

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 2ND SEPTEMBER, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 2ND SEPTEMBER, 2024

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

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs

Hon. Graham Everett Leung, Attorney-General

Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic

Planning, National Development and Statistics

Hon. Ro Filipe Qaraniqio Tuisawau, Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport

Hon. Charan Jeeth Singh, Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry

Hon. Filimoni Wainiqolo Rasokisoki Vosarogo, Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources

Hon. Manoa Seru Nakausabaria Kamikamica, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications

Hon. S.D. Turaga, Minister for Justice

Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya, Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection

Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and, Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation

Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu, Minister for Health and Medical Services

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodoro, Minister for Education

Hon. Sakiasi Raisevu Ditoka, Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Ifereimi Vasu, Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

Hon. Maciu Katamotu Nalumisa, Minister for Housing and Local Government

Hon. Agni Deo Singh, Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations

Hon. Vatimi Tidara Tuinasakea Kaunitawake Rayalu, Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. Alitia Vakatai Bavou Cirikiyasawa Bainivalu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education

Hon. Ratu Rakuita Solesole Sauramaeva Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration

Hon. Sakiusa Tubuna, Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister

Hon. Sashi Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister for Finance

Hon. Jovesa Rokuta Vocea, Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Tomasi Niuvotu Tunabuna, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. K.V. Ravu

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar

Hon. Viliame Naupoto
Hon. Ioane Naivalurua
Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu
Hon. Hem Chand
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala
Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau
Hon. Aliko Bia
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Ratu Josai Bulavakarua Niudamu
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal
Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva
Hon. Viam Pillay
Hon. Shalen Kumar
Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand

Absent

Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj
Hon. Sachida Nand
Hon. Vijay Nath

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 9th August, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the students and teachers of Ketei District School. It was misspelt. They had Katei there, and that is where my grandmother hailed from in Totoya. Welcome to your Parliament, school children. I hope the proceedings this morning will give you some perspective of how your Parliament works.

Responses to Written Questions

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

- (1) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to:
 - (i) Written Question No. 107/2024 asked by honourable P.K. Ravunawa; and
 - (ii) Written Question No. 148/2024 asked by honourable P.D. Kumar.
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation to Written Question No. 135/2024 asked by honourable V. Nath.
- (3) Honourable Minister for Education to Written Question No. 51/2023 asked by honourable P.D. Kumar.
- (4) Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services to Written Question No. 159/2023 asked by the honourable assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

Honourable Members, the responses have been conveyed to the respective honourable Members and copies are made available to the Parliament website. I have also instructed the Secretariat to compile a list of overdue written questions, and I will announce this in the course of the week.

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) Ministry of Civil Service 2020-2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 66 of 2024*);
- (2) Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit 2023 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 06 of 2024*);
- (3) Office of the Attorney-General 2006 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 79 of 2024*);
- (4) Office of the Attorney-General 2007 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 80 of 2024*);
- (5) Office of the Attorney-General 2008 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 81 of 2024*);
- (6) Office of the Attorney-General 2009 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 82 of 2024*);
- (7) Office of the Attorney-General 2010 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 83 of 2024*);
- (8) Office of the Attorney-General 2011 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 84 of 2024*);
- (9) Office of the Attorney-General 2012 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 85 of 2024*);
- (10) Office of the Attorney-General 2013 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 86 of 2024*);
- (11) Office of the Attorney-General 2014 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 87 of 2024*);

- (12) Office of the Attorney-General 2015 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 88 of 2024*);
- (13) Office of the Attorney-General 2016-2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 89 of 2024*);
- (14) Office of the Attorney-General 2017-2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 90 of 2024*);
- (15) Office of the Attorney-General 2018-2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 91 of 2024*);
- (16) Office of the Attorney-General 2019-2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 92 of 2024*);
- (17) Office of the Attorney-General 2020-2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 93 of 2024*);
- (18) Office of the Attorney-General 2021-2022 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 94 of 2024*);
- (19) Office of the Attorney-General 2022-2023 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 95 of 2024*);
- (20) Legal Aid Commission – Annual Report 2018-2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 67 of 2024*); and
- (21) Legal Aid Commission – Annual Report 2021-2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 69 of 2024*).

I am directing these Reports from the Chair to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, since they have not been doing any work as of lately. All the work has gone to the different Committees and the Business Committee has made a ruling that the direction will be taken from the Chair.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; and
- (3) Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

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

State Visit to the People's Republic of China

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I present my Ministerial Statement in relation to the State visit to the People's Republic of China, may I offer words of condolences to Maoridom on the passing of His Majesty, the Maori King, last week. He was a great friend of Fiji. He made a special request to visit *Na Turaga Bale na Vunivalu of Bau* when he visited and responded favourably to the invitation of the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and to be present at the Council of Chiefs Meeting in Deuba. Also, he made himself available and responded positively to the kind invitation from His Excellency the President, to be at a dinner at the State House, which I was honoured to have hosted.

Our condolences go to the Maori people of New Zealand. I would like to also record our appreciation to the Maori people in New Zealand for their role in the development of sports in Fiji, particularly, the days of the Maori All Blacks. We have a special place also in our relationship with the Maori people. In that, one of our late chiefs, Ratu Tiale Vuiyasawa, who found it difficult to join the Colonial Forces of the time, applied to join the Maori Battalion. But he had to have an English name, so by deed poll, he added “Wimbledon” and they gave him the qualification to join the Maori Battalion that fought in Palestine at the time, until the end of the war when he returned to Fiji.

Sir, we have that special relationship, and we would like to honour him with our letter of condolences, and you will probably be getting an application from the honourable Minister of iTaukei Affairs later on, to be excused from a day’s sitting to represent the Government at his funeral later this week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our visit to the People’s Republic of China was a great demonstration of the friendship that we enjoy with this great power, not only economic, but also in military and political power in the world. I acknowledge the presence of His Excellency, the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China here in Fiji.

Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and those listening in, *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all. My friend, His Excellency Zhou Jian, thank you for your very kind invitation in facilitating the visit to your great country. I also greet those who are watching us on television, livestream or listening in to the radio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have addressed your Chair, your position in addressing our condolences to the people of New Zealand, the late King, and dispatching a condolence letter to our High Commissioner in New Zealand – Ratu Inoke Kubuabola. There was an earthquake in Tonga on the day he died. We felt it, I thought there was going to be some siren, but they are so used to it in Tonga. I said, “no siren?” The honourable Prime Minister said, “no, we only get a siren when there is a tsunami warning.” “What about the buildings crashing?” He did not have an answer to that. As I have said, he was a dedicated leader and a friend to the leaders and chiefs of Fiji. He also joined the chiefs of the Pacific in their gathering in Hawaii.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming back to the Ministerial Statement and acknowledging the presence of His Excellency the Ambassador this morning, I also watched the television programme last night, where our representative, Robert Lee, spoke on Chinese TV. I was proud to describe our Ambassador to China, His Excellency Robert Lee, to President Xi Jinping as an ethnically Chinese descendant from Fiji, one of the many successful Chinese families we now have in Fiji, who are now Fijian citizens.

The bilateral relationship we have with the People’s Republic of China is founded on mutual respect and co-operation, and we observe the “One China Policy” which has been a key pillar of our bilateral relationship since 1973.

Since assuming office in 2022, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my primary goal has been to strengthen relationships with Fiji’s bilateral and multilateral development partners. The ultimate goal is to restore Fiji’s position on the global stage as “friends to all, enemies to none”, and fortifying our foreign policy principles of sovereignty, security and prosperity.

I am proud to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that these are also the principles that guide the leadership of His Excellency, President Xi Jinping, of the People’s Republic of China. In that spirit, I have been keen to deepen ties with the People’s Republic of China and was honoured to accept their very gracious invitation extended by Premier Li Qiang for the Official Visit to be conducted from 12th

August, 2024 to 21st August, 2024. The visit marked a significant step in strengthening bilateral relations and we also explored new avenues of co-operation to benefit our nations and people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Republic of Fiji recognises that the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government of China in line with the United Nations resolution on the "One China Principle". China's longstanding relationship with Fiji as a true friend who stands firm, particularly when we face difficult periods of isolation from traditional partners following our own political upheavals here in Fiji.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that after 1987, when everyone turned away, China stayed on. That is when we started the Look North Policy internationally. Locally, we have our Look North Policy for Vanua Levu. Sir, for my delegation and I, the Official Visit was both, humbling and very thought-provoking. The visit gave me the privilege to witness for myself, the remarkable progress that had been achieved by China in just three decades since my previous State visit in 1994.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 30 years, China had experienced an unprecedented transformation. Since 1994, China's Gross Domestic Product has increased from just over US\$560 billion to a remarkable US\$18.5 trillion today. This is a testament to China's strategic vision, innovation and pursuit of economic development.

In the same period, China has elevated its GDP per capita from a modest US\$470 to now at around US\$13,000 per capita. This has translated to a significant improvement in the standard of living of the Chinese people. This achievement is even more impressive, given China's population which has grown from approximately 1.2 billion in 1994 to over 1.4 billion today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, China has significantly reduced its poverty rate, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, from poverty alleviation to poverty eradication. I was given a book written by the man himself, President Xi Jinping, "*Up and Out of Poverty*" - great reading for all leaders and aspiring leaders. China has significantly reduced its poverty rate, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty in that programme.

In comparison, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Fiji has also made significant strides in its own economic development, it is on a much different scale. Fiji's own GDP has grown from US\$1.9 billion in 1994 to approximately US\$5.8 billion today. He has not looked angrily at me to say that I am wrong, so I believe it is correct (referring to HE Zhou Jian, Ambassador of China).

