to address all these extra-curricular activities in line with the SDG4 and also part of the Denarau Declaration 202.

Currently, Sir, for the schools that are engaged in cadet training, the criteria that is used is as follows:

- (1) Written parental consent from the students.
- (2) Medical clearance that the child is physically fit and able to participate in the activity.
- (3) Religious rights of the child is also taken into consideration because some faiths have reservations for their followers to be part of the cadet training, like the Jehovah's Witness.
- (4) Commitment from teachers, teachers must be assigned to supervise and assist the military personnel.
- (5) Affordability for parents and consent for their child to participate and acknowledge that there will be associated costs that will be shared with them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are the criteria that have been used, but like I said, I will be giving a Ministerial Statement covering these extra-curricular activities that are involving students in school.

MR. SPEAKER.- First of all, we fully appreciate the position that has been taken by the Ministry and we look forward to that Ministerial Statement.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I have a supplementary question, honourable Minister for Education. I have a feeling that we have strayed off track, as far as the objectives of cadet training is concerned.

Perhaps, a review is very much needed. I know it digs into the pockets of parents to buy the uniform. Right now, it is just marching in uniform. The objectives of discipline and teamwork, I think needs to be relooked at and turn this programme into a useful programme for schools and to keep them occupied, given the problems that we have on drugs.

I would like to add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that a great addition to cadet training, especially for boarding schools, is to get them to have a brass band. Get them occupied in music. My supplementary question is, would you be willing to make a review of cadet training in schools?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, we are trying to do an evaluation of the programme, to improve in terms of the current practice that is being done now, especially with the provision of brass bands to schools, like Queen Victoria School (QVS), which has a long history in terms of the provision of cadet training in schools.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think in the 1960s, Suva Methodist Boys School which I had attended, used to have a set of drums donated by the Military and that was how we learnt how to beat the drum and march to the beat of the drum as well. That was in Toorak. Toorak was the only renown primary school that existed then in the Suva area, going right down to Qauia in Lami and right up to Tacirua and Tamavua.

Soon, we had the set of drums. I do not know who donated the drums, but we used it and we marched well to the beat of the drum, knowing how to beat the drum for slow march and quick march. I am just sharing that, whilst we await the statement from the honourable Minister for Education.

Marketing Initiatives for Destination Fiji  
(Question No. 206/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the marketing initiatives in place for Destination Fiji in support of Fiji Airways' forthcoming services to Dallas, United States?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Just last week, on 29<sup>th</sup> August, the Air Service Agreement (ASA) for Open Skies was signed between the Government of the United States and the Government of Fiji, which has been heralded as a great achievement by the Coalition Government. We already knew that the honourable Prime Minister, together with the Deputy Secretary of State of the US had signed this in Tonga last week, Mr. Speaker.

In preparation for this milestone, earlier this month, Fiji Airways proudly announced its first ever non-stop flight, connecting Nadi, Fiji, with Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, commencing on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2024. The new route represents a significant leap, as Fiji Airways' 24<sup>th</sup> international direct flight and its fifth destination in North America, joining Los Angeles, San Francisco, Honolulu and Vancouver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Dallas itself, what we have there is the partnership with American Airlines. Fiji Airways has linked up with American Airlines and the AAdvantage travel rewards programme, which is for American Airlines, is a huge step forward for anyone flying Fiji Airways and American Airlines. American Airlines advantaged members can enjoy ticketing through services on Fiji Airways, with all the same benefits, like priority check-in, priority boarding, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, AAdvantage is the longest running loyalty programme in the world. Fiji Airways is now the 50<sup>th</sup> full member of Oneworld Alliance, beginning in 2025. There are 115 million members of the AAdvantage programme – the largest in the world.

Dallas Fort Worth has 193 domestic US ports that fly directly to Dallas, and 67 international non-stop destinations worldwide, across 26 countries. So, what it means, for example, tourists will be able to fly non-stop from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, through Dallas to Fiji, or from London to Dallas and on to Fiji. So, just one stop into Dallas, Mr. Speaker.

The airlines in the Oneworld Alliance include Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, Iberia, Japan Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Qantas, Qatar Airways, Royal Air Maroc, Royal Jordanian, Sri Lankan Airlines, Fiji Airways and soon, Oman Air.

Dallas Fort Worth is the third busiest airport in the world and in 2023, served 82 million

passengers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, American Airlines has 850 outgoing flights from Dallas Fort Worth Airport every day. Dallas is considered one of the best and most efficient airports in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, their service to Fiji is non-stop, of 13 hours, and will operate three times a week - Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, utilising our state-of-the-art Airbus A350-900 aircraft.

In a joint effort, Tourism Fiji has launched a series of collaborative marketing campaigns, aimed at maximising the visibility of the new Dallas route. These campaigns span both, digital and traditional media, specifically targeting key demographics in the Dallas Fort Worth area. By showcasing Fiji's unique attractions and experiences, through social media campaigns, search engine marketing and targeted email initiatives, we aim to capture the interest of the vast majority of potential visitors.

In addition to the direct marketing and advertising activities, the Fiji Airways Sales Team has also been actively promoting the new Dallas service through its trade partners, including travel agents, travel wholesalers, like Flight Centre, and online travel agents such as Expedia. These partnerships not only promote attractive travel packages featuring the new direct flights, but also includes some special incentive programmes to further boost the promotion of Fiji as a travel destination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to generate buzz and excitement and public relations around the new route, a series of press releases and media engagements are ongoing. These efforts will be complemented by collaborations with prominent travel influencers and bloggers, who will create organic content that highlight the allure of Fiji and the convenience of our new services. Additionally, during the US Roadshow in September, there will be targeted PR events, including the engagement of travel journalists, influencers, industry stakeholders, further elevating Fiji's profile.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tourism Fiji is also organising promotional events and roadshows in key US cities, including Dallas, New York, Toronto and Los Angeles, with 24 Fijian tourism businesses. Our participation in major travel trade shows and expos, including Virtuoso Travel Week and IMEX America, will allow us to directly engage with industry stakeholders and promote the new route.

Since the announcement of the new Dallas service, Fiji Airways has been proactive in promoting it across key markets. Special offers were launched in the US, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, leveraging Fiji Airways paid owned channels, including the website, social media and paid search. Furthermore, last week a promotional fare was launched through digital marketing in New York to drive travel to Fiji.

Additionally, our consumer marketing initiatives will span key markets across Texas, California, New York and Florida. This include outdoor advertising, strategic TV spots and contractual sponsorship opportunities with major Dallas-based brands.

As part of our commitment to provide a unique Fijian experience from the moment travellers step into Dallas, we are collaborating with the airport to establish a temporary Fiji-themed lounge. This pop-up Fiji lounge will offer a taste of our renowned Fijian hospitality, cultural experiences and detailed information about the new direct flights. Additionally, prominent signage within the airport will further promote the upcoming services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, these marketing strategies are not only designed to elevate Fiji's visibility as a premier travel destination, but also to ensure the success of our new direct flights to Dallas. By broadening our global connectivity, we are not just bolstering tourism, we are opening new doors for Fijian businesses, creating opportunities for export products and establishing vital



partnerships with American companies. This initiative is a testament to our unwavering commitment to diversifying and strengthening our economy.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for the update on the marketing initiatives in place for Destination Fiji, especially in support of Fiji Airways. In light of the fact that the Open Skies Agreement has been signed, and I understand is now actually active, that particular Agreement includes unrestricted capacity and frequency of services for both, passenger and cargo, and open route rights. The question is, does that mean, physically, we will see more metal coming out of the US into Fiji, or is it really specifically just restricted to a few airlines that have partnered up?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, open skies is open skies. It is between the American carriers and Fijian carriers. Any American airline operator can fly into Fiji under this open sky agreement. So, Fijian companies can fly into any US port and any American airline can fly into Fiji from anywhere in the United States. But the reality of the economics is always there, because the route here is thin, so we do not expect any competition that would compromise the survival of our airline.

It has actually been there, Mr. Speaker Sir. The recent ASA gave the Americans freedom to fly into Fiji and beyond, free freedom and all that. It was already there. So, what we did, by signing this, is for us to also enjoy those rights.

Sir, I understand where the honourable Member is coming from. We have looked at the risks and we do not think it is a risk that can affect our airline. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, we will move on to the third Oral Question for today. I am allowing honourable Usamate, and I would like to inform this august Parliament, that this will be the last time I am allowing this to happen.

In someone's absence, the mover has always been allowed for someone else to raise the question on his behalf or if he is still away. But the Standing Order is very clear, and I have allowed this to run for some time, but now I am making it a rule that this will be the last time we are allowing this, and I am allowing honourable Usamate to ask Questions No. 27.

Update on Local Government Elections  
(Question No. 207/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on when the Local Government Elections will be held?

HON. M. K. NALUMISA. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for this question, but I was expecting honourable Bala to be present to ask me this question.

To begin with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to refer to a media article dated 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2014. A similar question was asked to honourable Bala “as to when the Municipal Council Elections will be held?” This was his response, and I quote:

“That is my immediate task and that is what I am going to do now and after that within two or three weeks, I am going to visit all Municipalities to brief them on what is expected out of them and to see how we can run our Municipal Council elections.”

Again, in 2015, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while responding to questions raised by Opposition Parliamentarian, Prem Singh on when the Municipal Council Elections will be held, he said, “The Act has not been reviewed since 1972”, and he termed it as Hurricane Bebe Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though the honourable Member is not here, I must ask the honourable Member he is not here, what action did he take during his tenure as Minister for Local Government to hold this election? Did our residents and ratepayers see any election during his term in office? Did he even make an attempt to initiate the process? A simple answer, Sir, is clear, no action, *khali baat*, and only empty promises.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker Sir, let it be known that the Coalition Government did not sit idly by, within just one month of coming into office in January 2023, we put our words into action. In 11 months, that is by November 2023, we have achieved what the previous Government did not accomplish in eight years. We reviewed and amended the Local Government Act 1972, aligning it with the current policy and legal frameworks.

That was a significant accomplishment achieved, not only by the Ministry of Local Government alone but with the invaluable support of the Fijian Elections Office (FEO), Office of the Solicitor-General, all Municipal Councils and key partners, such as the International Foundation for Electoral System (IFES) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), extensive consultations were held, something that honourable Bala seemed to disregard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister for Local Government, I believe the timing of Local Government elections in Fiji is a matter of significant public interest that will be topic of discussion among Fijians and political leaders for several years. The Ministry of Local Government, in consultation with the FEO, plays a critical role in this process, as we are responsible for ensuring that all necessary conditions are met for the elections to proceed. The date of elections is certainly the responsibility of the Electoral Commission, as the Ministry of Local Government has complied with all the requirements and processes towards a successful Local Government elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Local Government elections is vital for ensuring that communities have direct representation, and that Municipal Elections reflect the will of the people. Local Governments operate city or town councils, responsible for municipal services, local infrastructure and the communities’ welfare.