Our GDP per capita has similarly improved, Mr. Speaker, Sir, increasing from around US\$2,500 in 1994 to over US\$6,200 today. These figures reflect steady progress in a country with a population that has grown from just under 750,000 in 1994 to around 980,000 today.

While our progress is notable, a comparison to the People's Republic of China highlights that significant difference in scale and speed of development between our two countries. This highlights the importance of recognising our unique challenges, and the need to continuously adapt and learn from global success stories.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my delegation and I witnessed once impoverished villages become communities where residents have grown healthier and wealthier through strong leadership and commitment in the implementation of policies. The remarkable development progress of China is largely attributed to a fundamental shift in the mindset of its people. Seeing the great progress made to lift these communities out of poverty, I was reminded of the Chinese proverb, and I quoted this to them, and they smiled, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and he can feed himself for a lifetime."

Mr. Speaker, what we witnessed in China is that the Government provided the necessary enabling environment, while it was the people that truly drove development progress. The Official visit to China's Yunnan, Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces, started with a visit to those three remarkable Provinces. Our visit to the three Provinces provided valuable insights into China's ongoing development efforts and facilitated deep and considered analysis of our own development history, our own development journey.

I travelled by bullet train, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We were almost running late, and I thought, has someone contacted the driver? They told me, "No, there is no driver." I said, "Oh!" Mr. Speaker, Sir, each Province showcased unique strengths and innovations that can serve as lessons for our small island economies, particularly in areas such as poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

In Yunan Province, Mr. Speaker Sir, I was deeply moved by the infrastructure development and connectivity that have been established to uplift rural communities. Yunnan Province is the most ethnically diverse Province in the People's Republic of China with 51 ethnic groups. The achievements made in alleviating, and in some cases, eradicating poverty, is impressive. It is instructive and commendable that the Government of China has endeavoured to ensure that really no one is left behind. My delegation and I witnessed this in the minority ethnic villages in Yunnan, who have been lifted out of poverty in a steady, focused and tailored programme of interventions over the last 30 years.

Our visit to Malipo County in Yunnan was eye-opening, and we witnessed first-hand how modern infrastructure has transformed the once poverty-stricken county - helping to lift its residents out of poverty. Basic infrastructure such as roads, housing and healthcare facilities are not just symbols of progress, but also links that connect the rural populations to opportunities for a better future. That experience reinforced my belief in the importance of investing and in revitalising the rural, interior and maritime economies in Fiji, to ensure a level playing field for economic prosperity for all citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our visit to Fujian Province showcased the innovative technological advancements that are driving China's economic growth. State-of-the-art logistics, software and automation systems at the Xiamen Port have made it one of the world's busiest ports, ranked in the top 20 in the world at 13th place, receiving an average of 45 vessels daily. Again, I saw cranes and all these machines on the wharf, and I was looking to see if there were any operators. Then they took me to the room where young men and women were operating those cranes and things that were working on the wharf. No one was on the plant itself. Given its advanced infrastructure and strategic location, Xiamen Port plays a critical role in fostering economic integration across the maritime Silk Road trade between Asia, Europe and Africa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my delegation and I witnessed first-hand how China is committed to reducing its carbon footprint. It is a lesson, not only for Fiji, but for the rest of the world. I have been hijacked by time, and I will stop here. I would like to pay my respects again to His Excellency the Ambassador, the political and community leadership of China, and I would like to commit to them the friendship and also the understanding of the Government and the people of Fiji to assure the future of peace, security and development.

MR. SPEAKER.- I also acknowledge the presence of His Excellency, the Ambassador from China, in the gallery.

I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to make their response.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I quickly respond to the honourable Prime Minister's Ministerial Statement, I also wish to echo our condolence and sympathy to our Maori brothers and the people of New Zealand for the sad loss of the Maori King. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

May I also congratulate QVS for the Deans win last week. I am a bit reluctant to say this, but congratulations for the win, honourable Prime Minister.

May I thank the honourable Prime Minister for finally making the visit to China. I know that it is long overdue. Unfortunately, there was an incident last year that prevented the honourable Prime Minister from making his State visit to China, but thank you, Prime Minister, Sir, for finding time, despite the busy schedule that you have to make that important visit to China. You have highlighted it, Sir.

China is strategic, China is important for us as a small country with very less influence, but we always want to make ourselves relevant, particularly within the Foreign Policy that we have. Friends like China are the ones that support us, particularly being part of the permanent five - they are a voice for us when it comes to our very difficult time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me go back to our Foreign Policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I know that it is important, particularly, for the honourable Prime Minister. You have talked about the guiding principles because Fiji will always follow a policy aimed at maintaining a stable and sustainable system of international relations based on international law and the principles of equality among States in respect of national sovereignty, independence, territorial sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs of States and respect for international treaties as embodied in the UN Charter.

We have talked about the bilateral relationship that we have with China and, of course, this is something that we also respect China for, being an economic power, political power, as well as military power. They also, under this mutual respect and co-operation agreement, live to this, particularly with the non-interference, given the problems that we went through, honourable Prime Minister, Sir. Again, the underlying interest for Fiji's foreign relations is formed by the principles of friends to all and enemies to none.

I wish to deliberately bring this to the attention of the House because I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in the process of reviewing our Foreign Policy and coming up with a White Paper. I have been part of the consultation, honourable Prime Minister, Sir, I did attend to the invitation, and I have also spoken my heart out to the team, particularly when I was asked about the geo-politics. You have stated it, honourable Prime Minister, during our difficult times, that China was with us and that is why it is important that we maintain this strong relationship.

I studied our relationship way back when I did an essay, honourable Prime Minister, as part of my Junior Staff Officers (JSO) Course and that is when I saw the "Look North Policy" that we stated way back in 1987 that established the Kalabu Tax Free Zone. That was part of your Look North Policy. We have always maintained that. China is important to us and China has set so many good examples. On one extreme, it is a superpower, it is developed, but on the other extreme as well, it is still a developing country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we have a lot to learn from them in terms of infrastructure development and the economic environment.

May I end, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the bell is ringing. You would recall, Sir, in Palau we saw a lot of tourists from East Asia. I know that we are flying to Dallas on 10th December, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, but there are economic potentials, particularly in terms of tourists and trade as well with the four Provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, Yunnan and Guangxi. I know there has been

recent visits by the previous government on these four southern Provinces within China and there are potentials, particularly for trade and, of course, tourism. I do not have time to go into it. There have been some discussions previously, but I hope that we can pick that up to ride on the visit that has been taken by the honourable Prime Minister.

I wish to also thank China. His Excellency is in the House, and we still acknowledge China for their contribution to the development of this country. Thank you, honourable Prime Minister, for your Ministerial Statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the leader of G-9 Bloc or his designate, I would also like to acknowledge the presence of Mr. Tevita Koroi and his good wife out there in the gallery. He used to head the, is it the Fijian Teachers or the Fiji Teachers?

HON. MEMBERS.- Fijian Teachers Association.

MR. SPEAKER.- He is back from the US. It is great to see our people coming back to their homeland. Welcome, Mr. Koroi, and your good wife once again to your Parliament.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, good morning to you. I rise to respond very briefly to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Prime Minister.

I thank the honourable Prime Minister for a very comprehensive Statement on his State visit to the People's Republic of China. For someone who has had the honour and privilege to have served and seen China in the manner in which they have grown and developed as a great nation, I can testify and admit that the Statement by the honourable Prime Minister is something that is not only inspiring, but something that we really can learn a lot from as a small nation like Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our relationship with China goes back a long way. The key pillar, as we have heard this morning from the honourable Prime Minister, is based on the One China Policy. Fiji has stood firm on this Policy since we established the relationship. I am made to understand that the primary purpose of this visit was to strengthen and deepen our relationship again with China.

We have also heard from the two speakers that China was one of the few countries that stood firm with us in our days in which we had great difficulties and remained so as of today. There is so much we can learn from China to grow our nation. Reading the report by the honourable Prime Minister, he has visited key Provinces and that is a clear testimony of models that have demonstrated how China has grown and developed in the last 30 years.

From Yunnan Province, we have seen a model of how poverty has been able to be turned around, but only through people focussed, people-driven strategy to change the Province around, but also through hard work, commitment and perseverance by the population.

We have heard about his visit to Fujian Province and we have seen how technology has been applied to drive a great nation like China. There are many things that we can pick up from Fujian Province to grow and develop our small nation. Fujian Province is a key province in the development of one of our projects in the West on mushrooms. We acknowledge that, Your Excellency, for the great work that your team did here, and Zhejiang Province too on his visit to the great capital of Beijing.

I think the key lesson that we can draw from after the visit by the honourable Prime Minister that we hope to apply when our National Development Plan is going to be released is how a nation like China, through its revitalisation programmes, its ability to turn things around from the resources

that it has; a people-focused, people-driven and above all, a very clear strategic vision in what a nation wants to achieve in the years ahead of it.

I am excited of the great lessons that the honourable Prime Minister has picked, learnt and explored from China, and I look forward to some of these ideas that could be put into place in our attempt to drive our nation forward, especially in the implementation of our National Development Plan.

Honourable Prime Minister, we support your report this morning and on that note, you have the assurance of the G-9 Bloc support to your initiative and measures to drive and move Fiji forward for a better future for our Fijians.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn the House for morning tea. When we return, we will offer the floor to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications to make his Statement.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.20 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.52 a.m.

Implementation of Commitments Under the IEPA

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, *Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, and to those of you who may be listening to this broadcast; *ni sa yadra vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to inform this august House of the implementation of the commitments under the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) and assure you, Sir, that your Coalition Government is acutely attuned to our beloved country's trading and market access needs. In this case, we are securing our market access into the European Union. This was the reason we recently sought Cabinet endorsement for the implementation of the Market Access Commitment under the IEPA between the European Union (EU) and the Pacific States. This decision, Sir, reflects Fiji's ongoing commitment to strengthening trade relations with the EU and safeguarding the interests of our key export sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, IEPA has a long history, and the previous government will remember this well. The EU has historically provided unilateral trade preferences to the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States under the Lome Convention since 1975. Due to the pressure from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to bring in WTO rules consistent to the preferences that were provided by the EU to the ACP, these were replaced by the Cotonou Agreement with the objective of aligning EU's trade agreements with WTO rules. Thus, the concept of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) were born. Each of the ACP regions began negotiating EPAs from the year 2000. Formal negotiations between the Pacific and the EU began in 2004. The WTO deadline for the EU and the ACP was eight years to conclude the WTO compatible EPA by 2008. None of the ACP regions were able to meet this deadline, including the Pacific.

Given that preferences were coming to an end in 2008, those ACP countries with significant export trade to the EU had the option of initiating an interim EPA to maintain their trade preferences. Sir, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji chose to take this route in November 2007 to protect sugar and fish exports respectively. The initial IEPA still had outstanding and contentious issues, which was the reason the comprehensive EPA negotiations with the Pacific continued.

Fiji signed the IEPA in 2009 and with comprehensive EPA negotiations stalled due to differences in the position on issues of fisheries management in the Pacific, Fiji applied the IEPA in July 2014. This was done to ensure that Fiji could continue to export its products, particularly sugar, to the EU. The decision to provisionally apply was also made due to the EU's decision to withdraw preferences for those ACP countries that had not signed nor ratified the IEPA.

Whilst Fiji had provisionally applied the IEPA in 2014, Fiji had not implemented the provisions of IEPA, including the reducing and eliminating of duties as per Fiji's market access commitments. The IEPA allows us to send our products to the EU without paying duties or tariffs. In return, Fiji has to make similar commitments or what is generally known, Sir, as "Reciprocity in Trade".

As part of an essential pillar of IEPA, Fiji agreed to allow certain products from the EU to be imported into Fiji duty free. Key items, however, were excluded from this commitment to protect Fiji's revenue and developing industries or what is known as the "Exclusion Basket". Since its signing, Fiji has benefitted from this arrangement particularly in the sugar sector where the EU member countries collectively accounted for a maximum of up to 90 percent of our total sugar

exports.

Despite challenges, such competition and fluctuations in the global sugar prices, the EU has been a consistent and reliable destination for our exports, contributing significantly to our foreign exchange earnings and providing employment opportunities for our people. The IEPA has opened up opportunities to export goods such as tuna, ginger, mineral water and garments with exports to the EU reaching a peak of \$132.4 million in 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we do not reciprocate, there is a danger that preferential or duty free access into the EU for Fiji goods under IEPA may be stopped, threatening the present volume of exports. Thus, implementing our market access commitments under IEPA is crucial. This means, Fiji needs to open its markets to goods from the EU under the terms of IEPA. This involves removing tariffs and taxes on imports, on certain products, making it easier for goods from the EU to enter Fiji's market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that the tariffs committed for elimination under IEPA are effectively removed, Fiji will take several very important steps. This includes establishing a dedicated team to oversee the implementation of these tariff changes, ensuring that they are correctly and efficiently applied. To support this, we will also develop a clear and straightforward set of guidelines that will help customs officials and businesses understand and follow the new rules.

Additionally, we will review, and if necessary, update process documents to ensure it aligns with the agreement. We recognise the importance of awareness which is why we will conduct training sessions and workshops for customs officers, trade officials and other key stakeholders. These sessions will equip everyone involved with the knowledge and skills needed to implement the tariff removals effectively. To keep businesses and the public informed, we will also provide clear and accessible information through our Ministry's website and with direct engagement with business groups.

Mr. Speaker, as we move forward, we will continually monitor the process to ensure the tariff eliminations are having the desired positive impact on our economy. This will allow us to address any challenges that may arise promptly.

Finally, we will maintain ongoing communication with the EU to resolve any issues that might come up during the implementation, ensuring that this transition is as smooth and beneficial for Fiji. Through these steps, we are committed to fulfilling our obligations under the IEPA while supporting the growth and development of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to astute negotiations by Fiji's Trade Team, Fiji's market access commitment has been reduced from 80 percent to 75 percent through technical amendments made in the last few years. This translates to removing tariffs on 4,916 individual items for imports originating from the EU. Currently, fiscal duties on 32 percent of these lines are already at zero due to the More Favourable Nations (MFN) level, meaning that Fiji only needs to liberalise the remaining 43 percent.

Implementing reduction in import duties on the remaining 43 percent is estimated to result in a revenue loss of approximately \$737,000 per annum. This estimate is based on the average of import duties generated over the past six years, specifically on the tariff lines Fiji has committed for elimination under the IEPA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current benefits in trade far outweigh any revenue loss that may eventuate from the elimination of tariffs on EU goods. We presently export items such as tuna, ginger, mineral water, garments and kava to the tune of \$132 million as mentioned.

In addition, after our decision to implement IEPA, the global sourcing provisions for canned and processed tuna or fish will be activated by the EU as part of their commitment. These flexible rules of the IEPA will allow Fiji to source fish from approved foreign flagged vessels outside of the EEZ, process it onshore, and export duty free into the lucrative market of the EU as Fiji fish. Fiji will then enjoy similar success that PNG has experienced by using this global sourcing provisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this partnership remains vital for Fiji's economic growth and development. It aligns with our broader trade and development objectives, particularly in terms of diversifying our export base and reducing our reliance on a limited number of trading partners.

The implementation of IEPA market access commitment marks a significant step forward in strengthening Fiji's trade relations with the EU. By implementing these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji not only safeguards its existing markets access, but also opens up new opportunities for growth, particularly in the fisheries sector through the global sourcing provision. The Ministry remains committed to engaging with the EU to ensure that we continue to benefit from this very important partnership.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the leader of the Opposition, or his designate, for their response.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and fellow Members of Parliament, I want to thank the honourable Minister for his regular updates on these very important Agreements that we are part and parcel of and continue on with the negotiations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as rightfully pointed out by the honourable Minister, the notification of the provisional application of Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) took place in 2014 and this was, as you have rightfully pointed out, in order to protect our trade in goods and services and our quota and access exposed to the European Union (EU) and was really done to avoid disruption.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are cumbersome processes that are involved in getting all these done which is a barrier to our trade with the EU, especially with respect to rules of origin, et cetera, and this is one of the reasons why it has taken many, many years to actually complete, and in order to also be in compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) requirements, et cetera, these things take a long time to complete. It is a good thing to see that these things are being done and the market access commitments have actually been approved by Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tariff liberalisation will only help Fiji but, again, there is a word of caution on it - we must be ensuring also that we do not interfere in our policy space, et cetera, with this particular Agreement. I think there is a great team that is actually involved in getting all these done.

The global sourcing issue that has been raised with respect to fish will also mean that more of our fish are able to enter into the EU, especially with fish that have been sourced from different foreign-operated vessels. But we must also be mindful of the compliance that we have to reach with respect to the EU market standards, Mr. Speaker, Sir. These are the things that are important to us.

Much debate has been held over the years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the IEPA and this is something that concerns a lot of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Now, ACP countries initially are very reluctant to get to the end of this EPA purely because they were considered to have too many bottlenecks, et cetera, and development also is centred at this particular Agreement with respect to most ACP countries. Also, with biosecurity regulations, we need to be updated and strengthened because it hugely has an important aspect of our trade with the EU.

One of the aspects also that comes out of this particular Agreement is promotion of agriculture development and trading services, tourism development, et cetera, investment protection and promotion and goods and fisheries. These are hugely important parts of this Agreement, so there is a steady progress that has been made on it.

We have also had a very devastating kava ban and I think the honourable Minister also mentioned this, that has been lifted in Germany and should be very good for Fiji and our kava exports.

In terms of market access on trade and in goods, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the EU has always interpreted WTO requirements regarding the degree of liberalisation with these EPAs and the regions to liberalise. They are also coming back and saying that we need to liberalise about 80 percent of our trade with the EU. It actually said that it was supposed to be done within 15 odd years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that they are giving us duty free and quota free market access, this is something that is really important that needs to be done quickly and I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister and the Ministry of Trade Team, in trying to get all of these done because it is very important for our goods and services. It opens up the massive market for us.

Again, as I have said earlier, there are certain things that we need to strengthen, but a word of caution - it is something that we are, as a developing country, realise also a little bit along the way, that many of the ACP countries that had signed it were regretting it afterwards because it interfered with that particular space. It is a very delicate Agreement, but I am glad it is moving along at a particular pace where we are actually being protective of our own policy space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it can only be good for Fiji, but we must learn from the examples that are being shown to us, especially by the Caribbean countries that have gone a little bit further than we have, as well as the African countries. So, the ACP is a good vessel for us to learn from and I wish the honourable Minister well in the further negotiations that needs to be completed. Thank you very much.

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

HON. P. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the outset, the G-9 Bloc sincerely appreciates the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications for his comprehensive update on the implementation of the Market Access Commitment under the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the European Union (EU) and the Pacific Island States. Notably, his extensive work in securing Cabinet's endorsement for this implementation is also much appreciated.