However, it is important to note that the last Local Government Elections in Fiji was held in 2005 and since then, Municipal Councils have been managed by appointed Special Administrators rather than elected Councillors. This situation arose in 2006, after which the former Government decided to abolish the elected Councillors and replaced them with Special Administrators. The rationale provided for this decision included concerns about corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement in the Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reinstating the Local Government elections is part of the Coalition Government’s commitment for promoting democracy, accountability and community representation. I would like to reiterate that in 2023, the Ministry commenced the work on the preparation of Local Government elections. This includes an action plan formulated by the assigned working group, which has planned activities and timelines for the same. Since then, our team has been vocal about Government’s plan to hold this elections, emphasising the importance of local democracy and the need to empower communities through elected representation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, running a Local Government election in Fiji is also challenging due to its complex social political landscape, diverse ethnic makeup and historical tensions. The lack of regular local elections since 2006 adds to the complexity, requiring substantial efforts to educate and mobilise voters, while ensuring compliance with the electoral laws and fostering a political stability in a fragile democratic environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the major issues that the Ministry has noted is discrepancies in the Municipal wards. The lack of proper documentation for transfer of wards in few Municipal Councils has also caused delays in the finalisation of wards. This imbalance can lead to unequal representation and resource allocation, affecting the effectiveness of local governance. Sir, for the first time, the new policy guiding the representation in councils is where each resident's vote within a Municipality carries the same weight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to commend our key agencies - IFES, International IDEA, Commonwealth Local Government Forum and New Zealand Local Government, and the Government Ministries for their assistance in the preparation of the Local Government Election thus far. With the assistance provided by our key agencies, the Ministry has completed major processes, such as conducting public consultations, revision of the archaic provisions relating to Local Government elections in the Local Government Act 1972, awareness raising concerns and finalisation of Municipal wards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, the Ministry in the consultation with all Municipal Councils, is in the final stage of ironing out the logistical details for the upcoming elections. Our focus now is on establishing policies and procedures for the allocation of Councillors per Municipal ward. This is to ensure that the electoral process is transparent and fair.

Once the Ministry finalises all the technical requirements, the next phase will involve collaboration with the FEO and the Electoral Commission for the remaining process. In this case, we want to make sure that accurate information and proper processes are followed before handing over to the FEO. Therefore, the Ministry is working very closely with the FEO with objective to have the elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the status of local elections reflects Fiji's Government's commitment to restoring local democracy, ensuring that communities have a voice in their own governance. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, work is underway to allow villages within municipal boundaries and, at least, 2 kilometres outside of the boundaries, to be part of the elections. These are villages with landowners of towns and cities; hence, they have the right to participate in the process to elect councillors. These villages will be included through section 125 of the Local Government Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per section 125 of the Local Government Act 1972, the inclusion of the iTaukei villages will require the approval of the iTaukei Affairs Board. It is worth noting that the Board has been consulted and the Ministry is awaiting the confirmation of the above. In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Solicitor-General has drafted appropriate regulations which is, again, pending at the iTaukei Affairs Board for comments and suggestions. We endeavour to conclude this process as soon as practicably possible, to enable a smooth transition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I want to underscore that merely polling and elections are not enough, we must ensure that the foundation upon which the new Councils we appoint is robust and resilient. To this end, we have been diligently working to establish a comprehensive Code of Conduct and other essential guidelines through new regulations.

We are also undertaking a thorough review and standardisation of inconsistent bylaws,

ensuring that they align with our commitment to good governance. With the valuable support of the New Zealand Local Government, we are putting in place new policies, rules and procedures that will be firmly in place by the time the new councillors take office. These measures are designed to guarantee that the Councils operate systematically and professionally with unwavering accountability and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is not just preparing for elections, they are building a solid foundation for the future of local governance in Fiji. While there are challenges to overcome, the Government is making progress in its preparation, and there is clear intention to hold the elections in the financial year 2024-2025. The day of the election will be confirmed, following consultations with the FEO and the Electoral Commission. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to conclude with a call for continued support from all the political leaders, CSOs and the public, to ensure that the Local Government elections are conducted successfully, which will contribute to the strengthening of democracy in Fiji.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to respond to this question.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, as reported by Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), the honourable Deputy Prime Minister made some comments where Fijians will be able to vote in Municipal Council elections in August 2024. The question is very clear, when? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the honourable Minister to provide definitive timeline as to when will the elections be held for the Municipal Councils?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already stated that it will be held in the next financial year. The response by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister was that the possible timeline for it, but I want to assure the honourable Members as well as the members of the public that Local Government elections will be held.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question was already asked by honourable Ketan Lal.

MR. SPEAKER.- This question has triggered a lot of interests.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a statement and a question.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Question!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- It is a very serious statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I formally write to the Ministers if issues are raised. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been a complaint about a Special Administrator, going into the shops and saying, "I am the King of this Town!"

(Laughter)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I will be formally writing it to the honourable Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- These kinds of people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should not be part of our Administration. It is a serious matter, take it in a serious way!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister is very effective, unlike others in responding to issues. They have talked about the promises of Local Government election, but they are running on

the national deficit budget...

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- *Areh!*

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ...they have increased their debt, how will you finance the Local Government election? Not at the cost of taxpayers, please!

MR. SPEAKER.- It is up to you, honourable Minister for Local Government, to answer the question.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think I need to respond to the comment made by the honourable Member regarding one of the comments made by one of the Special Administrators. I am not really sure of the Special Administrator that he is referring to, but, all I can say to the members of public, whatever issues that have been raised by them regarding any of our Special Administrators, and even raised by some political parties, I have managed to resolve some of those issues. That is something that I have done. so, if it was brought to my office, I would have responded to that question.

Based on the funding, that is something that the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is also going to consider before we actually hold the Municipal Election. Thank you.

Functions and Composition - Fiji's Human Rights Taskforce  
(Question No. 208/2024)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General update Parliament on the functions and composition of the proposed Fiji's Human Rights Task Force?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for i-Taukei Affairs for his question. As of 2019, Fiji is a party to the nine core International Human Rights Treaties of the United Nations, as well as several optional protocols that are part of the Treaties. These include the:

- (1) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination;
- (2) Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- (3) Convention on the Rights of People with Disability;
- (4) Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment of Punishment; and
- (5) International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by ratifying these Instruments, Fiji has assumed responsibility under international law for implementing the obligations under the respective Treaties.

Every Treaty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, requires Fiji to report periodically to each of the Treaty bodies that are part of the Conventions, and then participate in a public examination by the Treaty bodies which are typically situated in Geneva. The Treaty body then makes recommendations which, as a State's party, Fiji must consider implementing, and then subsequently provide progress reports to those bodies on the state of those implementations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to Treaty obligations, Fiji as a States party and a member of the

United Nations, participates also in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) conducted by the Human Rights Council which, again, is situated in Geneva. This is a Member State driven peer-review process under which every country's human rights record is reviewed, every four or five years. Recommendations received during the UPR process are either formally accepted or rejected by the State being reviewed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji completed its third UPR Review in November 2019, where the report showcased how the majority of the recommendations from the second cycle were implemented. At the conclusion of the third UPR, Fiji had received a total of 242 recommendations made by 97 States or Countries that are part of the Human Rights Council. Of those 200 plus recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji accepted 207 recommendations.

As a result of the reviews and the recommendations, Fiji has reporting obligations which are outdated. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination were required to be submitted by January or February 2016, that has not been reported. The initial report by Fiji to the Committee Against Torture was required to be submitted by April 2017, that is outdated. Fiji's initial reports to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was due in July 2019, again, we are in arrears. Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just as a further example, Fiji's sixth report to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), was due in March 2022, and we have not complied with our reporting obligations.

Those delays, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are a matter of concern and they do highlight, at the national level, the need for a robust mechanism to ensure that we, as a State party to these important international Instruments and Treaties, that we report on a timely and effective basis.

As a result, of those outdated reports, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nations has advocated that we establish a National Mechanism for the Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up of the Treaties, in short, known as NMIRF. The mechanism envisioned will be a permanent Government structure, tasked with inter-agency or inter-ministerial coordination and engagement with international human rights mechanisms, to ensure that we, as a country, are able to comply with our reporting obligations and to not experience further delays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following Cabinet's approval last month, the Fiji Human Rights Taskforce was launched on Friday, 30<sup>th</sup> August this year. The purpose of the Taskforce and its functions will include, for example, engaging and liaising with international human rights mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Treaty Body, the Universal Periodic Review process and the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Organising and coordinating the preparation of Fiji's National reports to these international human rights mechanisms, including initial reports, periodic reports, the common core document, our mid-term reports and follow ups, responding to communications and decisions, country visits by special rapporteurs, follow up questions, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the effectiveness of the Taskforce, it will comprise inter-agency representatives from different Government Ministries and agencies, including the Fiji Police force, the Corrections Service, the Fiji Military Forces, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, et cetera. This wide composition will enable comprehensive and coordinated action on a range of human rights issues across all sectors of Government.

The establishment of Fiji's Human Rights Taskforce will demonstrate Fiji's commitment to implementing the 14 Universal Periodic Review recommendations that Fiji accepted in 2019. This is a significant milestone in our journey towards a more transparent, accountable and rights respecting society.

I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to answer the question, and I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for i-Taukei Affairs, for the question.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The honourable Attorney-General, we understand what the Taskforce has been set up for, basically, making sure that we are compliant with what we have signed in the previous years. I also just wanted to know whether the Taskforce will be engaging in providing more policy direction and different recommendations, in terms of what can be bettered in terms of the foundation that we already have on the human rights platform? Will we be looking at some bold new policies and recommendations that may come out of this particular Taskforce that has been set up?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- I thank the honourable Koya for his question. I would simply say this, honourable Member, by way of response, the inter-agency inter-ministerial Taskforce will provide a vehicle for robust discussions between public officials in those respective agencies to engage in a critical analysis of Fiji's obligations under those Treaties, and to provide recommendations to the Taskforce on how Fiji would be able to implement more effectively, its international human rights obligations.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea and we will resume and continue when the bell is rung. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.57 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.33 a.m.

Level Of Expansion - Outsource Industry  
(Question No. 209/2024)

HON. F.S. KOYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, inform Parliament on what level of expansion we have had in the outsource industry in the last 24 months and has the wage rise affected this expansion?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is actually a very good question, as it gives me an opportunity to talk a bit about an industry that has great potential for our country. I know I have talked about billion-dollar industries too much in this august Parliament, but this particular one is another real possibility. Speaking to the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) just recently, he advised that the foreign exchange earnings from outsourcing industry is around \$200 million, and about 8,000 employees, give or take, a couple of thousand.

On that trajectory, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would suspect that in 10 years, it should be half a billion-dollar industry, and beyond that, the sky is the limit. It contributes to economic diversification in our country and is a great way for our young people to seek employment, particularly for those who, perhaps, have no visibility on a career path and are just wondering about what they would like to do.

It is an excellent opportunity because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the type of training that these young men and women get, is basically world class training for work exposure because they are working for offshore companies and so the standards, the expectations, the deadline setting, all these very important items when it comes to permanent employment, Sir, our young children are actually working at an international level.

They are sitting in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but for all intents and purposes, they are offshore working on behalf of very big organisations. Just as an aside, Sir, just recently, one of the larger outsourcing companies in Fiji actually started providing services to the UK Hertz in the United Kingdom, this is the car rental company. From that, they are now talking about a wider relationship, which may include the global Hertz brand. This is the type of opportunity that is in front of our country, and compliments to the previous Government for kick starting it. I was still in the private sector then and tried to do my bit, and we are just continuing the work. This industry has great potential and great benefits for our young men and women.