The partnership with the EU, which is one of the greatest GDP globally, is an important strategic move for Fiji and all Pacific Island States. This agreement promises an opportunity for diversified trade and potential economic growth. The implementation of Market Access Commitment could specifically lead to increase accessibility to numerous markets as alluded to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for our MSME's possibly facilitating cooperation and economic prosperity for all parties involved.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would like to request further clarification on these specific measures and consistent updates for all stakeholders to be taken by the Ministry to ensure that this commitment will indeed bring adequate and tangible benefits for our domestic industries, ensuring that Fiji and Pacific Island States businesses, especially the MSME's can effectively leverage this agreement which is crucial to realising the targeted economic benefits.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we trust that the Ministry is also taking into account the potential challenges that are posed by such agreements with binding commitments on environmental protection, climate change and labour rights. It is well known that such economic agreements which poses potential benefits, they often require significant adaptation to the local industries. It would be helpful to understand more about this support and the transitional aid that is to be provided to Fiji and the Pacific Island States in navigating this process.

Lastly, it would also be beneficial for us to understand the environmental implications to increase trade activities that could emanate from this agreement. Thank you once again to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his relented efforts in driving our economic growth and his adaptation to maintaining open communication about this development.

On this side of the House that I represent, we look forward to engaging further on this critical subject and I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the Ministerial Statement.

Coastal Fisheries Development Programme

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a statement on the Coastal Fisheries Development Programme implemented by the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry through our servicing centres in the Central, Eastern, Northern and Western Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, coastal fisheries resources are fish, invertebrates and plants, including associated habitats, which occur within customary fishing rights areas. These fisheries resources provide food security and nutrition, economic growth and employment, poverty alleviation, community resilience, and the empowerment of licensed fishers and communities. These resources and associated habitats are under stress due to threats of high fishing pressure, increased coastal development, sedimentation loading and pollution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the estimated annual production of coastal commercial and subsistence fisheries is about 30,700 tonnes annually. This estimation is challenged by the hundreds of landing sites and the 850 coastal communities that depend on these resources for food and income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coastal Fisheries Development Project's primary focus is to address these threats with clear goals and objectives - addressing overfishing in coral reef areas, supporting food security for our coastal and maritime communities, sustainably maximizing economic returns for our licensed fishers, and enhancing coastal fisheries management and conservation.

Mr. Speaker, last year, the Ministry issued 2,816 inshore and 27 deepwater snapper fishing licences to support livelihoods and contribute to economic growth.

Recognising the need for Fijians to access nutritious food and safe protein sources and support livelihoods, the Ministry provides accessibility to ice services from the 24 Fisheries Service Centres across the country, with training delivered to licensed fishers and fishing cooperatives on the post-harvest and the use of ice to preserve the seafood quality.

Mr. Speaker, 30 fishing cooperatives have been registered, and appropriate training and equipment have been provided for the start-up. The primary purpose is to create investment and

financial stability for fishers, maximise their economic return from fishing, and give them access to any assistance provided through government or financial agencies.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry deployed 13 Fish Aggregating Devices (FAD) to address overfishing in coral reef areas, relieve fishing pressure on the principal reef fish, and promote pelagic fishing to support local demand for pelagic fish.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, four community projects were established in the Western Division for sandfish ranching and mangrove crab fattening to support the growing market demand for these coastal commodities.

On focussed activities for 2024 to 2025, Mr. Speaker, in this fiscal year, the Ministry will continue to support coastal fisheries and scale up existing projects and activities to improve outcomes and effectiveness. The Coastal Fisheries Development Project has five main work programmes that include the following:

- (1) Pathway to market initiative that provides essential support for licensed fishers to access better markets, including the improvement of processes along the value chains.
- (2) Exploring the pelagic and deep-water snapper fisheries will relieve fishing pressure on coral reef areas and maximise economic returns for licensed fishers and fishing cooperatives.
- (3) Scaling up the locally managed marine areas through species management, ranching, and the grow-out of cultured high-value coastal species such as sandfish.
- (4) Minimise illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing in Fiji's coastal waters through monitoring, compliance and surveillance.
- (5) Training and awareness are needed to improve coastal fisheries resource value chain and the management of coastal fisheries resources.

Mr. Speaker, the project underscores the need to put less pressure on the coral reef area, particularly on fishing key coral reef fish, such as parrotfish, which has an important ecological role on the coral reefs. The focus is on exploring pelagic and deep-water snapper fishing to increase economic returns and create more opportunities for fishermen and fishing cooperatives. Equipping them with proper boats and fishing equipment and deploying FAD links them to registered fishing cooperatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coastal Fisheries Development Project also addresses the needs of communities living in the highlands who depend on rivers and streams for food and income. It focusses on improving the value chain of the eel fishery in the highlands, which has an existing niche market in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is also encouraging Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) to develop high-value coastal species for sustainability and to meet market demand. Most of our high-value coastal species are heavily fished and must be developed and improved to create income and opportunities for our communities and contribute to export earnings.

Mr. Speaker, the Coastal Fisheries Development Project will undertake fish collection trips in the maritime islands because accessing the primary market in urban areas is difficult. Fish collection trips will be conducted in Lau, Kadavu, Lomaiviti and the Northern Division, as well as the Western Division, to connect the fishers to the primary market.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will continue to undertake more awareness and focus training in communities and engage in exhibitions to educate and increase awareness of the importance of

marine and fisheries resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to increase monitoring, compliance and surveillance in our coastal areas regarding illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and ensure that users comply with all fisheries laws and regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, much work is needed in the coastal area to ensure the management and development of coastal fisheries resources meet the daily needs of Fijians. Still, the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to deliver on what is expected.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will ensure that proper fundamentals are set to support these projects, ensuring their longevity and effectiveness in relieving pressure on our depleted fish stocks.

Mr. Speaker, last but not least, before I take my seat, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Queen Victoria School U18 Team for successfully defending the Deans Trophy. I would like to thank all the schools and their teams for participating in the 2024 Fiji Secondary School Rugby Season. *Vinaka Saka.*

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Minister. You jumped from fisheries to rugby, so that is interesting fishing.

I now call on the Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, to make their response.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the honourable Minister for Fisheries in her brief to Parliament this morning on a very important subject in regards to coastal fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, I think the main issue and I thank the honourable Minister for bringing up this subject because most of our coastal and island communities greatly depend on the income that is generated by this initiative. She has clearly articulated the various positive moves that have been carried out in helping these coastal communities.

Mr. Speaker, if we think and consider the plights of our coastal communities – think of Yadua Island off the coast of Bua, Cikobia to the Northern Point of Udu Point, Wailagilala Island - a coastal community, a small island that consists of a few members who have migrated to Taveuni and have considered that now as their home because the resources have depleted and they could not afford to stay on the island anymore.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Yanuca between Rabi and Taveuni, and then you look at Ono-i-Lau, the most south-eastern portion which also includes Vatoa, there is nothing. If you look at agriculture, they do not even have land to cultivate. If you look at forestry, nothing grows on rocks, it is basically bushes, and if there are any birds that might fly around these islands and drop a few sandalwood seeds among the rocks, they will be able to cultivate sandalwood. Why I am saying this, Mr. Speaker, it is important to emphasise the situation that these isolated communities are being put in, not by force, but basically, this is the place they were born and brought up when they come to populate Fiji.

My plea to Government is to provide the resources and assistance to the honourable Minister for Fisheries to be able to help these isolated communities. They have nothing else. The sea is their main source of revenue. We need to give them assistance so that they can do better. I think the honourable Minister has stated that the preservation of sea resources will enable them to trade these resources. The source to market also depends on shipping that connects these very isolated islands and communities which will enable them to generate revenue from these resources.

I had created some semblance of trying to generate interest in the bartering system and especially in Lau and the outer islands in Vanua Levu. They trade with their relatives who live in cities and towns their resources, and their relatives buy things that they need which is loaded on to the ship. This benefits their daily living.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead to Government to look at this very seriously because if not, these small communities as I have stated, like Nagelelevu, they will leave their islands and move to towns because they need to live and look after their children and their families.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau, for that very thought-provoking statement that you have just made. There is a Fijian tradition known as *veisa*, where we prepare something of equal value to reciprocate when the other people from the mainland come to us. It is an organised visit, so that is how we trade – we barter.

Looking at the Lau Seascape, the very mentioning of the islands that you have stated, honourable Koroilavesau, is something that leaves a question mark too for us who have open waters. Before we still have our *qoliqoli* out there in Wailagilala and the ones off Udu Point, but it is amazing that in the Lau Seascape, they have organised themselves with the support of the Ministry of Fisheries, and they have allowed them to exist. That is the Yagasa Reef, belonging to the Turaga na Tui Nayau.

I am hoping if something could be organised along those lines, as you have suggested, through the Minister for iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Fisheries to, sort of, revitalise the usage of all the *i qoliqoli* there, as a way of ensuring that they get that steady supply of meat, or whatever, to be able to exchange or, sort of, barter, to keep things going economically.

That is all I want to add to your statement, Sir, and I thank you.

I now offer the floor to the leader of the G-9 Bloc, or his designate.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for her Statement and I fully support the sentiments expressed by honourable Koroilavesau on the issue about coastal fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just mention one upfront, it is said here that it is the Coastal Fisheries Development Project. I hope that if it is still a project, that it will be run as a programme because the funding for it is much better. When you run a project, at the end of the financial year, workers will have to go home, and they wait again for the new financial year to come back. But if it is a programme, they will stay and it provides them stability in their work and they will do their best because for Coastal Fisheries Development, management will be an ongoing thing. We are a maritime nation, we are a group of 300 islands, and it will be an ongoing work, and I suggest that if it is still run as a project that Government can, perhaps, look at it so that it be run as a programme and be funded as a programme.

If we compare our coastal fisheries to the other fisheries that we have, which is the offshore fisheries, I think we can agree that it is our offshore fisheries that is managed better. I think the reason behind the better management of our offshore fisheries is because of the links that we have regionally, through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), internationally through the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). Because of those organisations, there is good data that they get out of our offshore fisheries, and it is through the management of those fisheries, it is done very well because of the data that they get.