Over the past 24 months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's outsourcing industry has undergone another transformation. I would like to report that despite the minimum wage rate, the industry still remains competitive and resilient and has emerged as one of the critical sectors when it comes to our national economic development.

In the last two years since August, there has been a record of about eight companies that have set up business outsource operations in Fiji, and that number continues to grow. Things that work in the industry's favour is the fact that we are neutral speaking, we have a very good education and literacy level, proximity to some of the key economies of Australia, New Zealand and the US, even Europe and the UK are starting to consider Fiji as a real option. Of course there is a cultural similarity, everyone knows that when an Australian or New Zealander calls and they realise they are talking to someone from Fiji, it suddenly turns into a rugby conversation. These are the types of cultural



similarities that have created great benefits for the industry.

The other thing that we are seeing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is one particular outsourcing company which is a large operator, starting to consider operations outside the normal city location. Right now, they are operating in Drasa Vitogo, just outside Lautoka, they are operating in Navua, and these are a couple of a hundred young men and women, taking the work closer to the rural or their places of dwelling. There is potential, Sir, according to that company, to even move to Labasa, potentially, and may be Savusavu, and with the cable being installed from Labasa down to Savusavu by Telecom, that actually has a real opportunity as well.

Apart from that, Mr. Speaker, the knowledge process outsourcing had been asked here in this Parliament on occasions and that is also developing and evolving. We have one company, Sir, in Fiji that has already has 12 local staff being Artificial Intelligence in Fiji and that just crept up in the last 12 months. So, the potential, Sir, for this industry is very exciting and is very promising.

As a government, we will continue to support this industry as best we can, to ensure that we realise some of the real benefits that are in this industry. And just to give you an example, Sir, *Google*, who we are developing a partnership with, their Philippines Call Centre is 30,000 strong. Wonderfully, we can get, at least, 5,000 of that at some stage in the future, Sir.

In terms of the specific questions raised around wage rates, the outsourcing starting salary has been always above the basic minimum wage rate. According to my calculation, it is about 56 percent more, and so in terms of the minimum wage rate adjustments, it does not quite play because it is already above the minimum wage. However, that does not mean we should be complacent. We are competing with some very aggressive destinations. This outsourcing industry has started to move into Latvia and some of these other European countries, into South-East Asia, so we just have to watch that we do not get too far ahead of ourselves in that regard. However, certainly, Sir, when you look at the closer economies of Australia, New Zealand and the United States, we remain quite competitive.

In terms of the broader issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I guess, some of the challenges that the industry is currently facing is to do with employment. Currently, according to the outsourcing industry that is struggling to find workers which is a bit saddening, Sir, we are trying to work together with them to try and ensure that there is a good pipeline of workers coming through to allow the industry to continue to grow. I hope, over the next 12 months, that is certainly going to be a focus for the Government.

On top of that, the need to have data protection laws, that is already underway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of consultation with the donor partners. We do have the EU stepping up to actually help us with that regard, so that will create more market readiness, if you like, to take on more larger operations, Sir.

Of course, in terms of Artificial Intelligence, how does it look in the next few years against the current BPO operations? All I can say is that, obviously, there will be a transition, but it demonstrates if you already have capability, if you already have 12 young men and women in our country, in the AI space, that augurs well.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, certainly out of this industry, we are talking about other things like, perhaps, Fiji being a cyber security hub, not only of the Pacific, but even at the global hub. So, these are some of the opportunities, Sir, that in this very exciting space, it is an excellent opportunity for our young people, and we are looking forward to work with Government and also the other side in continuing to support this industry which will do wonderful things for Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a follow-up question. We had earlier on, just post-COVID, we found out that there was a tremendous amount of interest from Europe when Fiji actually opened up. As you know, post-COVID, we actually went to Portugal to do all these things. It is great to see what is actually happening, we have set a platform and it is good to see the Ministry actually ensuring that the numbers may catch up to about 10,000 people a year, which was looked at earlier on with a lot of support from our development partners.

The question that came out of the fact that there was a lot of risk diversification that was happening in this particular area because they found that out during the COVID-19. One of the tools that we had, as you have rightfully said, is that we speak neutral English, and we have highly educated young workforce. Will you also be looking at talking to the Ministry of Education where the schools can start teaching in their curriculum, languages like French and Spanish, et cetera, because that will also take us to another level?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The broader discussion around just education generally in outsourcing is something that we have been trying to push, as the honourable Minister knows, even from his time, in trying to develop courses that are focussed on BPO-type operations. The discussion on languages has come up as well with some of the universities, so we are trying to discuss that as well.

Recently, I think the Chinese language was going to be introduced through the education system, so we are headed in that direction. It may require some more cohesive effort in a not-too-distant future but, certainly, we are fortunate that USP and FNU have a ready resource of French speaking undergraduates and other languages as well. So, the BPOs tend to use those for now but I suspect as we continue to grow, there may well be a need to look at the question of language a lot more closer.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his elaboration and it is great to see the development and growth of this sector. It has been a very useful sector in mopping up our graduates, the unemployed, or those who have not completed their degrees.

One of the things that has occurred to me is that, at the beginning, a lot of the work has been pitting at the lower level - answering complaints, transferring complaints, and I am glad to see there has been some focus on cyber security which should be at a level a bit higher. I think we need to look at areas of writing code, instead of just doing basic accounting sort of thing, queries going into audits, et cetera. In terms of the movement towards higher value adding jobs in the BPO sector, is there a concerted effort or a policy to try to generate that rather than just the BPO jobs at the lower level?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you, honourable Usamate, for your very pertinent question. Certainly, I mentioned briefly about Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) sector. In terms of the posture of the Outsource Fiji organisation, certainly Government is to try and attract KPO type of operations into the country.

Right now, you probably would not realise this, but a certain accounting firm in Fiji is already doing quite a substantial amount of KPO work. Apart from their normal chartered accounting operations, they have a back office that is doing a lot of the technical work around accounts receivable - that kind of accounting work, including AI. So, it is a growth area and as we know, there is about four international firms in Fiji. Just imagine, one of them has already had 200 persons strong in Nadi and Suva. Potentially, if the other accounting firms starts moving, we will have another 800 people gainfully employed in professional areas.

As correctly pointed out by honourable Usamate, the KPO industry, obviously, pays a lot

more. Just to give you some feel, a basic cyber security analyst will get paid up to US\$40,000 to US\$50,000 in the United States. It probably would not get paid but you can imagine what that means in terms of the potential.

The discussion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, around, how do we raise our wages in Fiji and get to a higher wage level, I know the hotel industry is already at around about \$8 an hour and moving fast, but certainly the BPO sector and the ICT industry can really transition a lot of our young people to get into these higher paying roles and very exportable roles. My message always to the young people is, start doing IT jobs or study in IT, because there is a great potential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to honourable Usamate's question, yes, it is an area of interest, and we are working together with certain organisations that do have KPO content in their work. We will certainly try and ensure that with *Google* coming on board, with *Starlink* coming on board and communication becoming more accessible, that we leverage a lot of these and turn them into real genuine opportunities.

Sub-Recipient Agreement – Global Fund Programme  
(Question No. 210/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the Sub-Recipient Agreement between the Ministry and the United Nations Development Programme for a Global Fund Programme to fight Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Tuberculosis and Malaria in Fiji?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways for his question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sub-Recipient Agreement (SRA) between the Ministry and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for a Global Fund Programme to fight Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Tuberculosis (TB) and Malaria in Fiji has already been endorsed by Cabinet, and the Ministry is awaiting to sign the SRA with UNDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Global Fund contribution to UNDP is at FJ\$489,165, which will be under the SRA, to carry out activities stated in their workplan for a period of three years from 2024 to 2026. In accordance with the Grant Agreement, UNDP is the principal recipient, that may provide funding to other entities to carry out activities, contemplated under the project as sub-recipients. In this case, the Ministry is referred to as sub-recipient.

In terms of the workplan, the project intends to combat and control the increasing number of HIV and TB cases in Fiji through a design workplan that looks after the activities such as, HIV Combination Prevention Programme, stigma and discrimination, online courses for healthcare workers, capacity building for healthcare workers and transgender health, to name a few.

A grant award to carry out the project was initially US\$460,000 plus, equivalent to more than a million Fiji dollars. However, the Ministry had further consulted the World Health Organization (WHO) and together, they have revised the workplan by moving some of the activities to WHO to facilitate, as they have their expertise to undertake those activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, understanding the great situation of HIV and TB in Fiji, this funding has come at a much-needed time, to contribute to the development and strengthening of the public health and clinical response. The Global Fund Grant workplan has been developed by a technical working

group of the HIV and TB programme members, identifying the country's needs in collaboration and consultation with our non-government partners. It will contribute to the National HIV Surge Strategy 2024-2027 Plan and the National TB Strategic Plan implemented by the Ministry's Family Health Unit or HIV and TB Programme at the Tamavua Twomey Hospital.

Under the SRA, the UNDP will implement the Integrated Biological Behavioural Surveillance Survey for key affected population and rapid assessment for drugs in 2024. This will benefit the nation in better understanding the situation of HIV, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and its relationship with drugs in Fiji. Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the UNDP for assisting the Government to help with the procurement of these drugs. My question to the honourable Minister, does the Ministry have the capacity to combat this problem of HIV/AIDS, and we know that this \$5.2 million is only for three years, what preventive measures are in place to control the rise in HIV?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank honourable Ravunawa for his supplementary question. In terms of the capacity, we will always need help in that area in terms of human resources and other resources that need to be made available to the Ministry to combat HIV/AIDS. Basically, we need the support not only from the whole of Government, whole of Parliament, but also throughout the nation. As I have mentioned, this is a fight not only for the Ministry of Health, but for the nation as a whole.

In terms of your question on what the Ministry is doing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of budgetary allocation, yes, there is budgetary allocation, and we are grateful, again, to our development partners, both multilateral and bilateral, for stepping in and assisting us in this space. This year, when I went to the World Health Assembly in Geneva, I was very fortunate to attend the handing over ceremony between DFAT and WHO, and that money is specifically to combat HIV/AIDS here in Fiji.

Again, we thank the Government for progressing these issues and also thank our development partners for coming onboard and assisting the Ministry in its time of need, especially combating HIV/AIDS. As I have mentioned, the capacity, yes, we have some capacity but we will need to improve and refocus our attempt on improving the capacity within the Ministry to tackle HIV much better. *Vinaka*.

Progress of Termite Control Assistance Grant  
(Question No. 211/2024)

HON. S. NAND 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 progress of the Termite Control Assistance Grant for dwelling and structures affected by the Asian Subterranean Termites in both, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years there has been an increasing spread of the Asian Subterranean Termites (AST) in the Western Division, which resulted in a surge in notification and infrastructural damages received by the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF). So, given the significant increase in the spread of termites in the Western Division, the Government, for the first time, specifically in the 2023-2024 Budget allocated a sum of \$3 million for the Termite Control Assistance Programme.

Under Head 50, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to assist affected households with relief packages and in addition to continue with the efforts to minimise the spread of AST, a sum of \$2 million is provided in the 2024-2025 financial year programme. As part of the implementation mechanism, the Termite Taskforce was established to help foster Government's effort in assisting households affected by AST infestation.

The Taskforce, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is co-chaired by the honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, with members comprising of staff from BAF, Lautoka City Council and Ministry of Finance.

The Taskforce chose to use the first year to pilot the programme to evaluate the best approach to help control and eradicate AST in Fiji. The Termite Control Assistance Programme considered the Lautoka area under the pilot programme. The main activities of the Taskforce include:

- (a) enhanced collaboration between BAF, Lautoka City Council and Ministry of Finance to improve termite operations;
- (b) procurement of termite baiting services and establishment of the Termite Subsidy Programme; and
- (c) engagement of media organisation for awareness programmes.

In order to provide relief to the people whose homes have suffered extensive damages due to termite infestation, Government announced a Termite Subsidy Programme, mainly for people in Lautoka, Ba, Nadi and Rakiraki. The Termite Subsidy Programme was a subsidy of \$5,000 is provided for households with combined household income of less than \$30,000 and a subsidy of \$2,000 is provided for households with combined income between \$30,000 and \$50,000. The subsidy, Sir, intends to help residents repair their homes and ensure that they are structurally sound for people to live in.

Just to give you some details, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 1,327 applications were received by the Lautoka City Council, the staff stationed at Commissioner Western's Office of 1,327 applications, 448 applications have been verified to be in accordance with the criteria of the programme and have been paid \$5,000 and \$2,000 subsidy with the total cost of \$2.2 million. Those below \$30,000, the number of successful applicants were 439, that amounted to \$2.195 million, and those between \$30,000 to \$50,000, only nine were successful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 327 applications have been verified and will be paid in the coming months, while 160 applications are pending verification. Sir, 392 applications await information clarification, and 54 applicants were unsuccessful. So, in summary:

- (1) Approved and paid for – 148;
- (2) Verified to be paid in September – 327;
- (3) Pending verification – 160;
- (4) Pending information from applicant – 338; and
- (5) Unsuccessful applicants – 54.

The unsuccessful applicants, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were due to:

- (1) duplications such as father-son application;
- (2) tenant and landlord application;
- (3) insufficient documentation; and
- (4) household with no sign of AST infestation.

Sir, BAF and Lautoka City Council provided administrative support and verified all claims of AST and income category before payments are made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we just do not stop by providing the subsidy, I think in the long term, the idea is to eradicate AST and those household that have the subsidy will simultaneously receive the termite baiting system because I think that is the most effective way to deal with it. So, the termite baiting system is used to control termite infestation by deploying what they call “tasty baits” above or below ground to attract termite before they reach a home or business. The objective of the initiative is to ensure that baits are readily available. The public and nest termite baiting services is promoted in places like Lautoka for properties that have been severely impacted by AST.

The initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to help approximately 1,000 households, manage the spread of AST and, of course, meet the required criteria of the programme. The tender for the baiting services has closed, and a service provider has been selected and we are currently in the contract signing stages. We expect the baiting services to commence next month.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, BAF has been strengthened. We have provided additional 12 officers, one vehicle for compliance, and to protect the spread of AST, a grant is also provided for the establishment of BAF Officers in Nadi, Ba and Nakasi, and we are also looking at Labasa, so the Taskforce is already on it.

I want to take this opportunity to thank both, the Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, for their leadership and the ability, for the first time, to get a government programme to be able to address these issues. It is now also affecting houses in Nakasi, it has gone to Labasa, and it is causing significant problems for low-income households and the houses get damaged very quickly. This is the Government’s programme in dealing with that.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Lautoka is the worst affected by termites. This is not a question but just a comment. Looking at the number of people who have been assisted, it is only 448, but there are many who have been affected. My suggestion is that proper awareness should be carried out so that people, especially living in the remote and rural areas, come to know or are made aware how to apply and what are the requirements. That is my request.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have three points and one question to this. I thank the Government for this initiative, yet there can always be amendments. One thing I experienced when building my farm, I bought treated pine, but at the end of the day, the termites had infested. Basically, I was sold untreated timber at a price of treated timber. It is something the Government can really look into, because it is how our Fijians are being cheated upon, and some businesses are making money in this way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government can also look into this. When a recipient goes, for example, to a hardware store and say, your final quote is \$4,900. The person, obviously, would say, “Can you reduce the price?” What happens is, receiving the termite assistance and then going to the hardware store and purchasing untreated timber, again, and building your house, you are, sort of, setting yourself up for another infestation. Can the Government monitor this assistance so that we have permanent solutions on how we are helping households with our funds, and it is not gone to waste? One more thing, is there a biological solution to this matter?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first point, as I have said, one of the programmes in the scheme of things is the engagement of media organisations for awareness programmes. Just to address honourable Sharma’s comment, I agree with him. I think a lot of

cheating goes on in terms of treated versus untreated timber.

In the long run, as I have said, the big effort in this programme, and this is what the Taskforce that honourable Tubuna and honourable Kiran have been emphasising with BAF, is that the biological approach based on baiting approach that have been tried in Australia and in other countries, has worked. So, what we intend to do is scale up these programmes. Probably, by the time we come for the next budget and there are new areas that are opening up in Nakasi and Labasa, it could become a big national problem affecting a lot of people's houses because even in concrete houses, these termites eat away all the timber and it creates a mess in those houses. Yes, I think those are good points to take into account.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance for his detailed explanation.

I just wanted to add on by sharing my experience with the kind of timber that is sold in our hardware stores. There are certain requirements by the Ministry of Forestry as to how they can fill up a sheet as certain information needs to be there when it goes to the hardware stores. But during my investigation when I was with Consumer Council of Fiji, we found that most of these hardware stores do not care. They just got the timber, they label it as treated and they will sell it at a higher price, as has been highlighted.

So, the point that I want to raise here is, no matter how much baiting we are going to do, no matter how much money we are going to spend, if you do not treat or really seriously take the issue of treating the timber right, we will have that problem. And I can tell you one thing, it is not just the hardware companies who would or rather like the system to be as loose as it is, but also the timber treatment companies. I recall that we had so many meetings with the Ministry of Forestry. We did awareness raising, but at the end of the day, we realised that it is really the consumer who has been cheated, because they cannot identify what is treated and what is not treated. So, I just wanted to alert the Taskforce that perhaps, that is where we need to dive deeper.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, a purchaser should know what he is buying.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are issues that are real. I experienced that myself some years back. You buy treated timber, it is not treated, and then after two or three years, it gets bad. So, maybe, we need to look at that more carefully. So, I agree with it.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Lautoka was the first area to be infested by termites and then starts spreading elsewhere. It has gone to Vanua Levu and areas such as Vunivau and Valebasoga are suffering. So, what the Government can do is, the lessons learnt from Lautoka can be quickly implemented there so that the spread of termites can be controlled so the damage is lesser. So, I request the Government to quickly look at these areas where the spread is little and can be controlled, and quickly implement the lessons learnt from Lautoka into those areas.

The other question is, I see that the programme budget has reduced from \$3 million to \$2 million. Could the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance explain why it has been reduced? Is the uptake slow or we are unable to disperse the funds?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are two reasons, we looked at the usage in the previous budget and as I have said, the Taskforce is still getting a handle on what is happening - how the baiting system is going to work and also identifying the people who are actually affected and those in that income categories. So, when we look at subsidies, we look at those who need it most.

The other part of the programme, which is baiting, as I have said, that requires a little more work and I think the Taskforce is on it. Obviously, the lessons learnt in Lautoka would be used in other areas, particularly in Labasa. The Taskforce is already working on the Labasa issues, so if there is additional funding that is needed as a result of what the Taskforce will do, then we have options of deployment and virement, as we had discussed yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, once again, thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance for his explanation. I was going to talk about the issue of baiting, I am not too clear now whether that baiting is happening yet or not because my suggestion was going to be, in areas like Nakasi and Labasa.

I declare my interest as I live in Nakasi. I realise the funding for the last year was not fully utilised. So, if that money can be directed to baiting as a preventative measure in these areas where it is about to explode in Nakasi for instances and Labasa, would that be one of the plans you need to do as preventative measure up front?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-I think the Taskforce is looking at that. You are right, we need to look at all the areas to try and stop the spread. The focus is on baiting, otherwise we can provide subsidies. People will go and buy timber, and they might not get the right timber, and you end up with this vicious cycle that will continue. So, we are trying to make sure that we break that, and the best way to do that is to use the baiting system that works in other countries.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. It takes care of that. It is how you bait it, honourable Kiran and honourable Tubuna, to come to attend to your problem there, otherwise it will infest on its own.

Blue Economy Cooperation and Sustainable Development  
(Question No. 212/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Memorandum of Understanding between Fiji and the People's Republic of China with respect to Deepening Blue Economy Cooperation and Sustainable Development?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management for the question. In keeping with the good work done by the previous Government, we will continue to deepen relationships across the board with our economic partners, and it is fair to say that China is actually one of those partners. So, the question was about an update on the MOU between Fiji and China concerning the Blue Economy Cooperation and Sustainable Development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this month, the honourable Prime Minister, on his official visit to China, signed an MOU with the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China. The MOU outlines a framework for cooperation aimed at fostering sustainable and inclusive blue economy, aligning with our national objectives and the broader Pacific regional strategies.

It is important to understand that the MOU does not place any legal obligations on the parties. However, it creates areas for renewed and deepened strengthening of relationships. Key areas of focus in fostering new economic drivers within the blue economy includes areas in environmental best practices, bilateral investment cooperation, good business practices and, of course, international



environment commitment support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MOU is very beneficial for Fiji for several reasons, particularly in promoting and facilitating sustainable investment in the country. It directly supports Fiji's national plans for sustainable economic growth and environmental conservation, particularly, those related to the blue economy.

We all recall the initial Blue Town initiative that was initiated by previous Government which the current Government is also continuing, and this MOU will ensure that the Blue Town concept that initially was around Savusavu, Cabinet has now broadened it to be more national in nature, it starts getting executed and MOUs such as this will assist greatly, Sir, in furthering those objectives. It, of course, aligns to the broader goals of the 2050 Blue Pacific Continent Strategy, ensuring that our national efforts also contribute to regional prosperity and sustainability.

By fostering new growth drivers in the Blue Economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MOU, looks at expansion sectors such as, fisheries, marine tourism and renewable ocean energy. This diversification is crucial for creating sustainable revenue streams that will support Fiji's long-term economic resilience.

The MOU also aims to position Fiji as a hub for blue economy investments in the Pacific by creating attractive investment platforms, including marine economic cooperation parks. This will not only attract direct foreign investment, but also drive infrastructure development and business growth in key areas, contributing to job creation.

The MOU emphasises capacity building and the transfer of knowledge and technology, which are vital for enhancing the skills of our workforce and the competitiveness of our businesses in the global market. Collaboration with research institutes will also foster innovation, leading to more efficient and sustainable use of our marine resources.