The problem with our coastal fisheries, I think, is data. There is very little data that we have on the variety of resources that we have – fish, invertebrate, as the Minister mentioned, plants, and it is that lack of data that all of a sudden, we say, “Let us stop beche-de-mer. It is now over-fished.” So, because we cannot track and manage those resources well because of the lack of data, maybe that is an area that we need to look at and really, in trying to find development partners who can come in and assist us and provide us with good data on the various resources that we have in our coastal fisheries.

If we look at coastal fisheries, inshore fisheries versus our offshore fisheries, I stand corrected, but I think it is our inshore fisheries that contributes more to our GDP than our offshore fisheries. Even though we have a lot more export from our offshore fisheries, but it is our coastal fisheries that provides more to our GDP.

I remember when I was the Permanent Secretary for Fisheries and Forests, we did a very quick calculation and study on how much money spins locally just from coastal fisheries and it amounted between \$30 million to \$60 million in a year. That is the amount of money that circulates locally in our local economy because of our inshore fisheries from the commodities that we sell, the fuel that we buy for boats, so there is a lot that our coastal fisheries does to keep our economy alive by circulating that money locally in our local economy.

There is always this balance between development and management and conservation, and I think that work - that balance in development and management and conservation is done well if we have data. I think that is an area that we need to, perhaps, invest in, and get good data for our coastal fisheries.

I thank the honourable Minister for her Statement, and I certainly support the sentiments expressed by honourable Koroilavesau.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will proceed to the next item.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Current Status and Funds of PIDF (Question No. 161/2024)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprise and Veteran Affairs inform Parliament on the current status and functions of the Pacific Islands Development Forum?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Naivalurua had a stint as Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs and is fully aware of the circumstances on the establishment and functions of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). However, in the interest of parliamentary processes and public information, I have the honour to answer the question.

As we are all aware, the PIDF was established in 2013 and mirrored the foreign policy direction of the previous Administration. The establishment of the PIDF was part of a policy crafted to fill the void that emerged when Fiji's traditional partners held Government then, accountable for

breaches of democratic principles and rules-based order that underpin the foundations of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PIDF was recognised as an international organisation on September the 4th of 2015 and was admitted as an official Observer to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in December 2016. The organisation signalled a desire by the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) to engage directly with development partners to address goals in areas such as:

- Climate change;
- Food and energy security; and
- Ocean conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PIDF comprises of 12-member PSIDS, civil society organisations and private sector. Key achievements for PIDF, it benefitted Fiji and our PSIDS on a number of fronts, with key accomplishments that I will outline here:

- (1) The Suva Declaration which was used as a reference point for PSIDS lobbying at COP21 and contributed to the successful outcomes at the Paris Negotiations.
- (2) The Nadi Bay Declaration which voiced the Pacific's deep concern for the "lack of comprehension, ambition or commitment by developed nations" towards the consequences of the climate crisis on vulnerable Pacific nations.
- (3) The Solarisation of the official residences and landmark sites for the Pacific Heads of States supported by UNDP, the UN Office of the South-South Cooperation and the Republic of India. Fiji had extended that to include the residents of the Head of Arab Government and the Prime Minister's residents, not just limited to the Head of State or His Excellency the President's residence.
- (4) Research and Innovation Ecosystems to Address the Impact of Climate Change in the Pacific (RERIPA) with the overall objective to strengthen the Research and Innovation (R&I) ecosystem of small Pacific Island countries. The question also was raised at the recent Pacific Island Leader's Forum in Tonga, but we managed to allay any fears of any breakaway with the response I gave to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PIDF operates in a crowded space and is not immune to the challenges faced by regional organisations. Some of these challenges are:

- (1) Mandate issue due to the highly contested regional space and the evolving regional architecture, PIDF as the youngest regional organisation, continues to face the issue of relevance in the Pacific.
- (2) Leadership – PIDF continues to be branded as a "Fijian entity" and is negatively denoted to duplicate the existing regional body PIF Secretariat.
- (3) Financing – voluntary membership contributions impact on the commitment towards work programmes.
- (4) Governance Structure – the cost for maintaining the current structure is relatively high.
- (5) Capacity of the Secretariat – in the original design of the organisation, the Secretariat was not intended to be a technical organisation.

The way forward for PIDF, in view of the context that brought PIDF into being, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the complexity and multi-layered challenges which PIDF faces, and the outcomes Government seeks from this entity, it is prudent to have an organisation that is in tune and responsive to the needs of Fiji and its people. As such, we are undertaking a review of PIDF with the support of partners to

repurpose and re-orientate to a “fit for purpose” organisation that will draw on lessons learned while furthering national and regional interests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have received the views of some Pacific Island countries to maintain the PIDF’s *raison de’etre* (reason for being) regardless of the name of the organisation, as it serves their interests as well. PIDF has been plagued by some management issues, which we have corrected through prudent internal controls, oversight and improved governance and accountability structure. The PIDF is under review and is transitioning towards becoming an integrated entity that focuses on project delivery across sectors and geographical boundaries. Here, we are leaning towards a fully projectized business model to take this organisation forward.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has had dialogue with current donors who are pleased to continue supporting existing projects and moving into new ones. They are satisfied with the current interim arrangement where the entity is, for the time being, managed from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs as its Interim Secretary-General, while ensuring independence of operations with sound oversight on a two-tier accountability and oversight process.

An innovative role that donors can play in the governance structure under discussion is receiving positive feedback. Lessons from other regional entities are also being capitalised here. Thus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new organisation will soon be recognised as an integrated development centre. Whatever name it will be eventually given is immaterial.

The purpose and goals that it will pursue for Fiji and its neighbours is more important. It will be a project delivery organisation that is able to receive projects from across Ministries and sectors. It will focus on functional responses through Pacific-specific, nature-based solutions that focus on a model of green growth in blue economies that is in tune with the sustainable development principles. This will also institute incubators to boost sustainable development. An important focus of the governance structure will be in the monitoring, evaluating and learning components.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regionalism is an important development strategy in the Pacific and the soon-to-be Integrated Development Centre (IDC), for a want of a better term, will progress strategies that ensure the interests of relevant sectors including the Pacific family, are upheld. In the process, we envisage that the IDC will elevate support for local sectors and PSIDS’ agenda in partnership with Governments, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the Private Sector.

The IDC will be supported as a research and project-oriented organisation with a mandate that will complement regional and sub-regional organisations and actively support the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new IDC will reflect an organisation that is agile to enhance the delivery of our national and regional interests under the SDGs, 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and Fiji’s foreign policy pillars of Sovereignty, Security and Prosperity.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reviewed IDC will portray a development and program focus which will position it as the delivery arm to work across Government and non-government systems within Fiji’s neighbouring PSIDS.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Prime Minister, one of the objectives for PIDF was South-South Cooperation and in terms of South-South Cooperation, one of the major issues as part of that was to do with national capacity development. In light of the fact that we have had some serious migration issues, not just for us but also for our Pacific Island regional neighbours, has the PIDF somewhat erased the anti in terms of us getting more of that out of the PIDF?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has been the perception, but I can assure the honourable Member that at the recent PIDF Leaders Meeting, we assured everyone that it is still a regional rather than a national entity, that is also taking very seriously the interest of the Smaller Island Developing economies of the Pacific.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is forwarded to the honourable Prime Minister for a point of clarification. The clarification is that, for the amendments to the PIDF Charter, including name change of organisation requires a two-thirds majority of the members of the Summit and the adoption of a special resolution of the Conference. So, in the light of this, how can Fiji alone change the name or function of PIDF or were other members consulted on this?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, maybe, I have stated it wrongly. That is the proposed name that will have to be taken to the Member States next year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know the reason as to why PIDF was created and over the years, Fiji Government has been giving funds to PIDF, and in the last budget, \$1.2 million was given to PIDF. We have also read reports that has come out, there is an overlap in the work of PIDF and PIFS. In that situation, my question to the honourable Prime Minister, is the continued support to PIDF justified and whether that money should be directed to national development?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point raised by the honourable Member is very relevant or the points are relevant, and they are all part of the review that was being undertaken and will come up with recommendations and how we move forward will depend on how the voting happens when the members decide on the movement forward.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, just to shed some light on the issue at stake here – PIDF, where it is heading, name change, et cetera, there will be overlaps.

We will be organising a meeting sometimes next year and approval has been given by the honourable Prime Minister. They have discussed this in the Business Committee, to see how best the Pasifika is integrated in its development, it is fully represented, and at the same time, you Parliamentarians ought to be leading the fight there.

You ought to be leading the work there. The decision should come from Members of Parliament (MPs), and we are trying to organise a meeting next year in Nadi, which was an outcome of the meeting in Palau. We can get ourselves better organised because the Pacific Islands Forum (PIFs) is already there, the only thing left now is PIDF. Some have branded PIDF as a Fiji outcome, dominated by Fiji but yet, with the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) under the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), we are already chairing SIDS.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is chairing SIDS but when we try and identify SIDS as part of the Pasifika or the Blue Ocean, that is where the dilemma is. It is difficult because Indonesia would also like to be part of the Pacific. They have their borders fronting the Pacific Ocean, yet there is a bit of a controversy in how they have annexed West Papua. Then you have the decolonisation issue. These are issues that can be better addressed by us, Parliamentarians.

You, honourable Members, can better address this, and you take it up through PIF, right up to the IPU, because we have a voice there. That is why we attend COP meetings, just to ensure that the outcome of all the meetings sink down to parliamentary level. Otherwise, bureaucrats will be running the show, and we are at a loss. That is why we are saying the gap exists, honourable Premila Kumar, because in putting forward certain organisations to be, kind of, a yardstick of ensuring that

we have a say in what comes our way through the very existence of those bodies, it becomes a misnomer again because MPs are not there. It is only the bureaucrats who are there. I am not pointing a finger at the bureaucrats, no! It is you, honourable Members, who should have a say in this.

The honourable Prime Minister has raised this, even in the PIF meeting in Tonga, and also in trying to re-organise the PIDF. We are hoping that with the approval that he has already given, that this meeting that we will be hosting next year in Nadi, we will be inviting regional governments. We have about 13 or 14 regional governments in the Pacific and, hopefully, we can get something passed in that meeting that fairly represents the people who have been elected and given the mandate by the people to represent them in their parliament. That is all I want to share.

Update on the Secured Transaction Reform - Reserve Bank of Fiji
(Question No. 162/2024)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE 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 Secured Transaction Reform, including the Personal Property Securities Registry administered by the Reserve Bank of Fiji?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, lending as we all know can entail significant risks and without acceptable collateral to secure the payment is a key issue for credit institutions, you know, who would largely rely on what we call immovable assets land and those entities on land and most Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises may not possess them.

In addition, lending secured by moveable property was riskier particularly in the absence of legal and institutional challenges to protect secured parties' interests in the event of a default. So, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) with the technical assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI) of the ADB led the secured transaction reform essentially to unlock movable financing for MSMEs.

The project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was in four phases:

- Phase 1 - drafting the legal framework;
- Phase 2 - establishing the necessary infrastructure;
- Phase 3 - developing products and services tailored to MSMEs using movable property assets; and
- Phase 4 - evaluating the impact and promoting the uptake of these products and services by MSMEs.

This initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, aims to support the creation and modification of lending products secured by movable assets. When you talk about movable assets, could be personal property, cars, et cetera, you know, to name a few. To date, several banks and credit institutions have developed or adjusted their products to leverage movables financing. This includes simplifying lending applications criteria, introducing value chain and invoice financing products particularly for women led MSMEs.

The RBF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continues to maintain what we call Personal Property Securities Registry (PPSR). While working with the ADB and the PSDI to encourage banks and credit institutions in developing new and modified lending products to improve finance to MSMEs, in

particular, based on a baseline survey conducted in 2023, a sample of randomly selected 1,200 MSMEs are being considered for movable financing for the purpose of evaluating the impact of the reform.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, around 18 finance promotion workshops have been conducted across Fiji this year with banks, credit institutions and finance companies to encourage the adoption of these new products amongst MSMEs. The target is to reach 1,200 MSMEs randomly selected as part of a 2023 MSME Baseline Survey to measure the reforms impact. To date, at least 500 of them have agreed to share their data with lenders for potential financing. The RBF continued to promote further uptake among the remaining MSMEs.

The PPSR, managed by the RBF, has recorded over 120,000 notices filed by more than 120 client accounts including banks, credit institutions, finance companies, other creditors and their agents such as law firms. So, the Registry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, essentially in an online notice board of security interests enabling lenders and the creditors collectively called secured parties to register notices at any time and place.

It allows anyone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conduct public searches on property rights over collateral. This is particularly helpful for prospective secured parties as well as buyers of personal property in private transactions. So, for an example, if you want to buy second hand car or something and you want to check whether it is free of existing security interest. You could simply go to the Registrar and publicly search for that information. As of 31st April, 2024, the PPSR hosted 119 client accounts including six commercial banks, four credit institutions, 45 law firms, four credit unions and a range of other secured parties, including finance companies, hire purchase companies and motor vehicle dealerships and individuals.

The cumulative filings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by type amounted to \$124,762 filings including initial 71 percent amendment 4.9 percent, termination 16.5 percent and continuation notices of 7.6 percent. So, majority of these filings are made by commercial banks, credit institutions including Fiji Development Bank. The PPSR services have remained free. For the initial two years following its launch the ADB and PSDI provided funding for the annual maintenance of the Registrar.

In 2023, with the impending expiry of the fee period, the RBF Board resolved to continue to subsidise the annual cost of maintaining the Registrar for a further three years to 31st May 2026. So, to avoid the need for iterative requests for amendments in future and given the potential for indefinite extensions for the fee-free period. It was agreed that the amendment reflect no fee to be charged unless as determined by the Registrar for the following reasons:

- (1) include the administrative burden for implementing fees;
- (2) in the best interest of the RBF to continue to promote filings; and
- (3) linked well with efforts underway to promote new and modified lending products.

As such the Registrar is now amended to provide that no fee is to be charged from the date of commencement of the Act until such time has determined by the Registrar.

The PPSR is the cornerstone of the Secured Transaction Reform providing an efficient and transparent mechanism for establishing property rights over personal property by lenders and other conditions. So, with the amendment to the Personal Property Securities Regulations 2019, the RBF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will continue to offer fee-free services to its clients and the public search function remains available free of charge, 24/7.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is one of the groundbreaking

initiatives of FijiFirst and the Government then supported the Bill that was introduced in Parliament. Today, we can see the result of that particular new Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whenever I travel abroad, I always used to see these buildings carrying this small messages which says, “You can take loan for gold”, and I wondered how that was possible. Through this particular legislation, it is possible today. So, my question to the honourable Minister is, how is the Government ensuring that all stakeholders, including financial institutions, consumers and MSMEs, are fully engaged in benefitting from this initiative?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said earlier, there is active campaign, there are workshops, and as I have said, a lot of these institutions are actually finding it very useful and people themselves are also finding it useful. That is the reason why RBF is keeping it fee free, we want more people to use that, and more and more MSMEs are using moveable assets as security and it provides the lenders, including banks who are using that to be able to assess and provide loans. So, it is working.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Awareness is not there.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what I have said, that workshops and awareness campaigns are being held. You can do that as well, honourable Kumar.

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for continuing the good work that is put in place to put that measure in place. I think this is something that is of interest to a lot of us, as you have said, micro, small and medium enterprises. So, specifically, the issue that was raised here about awareness, what specific measure are you making sure to get to these people? A lot of them do not probably access a lot of the normal mechanisms that we have, so how is it that we get to those who can really benefit from this?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said earlier, the RBF and the data on the register shows that we still need more awareness. We still need to get financial institutions to support this and buy in to the use of the register and that is why we have asked RBF, banking institutions and other institutions with whom we have meetings to discuss this, to go out and promote this.

The RBF itself, will be conducting workshops, awareness campaigns so that MSMEs and the institutions are aware. It is just the people and those who are involved in MSMEs, they may not be aware of it, and that is the idea that we need to promote this more aggressively through various forms of campaigns that I have talked about.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you still not satisfied?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You will never be satisfied.

Status of the Upgrade of Nautoloulou/Cora Road
(Question No. 163/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the status upgrade work at the Nautoloulou/Cora Road in Wainunu, Bua?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Regarding the Nautoloulou/Cora Road in Wainunu, Bu,a Cora Access, according to information provided to me, is 4.2 kilometres inland from the main Kubulau Road towards the coast, while Nautoloulou is 810 metres side road from Cora Access. Most of these, are on freehold properties within the *Tikina* of Wainunu, Bua, and currently it is not part of the programme, but we have worked closely with the Ministry of Rural Development through the Commissioner's Office in terms of addressing some of the concerns of the residents there.

The access into freehold properties is an issue in terms of the various families who are there and some at times, have fenced off part of their portion and we are looking at further discussions on that. They will need to surrender portion of the land for the road, if we need to move it to make it a public access, so that is something we will need to discuss further with the freehold landowners, so we can have further dialogue on that.

MR. SPEAKER.- At least, you are moving, you can have more dialogue on that. I thank the honourable Minister. I just want to say that in the last session of Parliament, I was complaining about the Hibiscus Highway, and I am glad to see that it has begun to improve over this past few weeks. There is still a lot more work to be done.

However, on this particular road, when you ask for freehold land to be given, is there any thought of compensation or is it according to the will for them to give it as a gift, in this case, for it to be bequeath to FRA?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It is part of compulsory acquisition in terms of public access, but we, as a government, it is always important to dialogue with them in terms of that. Personally, I know that there is compulsory acquisition, but we need to look at what needs to go back to the landowners, as we move forward, because if we extrapolate that into the future, there would be huge economic benefits for any public access, not only for this one, but speaking in general.

MR. SPEAKER.- If I remember correctly, we have never done compulsory acquisition ever in Fiji. No, there is always this dialogue going on. That is why all the old Queens Road and the old Kings Road get reverted back to the landowners. So, it is an interesting topic, and that is why the honourable Minister is saying more dialogue, more *talanoa*, and then we take it from there. *Vinaka vakalevu*, we will move on.

Fiji's Plan on PACER Plus
(Question No. 164/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on Fiji's Plan on Pacer Plus?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, hopefully the way I have answered the question kind of provides the answer, Sir. Our involvement in PACER will rely fundamentally on whether it is good for Fiji. So, in terms of questions on market access and the like, it will be very much dictated on what we actually see.

As I have said, the trade imbalance is quite significant. Some may argue that because of the tourism flows, that vary balance but that is another view. I think as a country that is seeking to diversify its economy, it is important that we actually try and do more in terms of exports to both, Australia and New Zealand. That is certainly one motivation that is motivating me to look at PACER closer.

Also, in terms of direct investment into Fiji, we can see that there are a lot of activities in Australia and New Zealand, and it would be good to benefit from that as well. So, in response to honourable Koya's question, Sir, everything that we will do regarding PACER, will be done as long as Fiji's economic interests are protected and out of it, generally diversify the Fijian economy which I am sure the whole House agrees is long overdue and is something that we should try and achieve.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, definitely the deficit is huge and you have mentioned about the potentials to increase particularly more of trade from Fiji into Australia and New Zealand.