This MOU, Mr. Speaker, Sir, reaffirms Fiji's commitment to global environmental standards by adhering to international obligations, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Paris Agreement on climate change. In addition, the focus on green investments will support Fiji's transition to a low-carbon economy, preserving our marine biodiversity for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to pick on some of the practical investment potentials as appearing from this MOU, quite recently, we had one investor from Hong Kong, expressing his interest in looking at oysters and giant prawns in Fiji. So, there are some active discussions happening on that front now, Sir. If they come to fruition or gain momentum, we will certainly share them in Parliament. But these are the early harvests from the MOU that we are discussing today.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reiterate that this MOU is not just a bilateral cooperation initiative but a very much strategic partnership that reflects on our collective dedication to fostering sustainable development and deepening our engagement in the blue economy. It opens new avenues for investment, capacity building, and international cooperation, all of which are essential for building a prosperous and resilient future for our beloved Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just before we allow supplementary questions to be raised, just a matter of housekeeping and for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders in respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

**SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to complete the Oral Questions. We also have a Written Question, together with Schedule 3, four End Week of Statements and responses and a Bill whereby Government will move its first reading. Thank you.

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

Since no one wishes to speak on the motion, I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have anything to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**QUESTIONS**

MR. SPEAKER.- I now invite supplementary questions.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, thank you for the update on the actual MOU that has been signed with China with respect to deepening the blue economic cooperation and sustainable development. Honourable Minister, this obviously has a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was begun in 2018 as per to the actual agreement. The question is that under that BRI, there were quite a few things that Fiji was a beneficiary of, and I am talking about the Suva City Council building, et cetera, the Nabouwalu Dreketi highway, and some of the bridges that were done.

Does this particular MOU have a portion of that agreement that will mean that we have some projects that Fiji will benefit through this particular MOU that has been signed, especially in terms of the sustainable development part of the MOU?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the great things with MOUs is, it is almost like a blank canvas. So, it allows for cooperation on various aspects so, I guess, the opportunity is to do quite a few things, including direct economic investment, and other issues suggested by honourable Koya, will be part of the ongoing discussions going forward in terms of the development of this MOU. But sadly, in the initial conversation, what this brings to the table is an opportunity to discuss some areas of real opportunity for Fiji and try and convert them into good economics as well.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, definitely, we want to do more, we want to grow the economy. When we do sign MOUs, probably something that is critical and Government needs to seriously look into this now, is probably more along the lines of the question that honourable Koya has asked - the expertise within to help us elevate the standard of service and implementation so that we can achieve more, of course, particularly towards sustainable development goals.

Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation talked about brain drain yesterday. This is a problem. In my response to His Excellency's Address, I talked about strategic immigration policies that probably allow us to recruit expertise. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, this is very critical for us and I hope that Government can be open to this in getting in experts from our partners whom we are signing the MOU with.

You just talked about prawn farming. The secret in prawn farming is the fertility of the mother prawns, and that is a specialist area. So, whether we have it in the Ministry of Fisheries or not. If we do not have it, for prawns to grow and to do better, we need specialists. So, will this be an important agenda under these MOUs?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I will answer the question in a couple of ways. One, is just in terms of the immigration question *per se*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, there is an active endeavour to fix immigration issues. We are hoping that towards the end of the year, there will be a total change in the way immigration currently provides services and God willing, if that is happening well, it will allow us to then, backfill some of the gaps that we have in terms of our manpower development.

To the specific question raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, which is a great question, the MOU does talk about capacity building and technical knowledge support. You are correct that in the early discussions on prawn farming, the issue of technical expertise did come up, which the investor is willing to provide, in this instance, but certainly in a broader sense.

I think we all agree that whatever areas of cooperation that we get into, if the need arises in terms of technical support or capacity building to be able to ensure that sustainability to some of these initiatives is given, the MOU adequately covers the ability to reach out for technical assistance and capacity building resource.

Development of the Drug Rehabilitation Centre  
(Question No. 213/2024)

HON. J.N. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the development of the dedicated Drug Rehabilitation Centre?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Member for his question. With increasing Injectable Drug Use (IDU) which is a significant issue in the country, Government, through the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, intends to have a Drug Rehabilitation Centre. To do so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will need to tread carefully in terms of ensuring that services to be provided at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre is of local context.

Just to inform the honourable Members of this August Parliament on what is drug rehabilitation, it is a multifaceted therapeutic approach aimed at aiding individuals in overcoming addiction to substances, including drugs and alcohol. This process requires multipronged pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions, including spiritual components under guidance of expert professionals.

To give an update on the development of the Drug Rehabilitation Centre, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sub-Committee of the Counter Narcotics Committee (CNC) are working towards the National Counter Narcotics Action Plan for August 2024 – July 2025. Included in this Plan is the Counter Narcotics Framework which consists of four pillars, as follows:

- (1) Harm reduction which focuses on Treatment and High Risk Behaviour.
- (2) Demand Reduction which focuses on Prevention and Awareness,
- (3) Supply Reduction which focuses on Law Enforcement and National Security.
- (4) Legal Reform which focuses on Prosecution and Drug Court.

The implementation of these four pillars involves a whole of Government approach, involving the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection; Ministry of Youth and Sports; Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration; to name a few. The Drug Rehabilitation Centre comes under the Harm Reduction Pillar which is to be implemented by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in the next three to five years.

The aims of this pillar are as follows:

- (1) Reduce substance abuse morbidity and HIV incidents from IDU by 85 percent over the next five years.
- (2) Have practical recovery-oriented treatment frameworks in place that leads a person through clinical treatment into community recovery (with provisions for anticipated relapse episodes in the medium term).
- (3) Have St. Giles as the last (not the first) option for treating people presenting with substance abuse disorders.
- (4) Have specialist rehabilitation centres for patients with drug use disorders to begin specialised treatment and recovery programmes in partnership with faith-based organisations (FBOs) and our Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). At the moment, the Ministry is utilising available resources to deal with the current drug rehabilitation cases and, at the same time, will need to ascertain what services will be offered at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre should we intend to have one.
- (5) Facilitate access to medical therapies where appropriate.
- (6) Increase hospital-based counselling capacity at all health facilities.
- (7) Create posts and funding for, at least, one full time counsellor and social worker, there would be specific therapy training at each facility.
- (8) Ensure screening resources are available at all hospitals, divisional and subdivisional.
- (9) Provide training to nurses on drug screening and drug use assessment as needed.
- (10) Develop clear protocols around drug use reporting and patient notes and when an external report can be requested.
- (11) Acquire land, building agreement which can be used as a first rehabilitation centre.
- (12) Set up a team of practitioner stakeholders, health and community sector to plan a recovery treatment framework for the rehabilitation facility, funding and resources for this framework can be sought in the following year.

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

Written Question

Teachers in Primary and Early Childhood Education  
(Question No. 214/2024)

HON. H. CHAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the following with respect to the 2024-2025 financial year –

- (a) how many primary school teachers are there altogether;
- (b) how many teachers teaching in primary schools have primary teachers' qualification (Certificate, Diploma or Degree in Primary Education and Early Childhood Education); and
- (c) how many teachers teaching in primary schools have secondary teachers' qualification (Diploma or Degree in Secondary Education)?

HON. A. M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I table my response in accordance with Standing Order 45.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

**END OF WEEK STATEMENTS**

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

We will begin with honourable Aliki Bia, and then I will propose that we take a break for lunch, before we resume again to complete the rest of the weekly statements. The floor is yours, honourable Aliki Bia.

Melanesian Community in Fiji

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, Deputy Prime Ministers, the Leader of Opposition, fellow Members of Parliament. It is an honour for me to stand and be given an opportunity to make this statement. I would like to thank the Business Committee who also allowed me to make an end of the week statement, about Melanesians in Fiji or those that are descendants of the blackbirders in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year is a very special year, for us descendants of black birders as we will commemorate the 160<sup>th</sup> year, since the arrival of our forefathers in Fiji. The question we ask ourselves every day, have we finally broken the shackles of our slavery? Once again, we ask ourselves every day, have we finally broken the shackles of our slavery? With that, I thank the Government for approving a celebration later this year which we are very well looking forward to.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our cry for justice is much more than just the celebration, but I am thankful that the celebration is a step towards the right direction. Mr. Speaker, Sir, much respect to the Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources, honourable Filimoni Vosarogo, for spearheading discussions about the formalisation of the Melanesian Settlement in Baba, Levuka in Ovalau, and the Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister for the ongoing consultations around our Melanesian communities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I stand this morning echoing the same sentiments of those that have gone before me, that our painful era deserves recognition and understanding. After 160 years as descendants of blackbirders, we do sometimes consider ourselves as the forgotten group of people who played a major role in the development of Fiji in the early days.

To put it in the simplest way possible, because of Fiji, our forefathers lost their cultural connection, and they were not able to see their families ever again. We paved the way for development in Fiji, but 160 years down the line, we became victims of what we started. By saying this, some of our communities have become victims of development by having to be evicted to other areas. Just a few weeks ago, a number of Melanesian families in Namara Settlement have to be relocated, and currently close to 18 families at Nadawa Melanesian Settlement are on the verge to be evicted to make way for ongoing development. Our Melanesian Settlement in Wailoku, namely, Wai, Bali, Vateleka, Marata and Koio, have been told that they only have few years left on their leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been relocated so many times during the past decades, and this has created a sense of uncertainty amongst the Melanesian community knowing that everywhere we go, we are just temporary. This has generated fear and instability within our Melanesian communities around Fiji and at times, having sleepless nights thinking of what the future may hold. Please allow me to highlight some injustices that currently continues to derail the progress of some Melanesian communities.

In some maritime islands communities of Wailailai, Baba, and Wainaloka in Levuka, Ovalau, their *Turaga ni Koro* (Headman) only received half the normal allowances given to the *Turaga ni Koro* (Headman) in every village. Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I just share this experience in *iTaukei*:

*E dau mosi vei ira na Turaga Ni Koro oqori ni dau tautauvata kece tu na veilesi ena vuku ni kena qaravi na i tavi se na veika e dau lavaki mai ena Vale ni Volavola ni Yasana ni dau vakayacori e dua na soqo ni vanua. Ia, na gauna me ra dau saumi kina na Turaga Ni Koro, e dau musu tu ga vakaveimama na kedra i sau. Oqo, e sega walega ni qai leqa 'go, se leqa tu mai ena dua na gauna balavu mai na veimatanitu sa oti. Ia, sa tiko na veivakabauti ni na dua na gauna ena wali na leqa oqo.*

[It is, indeed, a painful experience for our Village Headmen, who only receive half the normal allowance given to their peers in other villages, even though the various tasks allocated by the Provincial Office are the same as to their obligations to the *Vanua* meetings. The unfair payment of allowances was not of late experience, our Headmen have been unfairly treated over the years by past Governments.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, some of them have not received their *Turaga ni Koro* allowances since last year to date. I will not be mortified to say this, I question the purpose of setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Is this a set up just to heal the political injustices of the past or also to bring justice to the painful era that our forefathers went through? Some of them even lost their lives while working as slaves in farms and building roads for development across Fiji.

I have heard so many past and current politicians in this nation apologising for the political injustices of the past, and events that may cause inequality and bias to other ethnic groups, but never have even one bothered to apologise to the blackbirders descendants who are spread out across Fiji. Their forefathers who were whipped to death while working, some were starved and made to walk day and night, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some even had to witness their wives, mothers and sisters brutally assaulted during the black birding era.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for 160 years, we continue to cry for justice, writers and philosophers who have wrote publications about our history have labelled us as the landless people of Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have no choice but just to go through the trauma of this painful memories and silently adjusting to the many injustices that confronts us in our daily lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, over the last 18 to 19 months, the people of Fiji have been observing and listening to all of us in this August Parliament trying to figure out the change that we may bring and how can we impact the daily lives of ordinary Fijians. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of us as honourable Members of Parliament, we are representatives of the people and it is very important that we listen before we speak out, and when we listen, we need to listen well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, knowledge is important to produce informed policy, but listening and understanding of the people of Fiji is vital to ensure democracy. We, as leaders and Members of Parliament, need to listen to people's deepest concerns, fears and hope of a better Fiji. We need to listen to all sectors of society and not only elites and lobbyists. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot have democracy if we do not have the trust of the very people that we serve. Once again, we cannot have democracy if we do not have the trust of the very people that we serve. *Vinaka vakalevu*, God bless the nation and God bless the people of Fiji.

HON. S. L. RABUKA. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I request that the honourable Assistant Minister respond.

HON. S. TUBUNA.– Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to respond to what has been shared by honourable Aliko Bia. Firstly, I would like to thank honourable Aliko Bia for highlighting some of the issues and the injustices being done to the Melanesian people. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the injustice that has been done to the Melanesian people stem from the implementation of the 2013 Constitution.

As you look at the previous Government, a lot of support has been done to the Melanesian people from the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL). But when you look at the Constitution, when we are all labelled as Fijians, this is where the greatest injustice has been done to minority communities in Fiji. When there is no special assistance being targeted to the poor people of this country, particularly the Melanesians. When we came into power, we undertook a survey of all the Melanesian communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you look at all these communities, 100 percent of the people are living under poverty. This is when there was no targeted assistance in the last 10 years of the FijiFirst Government. No assistance for these people to improve their standard of living to come up to the level that we want, Mr. Speaker Sir. When we are all labelled as Fijians. I was at one village, in Waidradra Community, and they said that the assistance was going to the Fijian village just next to them, and they did not receive any assistance. This is where another injustice has come, and I would like to thank the honourable Bia because last year in his maiden speech he said, providing everyone the same equal rights benefits the Melanesia communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know, and I totally disagree with that. It is not that when you provide equal rights to every community, that it will benefit the Melanesian people and of course this Government is committed to uplifting the life of the Melanesian people. During our term, we will see that all land that the people that are living on, has to be formalised. We are now committed to that. We will look at the injustices that has been done, so that we can try to provide a solution to their needs. No one else has done that, to go around to the communities and interview them. What do you need? What do you really need?

We are just going around and ensuring that equal attention is been done to all the communities is not going to solve the problem. We have to listen to them. When we came in, we provided some provisions in the budget where we went down to all communities asking them what are your priorities? What are your needs? What do you need your Government to assist you with? And that is what we are looking at.

This Government is going to address all the issues that has been highlighted by Mr. Bia, starting with this celebration that will be undertaken in November. No one has ever done that before! This is the Government that cares for the people! Looks after the needs of the people! And that is why we are doing that, because we care for the people. We look after their interests but at the same time this Government is committed to looking after the interests...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bia.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Honourable Bia, apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I usually go up to Newtown where honourable Aliki Bia lives. You know when you look around the communities, there is a lot of social problems. Some of the houses have no toilets and this is what we are trying to help in going down to those villages, to assist them.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to say that your Government has never done anything for these people. Of course, we are totally committed, and we will try to help in whatever way and in whatever assistance that we can provide to these communities.

MR. SPEAKER.- I apologise, I cannot sit in silence and hear two honourable Members from the same community pitting against each other. One honourable Member is saying there is a lot of discrimination, et cetera.

*Au kerea me qai qarauni ga na i vosavosa. E dua na i wase levu era dabe tu vei keitou era sega ni sauma e dua na ka. Era kana, vakayagataki qele, ka kece. Eso era sa curu e na i Vola ni Kawa Bula. Ni lako ga mai qai mai veisautaki tu va qo eso na i vosavosa, e sakasaka toka na kena i tautau, honourable Aliki Bia, ni qai qarauna toka.*

The honourable Prime Minister established the Multi-Ethnic Affairs. That took care the interest of the minority groups. Now, some of them are within my *mataqali*, Valewaqa in Vunilagi, Vatusoqosoqo in Qamea, you name them, they are there. Some are registered within my village, within my other clans, *Yavusa o Benau* but been bracketed, descendants of Solomon Islanders. They are registered in the VKB and yet you still have the audacity to come and say you are being ill-treated and mistreated, but you are part of us already. You are voting. That is through the work of former Prime Ministers and administrators in trying to take care of the minority group within our society. So please all I want to raise is, please ensure that you understand what you are talking about.

You said you have been discriminated all this time and how come you are living amongst us? The Alliance Government ventured to pay for all the evacuation cost of removing the people from Vunilagi, the largest estate in Fiji back to Solomon Islands. They came all the way to Suva from Vanua Levu and before we could put into effect their evacuation procedures, some of them returned to Vanua Levu.

They could not leave without that place, that is our *mataqali* land. So, we had to come in and receive them because they have been there. The way they live is different. That is what honourable Tubuna is saying. Some they do not have toilets, yes, Naviavia is like that. Naviavia is trying to integrate into the Tikina of Wailevu so they would be fully part of that district when they hold their annual meetings and that is the onward trend right throughout Fiji. So, to say that you have been



mistreated, honourable Bia, I take exception to that, and I do not fully agree with what you have said, because you have been offered seats in the House, the Parliament of Fiji.

Even in the Multiethnic Affairs, Mr. Sanegar and then you have Father Sanegar in the Anglican Church who used to be a great leader for the Melanesian brothers and sisters. So, I take exception to that, honourable Aliko Bia and honourable Tubuna. Please, make up you twos' mind whether you want to be Fijians or want to go back to the Solomons because I will not sit here and listen to all these diatribe going on that you all mistreated, et cetera, because I say, "no, it is totally different."

Remember that case when the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) Government under the present Prime Minister, the Minister for Agriculture then was the late Militoni Leweniqila. He was charged with the responsibility to evacuate all the descendants of Solomon Islanders in Vunilagi back to the Solomons, but they only came as far as Suva and then they went back again, they have been living there ever since. They eat freely of our land.

Honourable Members, I hope you do not mind me uttering what I have stated because I am also wearing another traditional hat in this House, and I will not sit back and listen to all these kinds of, shall I say "hot air" without that being fully proven with facts that you have been ill-treated all these years.

I intend to adjourn the House now for lunch, and when we return at 2.30 p.m., we will resume with the End of Week Statements.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.00 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.31 p.m.

### Benefits of Remittance to Fiji's Economy

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula vinaka saka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my End of Week Statement on the Benefits of Remittance to Fiji's Economy. Over the past five years, Fiji has witnessed a remarkable impact of remittances on our economy in Fiji. Remittances have become a vital source of foreign exchange, bolstering our nation's financial stability. They have not only provided a lifeline for countless Fijian families, enhancing their purchasing power and improving living standards, but have also played a pivotal role in supporting local businesses and stimulating economic growth.

The inflow of funds from our citizens who have gone abroad through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, migration, peacekeeping duties and other overseas work engagements have been instrumental in financing educational obligations, healthcare needs and small-scale entrepreneurship. In essence, remittances have empowered individuals and communities to seek improvements in their living standards and explore opportunities for growth and development.

In retrospect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge that during challenging times, such as the global pandemic, remittances served as a buffer, helping our economy to stay resilient and supporting the ordinary Fijian. The June 2024 Report from the World Bank on the latest Migration and Development Brief which was released after a period of a strong growth during 2021 to 2022, officially recorded that remittance flows to low and middle-income countries moderated in 2023, reaching an estimated \$656 billion. In 2023, remittances surpassed Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) and like other developing nations, remittances have been increasing steadily over the years, making it a substantial source of foreign exchange earner for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Ministry of Labour data, the PALM Scheme in Australia and Regional Seasonal Employment (RSE) Scheme in New Zealand remittances from 2018 to-date is approximately FJD300 million. I am sure that all of us seated here in this august House have read on social and print media how this has helped many individuals and households here in Fiji. Personal remittances have helped support consumption in families, which include purchase of household goods and motor vehicles. Moreover, they may be used for social activities such as weddings, funerals and other community projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, personal remittances has been the second largest foreign exchange earner for Fiji since 2004, next only to tourism and outranking our traditional foreign exchange earners, such as sugar, timber, gold and garment. The significance of remittances to the Fijian economy has increased over the years, particularly as it supplements the household income, as well as a major and reliable source of foreign exchange here in our homeland.

The growth in remittance over the years is driven by many factors. Notably, there have been increases in the number of nurses, early childhood education teachers, peacekeepers, caregivers and sports personnel who are working abroad and who provide the utmost fast remittance to our homeland.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, the number of military personnel serving in the Middle East has

also increased. Many individuals and families rely on their wages and salaries as the primary source of income to meet the basic household needs of those who fall under this category.

Based on indicators such as the location and migrant population abroad, the major source countries of our inward personal remittances are Australia, United States of America, New Zealand, Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we move forward, it is crucial that we continue to recognise and maximise the benefits of these financial contributions, ensuring that they are directed towards sustainable development and long-term economic prosperity for all Fijians, to mitigate challenges and minimise dependency on remittances.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Education for his Statement. He has quite rightly pointed out that remittances is now the second largest foreign exchange earner for Fiji and it has been like that since 2004, next to only tourism.

Mr. Speaker, in the last five years between 2019 and 2023, personal remittances have grown on average by a staggering 17 percent every year. In 2019, it stood at around \$606 million and have more than doubled to \$1.25 billion by the end of 2023. Sir, between 2019 and 2023 we have received a total of \$4.5 billion in remittances alone.

The adoption, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of Fiji's mobile e-wallets for receiving remittances made a significant difference and advancement in the country's financial ecosystem. It provided a more accessible, efficient and secure method of transferring funds and this shift, Sir, has somewhat reduced transaction cost, delays and also provided extensive accessibility to people in the rural areas. So, by leveraging this mobile e-wallet technology, our people are now able to receive remittances directly on their mobile devices, reducing their dependency on physical cash and enhancing financial inclusion, particularly, for unbanked and underbanked populations.

The remittances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, received through mobile network operators - M-PAiSA and MyCash, were a meagre 3 percent in 2019, has now increased to about 38 percent in 2023. In 2023, remittances received through the mobile money e-wallets totalled \$476 million. Sir, 20 percent, about \$252 million, came through commercial banks. About 42 percent - \$524 million, came through money transfer operators, the foreign exchange dealers around the country.

Remittances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not just an abstract economic concept. As the honourable Assistant Minister quite rightly pointed out, it is a critical source for household income and it goes into consumption, but also providing basic necessities such as food, education and healthcare. It contributes to poverty alleviation and improves the overall quality of life for ordinary Fijians. So, in 2023, the total remittances amounted to about 10 percent of our GDP and that underscores the significance in sustaining household consumption and driving local demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the remittances also have a multiplier effect on the economy, which means that every dollar that comes into the country has multiple effects - stimulates local businesses, create jobs, fosters economic activity and, particularly, is important in rural and remote areas. Someone said to me that people in Labasa have a lot of money. The consumption and new businesses opening up in Labasa are doing very well. So, I said, "Yes, per capita, a lot more people from Vanua Levu are, perhaps, in Suva and also outside of Fiji, so remittances in Vanua Levu might be higher compared to some of the other areas." Also, remittances from Viti Levu to Vanua Levu.