One of the key constraints is the facilities that we have. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the negotiations and liaison with the other agencies because, to facilitate this, we have funded programmes – the Pacific Horticultural and Agriculture Market Access (PHAMA) Plus and Market Development Facility (MDF) because our development partners, Sir, are aware that we lack proper facilities, and we do not qualify in terms of their quarantine regulation.

We have just talked about PIDF this morning. Based on the 1994 UNDP Report on Human Security People Centred Development and that is why I asked the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. We are very interested now in your National Development Plan. So, my question, honourable Deputy Prime Minister is the importance of these programmes and the continuation of it because some of these are temporary, how are you handling this and what are the prospects in further extending these programmes to facilitate this?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I am so glad that the honourable Leader of Opposition asked about those particular two agencies, the MDF and PHAMA Plus because certainly from the Ministry of Trade, if you like, using them as extensively as we can. Just to give you some examples, Sir, the discussions around the kava industry, we have used them in particular, because of the research they have done - PHAMA Plus, into kava. Also, we are now talking to MDF about scaling up a study on kava. I know I have talked quite boldly here about a billion-dollar industry, but it is always good to back it up with some analysis. Sir, MDF is actually going in discussion about them assisting with that.

Apart from that, Mr. Speaker, one of the things I realised, was somewhat shocked when I went on the New Zealand Trade Mission, the Australian Government said, "you already have market access pathways for more than 20 crop products from Fiji into New Zealand." Therein lies a bit of a challenge as well, which is why we are reaching out to MDF and PHAMA Plus, talking about pineapple and some other products like that. The medicinal cannabis study was actually done through MDF.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, to be quite honest, from the short time I have spent in Government, MDF and PHAMA Plus are two very good agencies that are actually helping with what we are trying to do in terms of economic diversification. They are responsible for helping expand the BPO sector. I was on the other side in the outsource industry executive committee and we actually used MDF to do a scoping study on BPO and then assist the BPO to set up its structure which is now currently running on its own.

So, in a nutshell, Sir, in response to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's question, those two agencies are quite effective in my view in terms of what they do and certainly now from our position, we will continue to use them as best as we can to ensure that we explore opportunities and pathways for further economic diversification.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a \$1 billion trade deficit is rather huge and I know when I was the former Minister for Trade, a lot of work was undertaken by the Ministry of Industry and Trade. They conducted impact assessment just to understand that if they sign up with PACER Plus, what would be the impact on the country itself?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my biggest concern at that time and it remains now is the fact that Australia and New Zealand are not accepting our produce from the Pacific. In Australia, you will find *uto* (breadfruit) in abundance and it is coming from Sri Lanka. The distance is big, whereas from here, it is a short distance. So, we need to, sort of, create a pathway to get more of our produce into our Pacific Island countries, particularly when it is fresh, not frozen. It is a huge challenge because we know protection is one way of survival and, perhaps, that could be one of the reasons why some of our produce cannot reach these markets.

So, I would like to ask the honourable Minister, are you talking to these two countries for them to help us to allow this produce to enter their markets? Thank you.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the short answer is, yes. We do recognise that it is called the non-tariff barriers and because of the sovereignty of the two countries, they do have barriers in terms of biosecurity particularly, and other requirements, and there has been an active discussion with them.

One other positive outcome during the FijiFirst time was when they actually managed to create a pathway through the ports just recently because of working together with Australia. I am trying to remember the type of treatment that was used, I think, the "hot air treatment", so that is the type of collaboration that we will need to continue to be able to try and get our market access through.

Very briefly, Sir, you probably would have heard me now and again talk about Fiji Water creating agricultural export commodity and some other potential exporters. The very reason for that is, it is nice to have the market access, but we need to produce things at scale. So, the announcement around commercial agriculture is quite particularly driven to us ensuring that once these market access pathways are clear, we can actually maximise them.

We are now discovering some very big interest in pineapple, for example, so we are working together with PHAMA Plus and MDF to, hopefully, try and create that pathway but underlying that is a private sector partner, who can be foreign or local, that kind of drives the opportunity, Sir.

So, yes, it is going to be an ongoing challenge and in our active conversation, we have some very good people in Biosecurity who are pushing Fiji's interests, and we hope to ensure that particularly, the non-tariff barriers, are continually addressed. Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a quick question to the honourable Minister. Honourable Minister, just post the conclusion of PACER Plus, there used to be an Office of the Chief Trade Adviser (OCTA) where appointments were done, et cetera to assist in all these negotiations. Now that we are moving forward in trying to see if we can finalise it with respect to Fiji, will we be appointing someone to provide that extra expertise for us as an independent person or are we just relying on our own expertise?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, currently as the honourable Koya will know, there are some very experienced trade negotiators now in our trade team, and what we intend to do is supplement that with the external advice as appropriate, particularly with PACER. We will certainly go down the road of some external advice to just supplement what our local team can do. I think that will be adequate for now, but if there is need for further resourcing, I am sure the honourable Minister for Finance will reach out to you, if required, but certainly for now, there is a budget already for current support.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will suspend proceedings and we adjourn for lunch. We will return at 2.30 p.m. when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.31 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Government's Future Plan on the CBUL Programme
(Question No. 165/2024)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways inform Parliament on the Government's future plans for the Committee on Better Utilisation of Land Programme that was introduced in 2008?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise in response to the question raised by the honorable Leader of the Opposition regarding Government's future plans for the Committee on the Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) programme that was introduced in 2008.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has been providing an annual budget, through the Ministry of Agriculture, since 2008 for the operation of CBUL. This initiative was created to motivate landowners to lease their land for productive agricultural use, as opposed to leaving it unutilised.

Landowners were given the chance to renew expired agriculture leases, if they lack the means to make use of the land. The subsidy for lease payments to individual landowners through the CBUL programme was increased from 6 percent to 10 percent over the last few years. Initially, the emphasis was placed on the sugar industry. However, it has gradually expanded into other agricultural commodities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the CBUL programme aimed to motivate landowners to give quick consent to lease their land for agriculture purposes. However, there was a lack of feedback regarding the impact of the annual expenditure of \$6.9 million due to poor monitoring and evaluation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet's endorsement for the CBUL Programme had expired in 2022 and the last payment of \$6.9 million was paid to landowners through iTLTB in the 2023-2024 financial year. Since the impact of the CBUL programme on agriculture production was not that clear, we did not have approval from the Ministry of Finance.

There was no budget allocated for the programme in the 2024-2025 financial year. Some of the areas of concerns at the moment are:

- there may be leases that are active but are not under agriculture production;
- there may be leases that have expired; and
- leases that have been rezoned for commercial development but may still be under the CBUL assistance programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the concerns on the CBUL programme, the Ministry recommends that consultations be carried out with iTLTB to agree on a way forward, and below are some potential strategies:

- (1) If the CBUL programme is to be extended, there needs to be active monitoring by the land administrators on its impact on agriculture production and development, as there is a need to show the impact and return on investments of public funds invested under the programme. The CBUL programme will have to be coordinated through the land administrators, preferably the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, which is the custodian of more than 82.5 percent of our land.

- (2) The ALTA Schedule of Values will also need to be reviewed to address the outdated land value which has been a concern to landowners over the years. This review and updating of the ALTA Schedule of Values should ensure that land is leased at a comparable rate to the current market rate, ensuring maximum benefits to the landowners. There is a draft Cabinet Paper that is being circulated to carry out a review of the ALTA Schedule of Values for feedback and support before taking it through DSC and Cabinet for endorsement.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in conclusion, if CBUL is to continue, it is essential for the Ministry of Agriculture to supply the lists of agricultural leaseholders who require assistance, determined by the productivity of their land. The main emphasis should extend beyond the lease renewal subsidy. It should also encompass financial assistance for farmers to enhance their productivity further.

HON. I.B. SERURATU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for his response. I think the key question that I have is, you have talked about the ALTA Schedule and, of course, the possibility of the continuation. If it is going to be reviewed, particularly on the performance as well, how will this be distributed amongst the key stakeholders that are involved in the CBUL work, particularly on the performances and with the landowning units that are responsible as well in ensuring that leases are available?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think in answer to the question, the honourable Member is fully aware because during his time as Minister for Agriculture, we were handling CBUL in the Ministry. The Ministry of Agriculture was simply like a post office; we received the funds, it comes under Head 30 as part of the Ministry of Agriculture's budget, we request for the RIE, and we take the whole funds and pass it on to iTLTB. The impact of the programme was not monitored by the Ministry because we simply were the post office for the funds. It appeared under our budget, but we passed the whole sum to iTLTB to administer and dish out the funds to the list of landowners that they provided.

The gist of the whole matter is, as custodian of taxpayers' money, we need to keep account of how those funds have been used and what has been the outcome, what has been the impact of the funds when given out. That has not been very clear under this programme. Should we revisit the programme, which I think was noble in its original intent to fasten the approval of landowners for leases, to have their land leased out rather than having it idle, that was a very noble intent by the government at that time.

The Ministry of Agriculture and iTLTB failed miserably because we did not come to terms with the monitoring and evaluation part to see what the real impact of the programme was using some parameters, like agricultural production, and we can go on into crops and livestock.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his reply. I am glad to see that in CBUL too there will be more of an emphasis on making sure there is a measurement of outputs that come out of it. When CBUL was first put in place, it was largely done in relation to sugar. In CBUL too, will this also be looking at a greater extent at the dairy sector?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Is that just a general statement or are you asking a question?