We also recognise that remittances contribute to human capital development. Many families use remittance income to invest in education and skills training for their children which, in turn, enhances our national workforce and supports long term economic growth.

Remittances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as honourable Vanawalu pointed out, offer a stable and predictable source of income that is, kind of, less vulnerable to economic cycles, compared to other revenue. So, during periods of economic downturn and disaster, remittance inflows remain steady or even increased during those emergencies because Fijians abroad send additional support to their families. So, these counter cyclical nature of remittances provides a crucial buffer to smooth consumption and stabilise our economy during challenging times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is clear that the effect of us receiving remittances is quite multifaceted. Sometimes it not only has temporary effect, but also has a permanent effect. The source of our remittances, 44 percent of our remittances come from Australia; US is second - 24 percent; New Zealand - 18 percent; UK - 6 percent; and the rest comes from the others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, on behalf of the honourable Prime Minister, Government and, indeed, all the honourable Members of this Parliament, all I want to do at this point is to thank our people - our diaspora, whether they are in employment there, whether they are playing rugby or in peacekeeping duties, we want to thank them for sending remittances, for looking after their families and friends and, in particular, for supporting their families and friends and contributing generously to Non-Governmental Organisations to support activities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to also point out that as part of that strategy to attract our diaspora back into the country, we want to gain their brain. While we send people from this side, they go there, they work hard, get the experience, earn enough money, and some of them are coming back and investing in the country. So, it is not just remittances, it is also about gaining from the experiences of our people.

This Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has initiated changes to our immigration rules. For example, we are now allowing all those people and their children registered in the Vola ni Kawa Bula (Native Land Register), if they do not have a passport but have a passport for another country, if they want to come, live, reside and work in Fiji, they do not need to get a Fiji passport. For others, all they have to prove is that their grandparents or their parents were citizens of Fiji at the time of Independence. This is just one of the first steps that this Government has taken.

We are looking at other policies, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications was in Canada and he was telling me that the interest of our diaspora wanting to invest in Fiji is quite big. It is a happy story in some sense, Sir, when our people go out of the country, they go and work there, some of them live there, but their love for Fiji and they are constantly coming back to Fiji.

It is not only just remittances, a lot of the tourist dollar that comes in, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is also part of our diaspora coming back and spending their time here with their families and friends and spending their money. Again, we want to take this opportunity to thank all of them.

#### Protecting Coastal Communities Against Sea Level Rise

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank you for giving me this opportunity to make a Statement regarding the real challenges faced by our vulnerable coastal communities here in Fiji and other small Island States in the Pacific and the Caribbean region.

As many of you know, Fiji is confronting profound challenges due to climate change - rising sea levels, increased frequency of extreme weather events, changes in precipitation patterns and ocean acidification, pose significant threats to its coastal communities. These populations, largely dependent on agriculture, fisheries and tourism, are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.

This Statement highlights the challenges posed by climate change in Fiji, the impact on coastal populations, agriculture, waterways and floodplains, infrastructure and other critical issues, while proposing pathways for mitigation strategies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rising sea levels is one of climate change's most direct and immediate consequences. According to the IPCC 2021 Report, projections indicate that the global sea level would rise from 0.3 metres to 0.8 metres by 2100. In Fiji, numerous coastal areas are less than a metre above sea level, making them exceptionally vulnerable. The Fiji National Climate Change Policy indicates that rising sea levels can damage homes and coastal ecosystems, threatening food security and livelihoods. This is in reference to the Government of Fiji 2018 Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to climate change, we also witness an increasing incidence of extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods and droughts. The devastation caused by *TC Winston* in 2016, which resulted in estimated damages exceeding \$1 billion, serves as a stark reminder of the potential impacts of climate change, according to the World Bank 2016 Report. The changing climate is likely to exacerbate such events, thus destabilising the socio-economic frameworks that coastal communities depend on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a result of this deadly combination of rising sea levels and severe weather events, we have witnessed significant new challenges to our coastal settlements and villages, properties and livelihoods. The sea, which was once the very source of survival for our ancestors, is now threatening the survival of these communities. Rising seawater is washing away houses, villages, burial grounds and fertile agricultural land.

The FijiFirst Government has displaced some communities, while others are awaiting relocation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving entire communities is not an option any community would willingly choose. Leaving their ancestral homes implies abandoning their roots, cultural heritage, traditional grounds and way of living. It is an option no family or community would prefer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one option for the protection of vulnerable coastal communities is constructing seawalls. As stated by the former Minister for Waterways, Dr. Mahendra Reddy, in the last term of Parliament, 114 communities needed protection through seawall construction as of 2022. What is the progress on this?

The former Minister came up with a brilliant idea of constructing nature-based solution seawalls. I note from his recent 2024 paper published in the *European Journal of Engineering and Technology Research, Vol. 9, Issue No.4*, he provides the detailed design of the nature-based solution seawalls and noted that as of 2022, Fiji needed to protect 142 villages by constructing 108 seawalls with a total length of 38.2 kilometres. Over the period, 2018 to 2022, 12 nature-based solution seawalls were constructed around Fiji. What is the progress since then?

I note from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) announcement on 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2023, a picture of the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, shaking hands that KIWA awarded €326,077 (FJ\$700,000) to construct seawalls at six sites: Nakawaga Village, Vesi Village, Ligaulevu Village, Somosomo Village, Navola Village and Navolau No.1 Village.

These projects were supposed to be completed by December this year. What is the progress, honourable Minister?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change has also significantly affected the health of these vulnerable coastal populations. Increased temperatures and changes in precipitation patterns lead to outbreaks of waterborne diseases, vector-borne diseases and heat related illness. The World Health Organization (WHO) warns that these health risks are exacerbated in low resource settings, affecting the most vulnerable populations, especially children and the elderly, according to the 2018 WHO Report. I wish to ask the Government on what plans and strategies it has in place to educate and protect these vulnerable coastal communities from the negative effects of climate change on their health.

Mr. Speaker, agriculture is the cornerstone of Fiji's economy and a principal means of subsistence for many coastal communities. Climate change, however, poses severe risks to agriculture through the loss of arable land and decline in crop yields. Good quality arable land in low-lying areas is being washed away or inundated by saltwater, rendering it unsuitable for agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to ask the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, what strategies do you have to prevent saltwater intrusion and loss of arable coastal land? Increased temperatures and altered rainfall patterns significantly impact crop yields. Studies by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) indicate that climate variability can lead to reduced crop productivity, particularly for staple crops, such as taro and cassava, according to the 2020 FAO Report. This decline threatens food security and livelihoods, pushing rural population further into poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to ask the honourable Minister for Agriculture on what research programmes do they have to address this issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, encouraging farmers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices can enhance food security and resilience against climate variability. Agroecological methods, such as crop rotation, intercropping, and organic farming can help maintain productivity, while minimising environmental impact. What strategy has the Agriculture Ministry developed on this?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rise in sea level also poses a threat to coastal communities regarding the availability of clean drinking water. This is further compounded by extreme weather patterns, such as increased variability in rainfall and prolonged droughts, therefore, affecting the quantity and quality of ground and surface water. What plans are in place to provide these communities with alternative water sources so that we do not panic when we completely run out of water? It is not only households that will be affected, but also schools, health centres and agriculture located in these areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, empowering local communities through education and engagement is vital. Training programmes focused on climate adaptation strategies and sustainable practices can enhance community resilience and empower individuals to respond to climate challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our public infrastructure is also under threat. Coastal roads are being washed away, such as the road in front of Taveuni High College, which is subject to coastal erosion. The scouring of riverbanks is also threatening the collapse of critical bridges in coastal and rural areas. Some schools and health centres in the Northern Division are being threatened by riverbank erosion and coastal erosion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, have our relevant ministries conducted a stock take of these issues and developed a plan for adaptation and mitigation? Time is running out, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Government should enhance policies that focus on climate adaptation strategies. This includes investing in resilient infrastructure, upgrading drainage systems, and developing early warning systems for extreme weather events to protect vulnerable communities.

While I acknowledge progress in some drainage work, we need a countrywide plan. According to the Asian Development Bank 2019 Report, the cost of climate-proofing infrastructure in Pacific Island countries is projected to be substantial, affecting government budgets and development prospects. We must spread this cost over successive years rather than wait to spend it all at once, thereby facing budgetary problems.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing climate change requires local, regional and international cooperation. Collaborating with organisations, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), can enhance resource mobilization and bring in expertise for effective mitigation strategies. We must act now; failure to do so will devastate vulnerable communities, our tourism and agriculture sectors, and our economy. In the long run, it will affect the Government's ability to engage in development and distribution policies.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Kirpal for his End of Week Statement which covers a lot of ground on climate change, not only limited to the subject I was given to prepare on and, that is, protecting our vulnerable coastal community against sea level rise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said earlier on in the week, it would be good to review our procedures as the civil servants working in our offices prepare detailed answers to the questions, particularly the questions that are relevant at this time in our development, in our history. So, when we provide answers, we are conversational in our responses, while the prepared text have a lot of information on the subjects. Perhaps, if we can, at the end, they come and collect our questions and responses, and if all those could be included in the official records for future generations. They come, they talk about climate change, they will know, "Oh, honourable Sanjay Kirpal asked the question and the response came from the Prime Minister". They would probably just read the *Daily Hansard* Reports and not get to the bottom or get to the heart of the responses which have the facts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this afternoon, even before I go deeply into the response to the very good question asked, I would like to pay my respects to a former Lord Mayor of Suva, the late Vijay Raghwan, who passed away earlier in the week - a very good friend of mine. He was one of those who was a bridge in my relationship with the Indo-Fijian community after 1987. He was Lord Mayor in 1987 when the Fijian Nationalists in Suva were terrorising everyone. They threatened to go on site to those who were working in the market and the late Vijay Raghwan, as Mayor, called me and said, "See, these people want to burn the market". I asked, "Who?" He replied, "The Nationalists, they said they will march up to you." I said, "Tell them, who are you going to march to?" They told him, "To the Commander." I said, "If they tell you that, ask them, 'Who is the Commander?' I do not know the Commander, I am the Mayor of this city." That is exactly what happened. They threatened him and he said, "I do not know the Commander, I am the Mayor of this city and his camp is within my city." They were baffled and stood down. He was a good man, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

One of my Minister's defended him very well when he got the tender to build the Civic Towers. I was asked by the former Leader of the Opposition, the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy, "Did you give it to Mr. Raghwan because he is your friend?" The Minister for Housing and Urban Development said, "Yes, I gave it to him because he is my friend." Again, he asked, "Why?" He responded, "Because I knew he would do a good job", and that was the end of the questions. I sent

my condolences to his children and grandchildren. To those of us who will continue to look after Suva, hopefully, we will look after the city that he loved very much, properly.

The other one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the late Mrs. Ema Bovoro who was the CEO of St. John Ambulance Fiji, the St. John Association of Fiji and recently decorated with the Officer of the Order of St John. She has done a lot of work for the St John's in Fiji and our condolences go out to her families and friends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming back to the rise in sea level, unfortunately, as abbreviated here, "SLR" – Sea Level Rise, it says SLR is a hazard. I am going to sack these civil servants.

(Laughter)

However, it is, sea level rise is a danger. I hope I will be able to table my response because it has the facts.

Conversationally, my house is the first one in my village next to the sea. When it was built, when I came back from Lebanon, the steps out of the kitchen was stepping straight into the high tide. If you want to walk out that kitchen door, make sure it is low tide otherwise you walk out of the front door.

Now, that has been reclaimed by the Army at the time. The first seawall was built by the village men who went to New Zealand to do fruit picking before the seasonal workers programme came in. We collected money, and we are very grateful to the FijiFirst Government, they built a replacement sea wall. A little further out, a little higher, but we will have to keep doing that with the rising sea levels.

You asked about what we are doing about inundated coastal areas and you directed your comments to the honourable Minister for Agriculture. I went to look at an area at Ba where they are anticipating a lot of that area which used to be under cane, being inundated with seawater, and there are researches going on about seawater resilient varieties of cane and rice and also the possibility of starting giant crabs, giant prawns or tiger prawns as they call it in parts of Asia. I thought a cartoon artist would show a man perched on a tree eating big prawns.

We are living the reality of sea level rise all over Fiji. The Government has a programme which carried on from the previous Government on the relocation on some of these villages. Some are still ongoing, we have heard so much about Nabavatu, very close to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance's farm. They all need to move very soon and also villages in Bua and Kadavu. I must remind the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection that her grandmother's village is almost under sea now, but they will also be moved up to Udu Point in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is a very good one and I have some very good answers here, the facts and names, and I hope I can table the response so that future Members of Parliament, historians and maybe, scientists will look back and say, "Ah 100 years ago, they were talking about this, they were talking in a Parliament House in Suva. Where is that?" "Down there", they will be sitting up on the mountains of Naitasiri and pointing down at where we are today. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, it is a very good question and not only for Opposition and the Government to talk about, but it is also the whole nation, as I have said.

I also like to inform the House that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is coming up. The honourable Leader of the Opposition will be accompanying His Excellency the President



and the honourable leader of the G-9 Bloc, to support the President as its leader of the delegation to the UNGA. I hope they have prepared. On the side meetings on climate change, the honourable Leader of the Opposition will be involved on security, the leader of G-9 Bloc will be involved and talking to G20 Leaders. I hope they are ready to go, if not, they can always decline my invitation.

MR. SPEAKER.- For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has run up voluminous report of all these exchanges that we are doing, in the hope that we could have something like what the Prime Minister wants. It is in black and white. The Australian Parliament and New Zealand Parliament have it as well and these are all the exchanges here. We have them in big volumes, so it becomes a good reference book as well. But the only thing now is we are looking around for sponsorship in order to get them bounded. Madam Secretary-General is dealing directly with UNDP in the hope that we get some funding there, but that is the development we have so far, Sir. We thank you so much for your kind thoughts.

### Stray Animal Campaign – Cattle and Horses

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *miau sa bula re*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before you to address the House on matters related to stray animals, specifically cattle and horses. This has been a continuous problem in Fiji, affecting farming communities, with significant impacts on nutrition, health, economy and public safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ownership of animals entails a significant degree of responsibility. It is often witnessed that due to negligence of their owners, these animals are frequently seen wandering unsupervised, especially in rural areas. This situation has resulted in considerable crop losses and damages to farming communities, increased risks of accidents to road users, losses of revenues for farmers and increase in NCDs from poor nutritious food.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are more than one Act that covers the subject of my address today and that includes:

- Pound Act of 1877;
- Brands Act of 1928;
- Protection of Animal Act of 1954;
- Trespasses of Animal Act of 1955; and
- Biosecurity Act 2008 which repealed the Quarantine law of 1964).

While these Acts (except Biosecurity Act 2008) are very old and they cannot address Fiji's current situation and needs, a thorough review of these legislations is urgently required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pound Act defines the term "poundable animal" as any horse, cattle, goat, sheep and pig, young or old, male or female. The Pound Act covers establishment of specific livestock pounds intended for the confinement of stray animals. This legislation stipulates that:

- Any animals that are not confined on the owner's property and are straying on roadsides or other farms will be trapped, loaded and taken to animal pounds.
- If your animals are tied onto someone else's property without the owner's consent, the animal will be captured and taken to the pound as well. Once the animals are loaded on to the truck, they will be taken straight to the pound and will only be released to their owners if the requirements are met.

- If your animals are tied near to the roadside and can reach up to six metres from the centre of the line, that animal will also be taken for pounding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stray animal causes substantial destruction to agricultural fields, affecting crops such as sugarcane, *dalo*, cassava, vegetables, and limits our food security. The destruction of these crops not only impact farmers' livelihoods, but also have wider economic consequences. It had also been noted that stray animals had been a major cause of widespread tuberculosis and brucellosis infection in cattle and had also costed Government millions of dollars every year for disease control.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some factors contributing to the challenges associated with stray animals include irresponsible ownership, economical status of farmers and outdated penalty charges that are implicated to owners or offenders.

The primary cause of stray animal problems is the absence of responsible ownership. Owners fail to provide proper care, or containment of their animals, resulting in their unrestricted movements. In addition, economic factors including poverty and restricted access to resources play a significant role in the problem of stray animals. It is also sad to note that some livestock owners are ignorant of animal's welfare and will only attend to their animals when they need them. The high fencing cost, low quality of fencing material and absence of quality control for farming equipment and inputs have been a major contributor to improper fencing and control of livestock movements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last three years, a total of 2,193 complaints had been lodged by farmers and members of the general public on issues related to stray animals. Similarly, the Ministry had successfully captured more than 2,700 stray animals over the past three years.

Proper procedures were implemented to guarantee that animals that had been branded were returned to their rightful owners who came to retrieve them. These animals that remained unclaimed were auctioned off, following a period of 10 days' notice. We urge farmers to follow the guidance provided by our officers at the Animal Health and Production Division, and our officers are stationed throughout Fiji to perform this vital task.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our officers normally await requests and complaints from communities and the public before campaigns are carried out to capture stray animals. There had been instances in the past where firearms and tranquilisers had been used to address stray animal control. This used to be a very strict procedure, and it is only done when human lives are at risk.

The Government has acknowledged the seriousness of the problems concerning stray cattle and horses and has implemented several initiatives to address it. For the 2024-2025 financial year, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has allocated a budget of \$530,000 for stray animal activities. The Pound Act 1877 provides a structured framework for the law and orderly management of stray animals. Across the nation, there are 27 pounds situated in strategic locations where stray animals are impounded after they are captured.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Brands Act 1928 requires cattle owners to brand animals. According to the legislation, the sole method of identifying an animals' owner is through the brand. The brand should be visible, readable, and accompanied by a registered number issued in your name by the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. Owners can only obtain a brand registration certificate by applying at the Office of Ministry of Agriculture Fiji-wide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has conducted numerous public awareness campaigns designed to educate the public about the importance of responsible animal ownership. These campaigns have emphasised the necessity of proper care and management of livestock to prevent potential nuisance

and hazards. For the past three years, a total of 267 awareness campaigns had been conducted and continue to take place throughout Fiji, especially in the Western Division, which is a red zone for stray cattle and horses.

In addition to Government initiatives, local communities have also been proactive in addressing the stray animal problem. Initiatives such as organising cattle drives and establishing community grazing areas has also been undertaken to manage and reduce the number of stray animals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, although progress had been achieved in addressing the problem of stray animals in Fiji, we will continue to encounter the challenges in the near future. Apart from the review of the old Acts, the Government will continue to intensify initiatives with individuals and communities, to alleviate the adverse effect of stray cattle and horses. I finally want to assure you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I will be providing a statement in this House with regards to the use of antimicrobial and livestock production in Fiji.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the Statement, I think the problem of stray animals is an extensive one. Just last week, I received pictures of sheep being attacked in Nasarawaqa - 100 sheep perished by a pack of dogs. I had already talked about this in this august Parliament. In fact, the problem of stray animals has become a disincentive to our livestock farmers.

We have Acts that bind us in terms of what we can do in controlling stray animals. But then, most of these legislations are very old, such as the Brands Act which is an Act from 1928. Then there is the Pound Act 1877, which is just as old as the Brands Act.

The Pound Act 1877 is a very rigid legislation. It does not even allow the Minister to use his discretion to release an animal, should a farmer request the release. With the processes that are contained within the Pound Act 1877, an animal without the brand will surely end up in the abattoir and given the diseases that we have now (brucellosis and tuberculosis), we do not want to keep animals inside the pound, or bringing animals from somewhere else into the pound located in another geographical area because under the Biosecurity Regulations, we cannot do that. So, without the brand, surely the animal will end up in the abattoir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to inform the House this afternoon that we are already into the process of reviewing the Pound Act 1877, simply because of the rigid nature of that legislation. It gives no flexibility to the Director or to the Minister or anyone to release the animal, once it is impounded.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will ask for the support of Parliament. Sometimes, as a Ministry, we cop a lot of flak. I was interviewed by the *Fiji Sun* or one of the dailies, and I said, “I think these dogs should be shot.” There were comments of cruelty, et cetera. It is a catch 22 situation.

On one hand, you have farmers who want to breed livestock that will contribute to the economy and yet, on the other side, you have others who just keep breeding dogs and let them run loose, and then when there is a dog attack, hundreds of animals like that perish. I have the pictures here if you want to see, honourable Member, I can show you.

## **BILLS - FIRST READING**

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 84, I move:

That the Audit Bill 2024 (Bill No. 17/2024), be now read the first time.

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

(Please hand the four copies of the Bill to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- While it is the first time, the Government has...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- After a long time, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- I have not finished what I wanted to say. You should count yourselves lucky because the Government has decided that this one here will take the full process of having the Bill scrutinised and debated in this august House.

[A Bill for an Act to repeal the Audit Act 1969 and provide for the powers, duties and mandate of the Auditor-General and for the audit of the Public Accounts and Public Entities and related matters (Bill No. 17 of 2024)]

Honourable Members, in accordance with Standing Order 84(1), the Bill has now been read the first time. The Bill will now be listed on the Order Paper and set down for Second Reading on a future sitting date.

Honourable Members until such time the honourable Deputy Prime Minister will give notice for the Second Reading, I encourage all honourable Members to utilise this time to peruse the Bill and prepare for debate which will primarily focus on the principals and merits of the Bill.

Interestingly, there should be a clause on immunity, I hope, because we are trying to immunise the Auditor-General as well in carrying out his duty. We do not like the Office of the Auditor-General to go through that critical journey where he is not allowed to freely flex his wings, so to speak in carrying out his duties. The Australian Auditor-General has that protection and, likewise, we were so happy that it is now part of Clause 9 of the Bill.

## ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week. I must thank you all for your contributions throughout the week. I now declare Parliament adjourned until Monday, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.29 p.m.