HON. J. USAMATE.- A question, Sir, on the dairy sector.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- The simple answer is, yes. Since it has now gone from sugar into non-sugar, dairy is part of non-sugar. Yes, honourable Member.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, honourable Minister for the answer that you have given and the need for review of CBUL. Four years now, landowners have been requesting if there could be an increase from 10 percent, and more. Even the Unimproved Capital Value (UCV) we have is only at 6 percent and CBUL has come in with an additional 4 percent and has given some value to the return of leasing out of land, given landowners in most cases are passive land providers and land is always locked in for a very long time. If that could be considered in the review, and increase of that percentage more towards the market value and also more proper coordination too with iTLTB, given that they are now pushing that landowners are to utilise land or to lease land, to move into entrepreneurship rather than only giving out leases.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for raising that concern from the landowners because that is a real concern regarding native land. It is quite unfair when you look at how the two parcels of land sitting side by side (freehold land and native land). Same kind of multi-million dollar view but when it comes to the value of the two parcels of land, the native land is always of a lower value because of what the honourable Member has raised. So, we will have to consider that.

MR. SPEAKER.- May I ask a question, what is now the fate of ALTA? Honourable Usamate is talking about 6 percent to 10 percent increases. These are well explained in this particular legislation and that legislation overrides the Native Land Trust Act.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, I have clarified with CEO of iTLTB, and this is one of the reasons why I raise this. Sir, ALTA is in existence but that provision on CBUL is just to fast-track things but I think the key question now is the review of ALTA. I think iTLTB is working on it.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the rates is based on the provisions under ALTA and that still continues, but one of the hiccups we had in the Ministry was when there was a decision to wipe out the Land Resource Planning Division. The Director of that Division is the gazetted officer under ALTA. So, when we wiped out the Division, that is why we do not have a review. When I came in as Minister, I brought back that Division. Now the process of reviewing the rates under ALTA has already started.

MR. SPEAKER.- There are beautiful clauses in there, bad husbandry that is usually executed by a Permanent Secretary for Agriculture or a Scientific Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture. These are all wonderful parts of the law that in most cases protects the interest of our Indian descent farmers.

We have the veto powers in the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* in the past. The Indian descent farmers, ALTA was their protection. It is great to hear that you will be reviewing that but again, what baffles me is that it is still in existence, and you brought in CBUL. Where does that leave ALTA? It cannot be in existence somewhere, that is part and parcel of the day to day life of farmers under ALTA. You have got Toko Town lands, those are 999 year leases.

Tribunal decisions have been made there because of the predominant use, including the marginal lots in the cane areas of Qeleloa, et cetera. I am just raising that as a point of interest for me because I work under the *iTaukei* Ministry for 30 years. It is hard to try and put that under the carpet and leave it there when it is very much still in existence.

30-Year National Review Report - Beijing Platform for Action
(Question No. 166/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection update Parliament on the Beijing Platform for Action 30-Year National Review Report?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, THE honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, and honourable Members of Parliament; good afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the leadership of our Prime Minister in 1995, Fiji endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It was a comprehensive global agenda for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Since then, the UN Commission on the Status of Women has taken stock of progress on this platform for action every five years and for Fiji, I am pleased to update this House that last month, Cabinet had endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) 30-Year National Review Report. So, it has been 30 years, and 30 years, we are again under the able leadership of our honourable Prime Minister to bring this event which will be celebrated next year.

The BPfA process provided an opportunity for Fiji to undertake its national review of the 12 critical areas highlighting significant achievements and challenges of women and girls over the past five years. These critical areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are clustered into six dimensions which includes areas such as:

- (1) inclusive development;
- (2) social protection;
- (3) freedom from violence;
- (4) stigma and stereotypes;
- (5) gender responsive institutions; and
- (6) environmental conservation.

The Fiji BPfA Plus 30 Review Report drew extensive insights from the Fiji Country Gender Assessment (FCGA) which was approved by Cabinet in 2023 and the work that was conducted by the previous government to get to that point. I acknowledge the contribution of my two former women Ministers.

The FCGA was undertaken over the course of two years and realised through a Whole of Government and inclusive consultation process with various stakeholders. In this context in building upon the extensive consultation process for the FCGA and other key recent national strategic initiatives, the BPA Plus 30 Report also benefitted from further consultations and input from civil society, women's rights organisations, whom I would like to also acknowledge.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the preparation of the report for next year was made much easier with the FCGA. It is important to underline that despite the gendered impacts of the global health pandemic and the continued effects of the climate crisis, Fiji has made strides in advancing gender equality over the last five years. These achievements, as you know, are attributed to the development and implementation of key Whole of Government Gender Equality Policies. These strategic national efforts involved partnerships as I had mentioned with the civil society, NGOs, faith-based organisations and women's right organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, the Report underscored Fiji's commitment to a Whole of Government evidence-based and transformative approach in rolling out these initiatives and this was commended very well at the Women's Ministers Meeting and Triennial Meeting in the Marshall Islands where our counterpart women Ministers around the Pacific would like to get more information and also help them to develop such policies in their own countries. As you know, this

includes the National Action Plan to prevent gender-based violence and the upcoming Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan, and Phase Two of the Gender Responsive Budgeting and Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative (ICD).

I would just like to at this point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, clarify to members of the public that there is a difference between gender transformative (the use of those words) and transgender. There were some confusion on social media about this and of course there were a lot of criticisms about the initiative, but I would like to clarify that this is not such the case. Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative looks at rolling out or gender mainstreaming across ministries and agencies in terms of planning, budgeting and having policies to that effect.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report highlights significant achievements in critical areas including our social protection policies. Of course, we know all our six programmes that we currently run, looking at specifically supporting women in the areas of Family Assistance Scheme, Care and Protection Allowance for Children, Social Pension Scheme, Rural Pregnant Mothers Programme, Food Voucher Programme as well as the Transport Allowance and, of course, the Disability Allowance Scheme as well.

The Report also highlights the challenges that remain, that whilst we celebrate our educational achievements and robust legal and policy foundations, there is a need to ensure these translate into real impacts. What does this mean? That is equal participation in the formal economy. Even though we have over 50 percent of women graduates, we still see a very low participation in the formal economy on the labour participation of women.

What is the disconnect there? Mr. Speaker, this is all part of the development of the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment Plan and that is to look into that. It also includes access to financial resources, there are efforts being made and I thank the line Ministries involved including the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises where women are becoming the focus of the provision of micro-finance for them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also lack of leadership roles in both public and private spheres and we all need to do better to commit to more women participating in these roles. The Report also highlights the high incidents of gender-based violence including technology facilitated gender based violence and also in the area of women's health. I thank the honourable Minister for Health and his team in their commitment in hopefully developing a policy to deal with cervical cancer in Fiji which is the number one cause of death for women in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, going forward, following the submission of this Review Report, we now anticipate Fiji's participation at the Regional Review at the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference in Thailand from 19th November to 21st November, 2024 which Fiji has been nominated to be the Vice-Chair. In preparation for the Conference in November, we aim to bring together CSOs, our faith-based organisations and women's organisations as well to present the report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Women and I thank the UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office for collaborating with our team in the Ministry to prepare for this and our Government delegations which Fiji will be part of.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we approach this remarkable 30th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2025, the Beijing Platform for Action +30 Review Report will showcase not just statistics but the resilience and successes of our Fijian women and girls in all their diversity. Fiji stands as a leader, stands at this pivotal juncture, one we will not only celebrate our achievements but also confront the challenges that continue to persist in the struggle for gender equality and an

urgent call for action.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, where there is support for the BPfA but in relevance to gender equality inclusion, gender based violence and women protection, I would like to give the honourable Minister a reality check because the Fiji Police statistics states that 25 percent of crimes against women increased in June, 39 percent increase in July, a young lady died from a ferris wheel incident and we have a child that got injured at the Hibiscus Festival as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of talk about a better future, policies, events, that is fine. What about the present? While there is support for BPfA and the Women's Economic Empowerment Plan, what action is your Ministry taking to take care of these women who are victims of these crimes in Fiji?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, honourable Sharma for the question. I want to start off by stating that it is not just the Ministry's responsibility to deal with gender-based violence. It is the whole of Government, whole of society approach that needs to be undertaken.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is correct, in the last ten years, the statistics have not changed where two out of three women continue to face violence in their lifetimes. So, it has not changed under the previous government and so with the development and implementation of a National Action Plan, the key words are "prevention of violence before it starts". We do need to take a different approach to actually address the root causes of violence against women and girls and that is patriarchy, it is currently being implemented

HON. P.K. BALA.- Be yourself!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, it was actually 10 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that under the previous government as well....

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What is happening now....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- If honourable Sharma, honourable Kumar and other Members were paying attention, we are now looking at key settings under the National Action Plan.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Microwaving.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- In fact for the very first time, our traditional leaders have said that they have even come together to be called by Government, by our Ministry to even discuss gender based violence. It has never been done before and for the very first time, our Great Council of Chiefs as well as our provincial chairs have come together to discuss this matter, Mr. Speaker, because we need to address the root causes of it and that is patriarchy. With these settings, it also includes the health setting as well as the education setting.

We are working with our line Ministries to be able to address this in the education curriculum to educate our children about gender-based violence, about violence against children and developing healthy relationships between boys and girls. Values based education, this is something that they did

not address in the past, Mr. Speaker, and this needs to be inculcated in the education curriculum which is part of the education curriculum review.

Also in the health setting, Mr. Speaker, children do present themselves as too late or even women, the abuse has happened but how do we support the health system in terms of educating our people, educating our children and women as well as boys and men? Boys and men have not been engaged in the past, Mr. Speaker. This is something we will be doing differently this time; to talk to our men and boys. They cannot be left out of the equation.

Mr. Speaker, as we implement this National Action Plan, we will be conducting a survey, and this survey will inform a communications campaign and the messaging to members of the public on how to prevent violence before it starts and that is within the four-year plan. It has already been, yes you are right, one-and-a-half years and we have another two-and-a-half years to go. We thank the Australian Government for supporting this initiative as we continue to roll out the implementation of this plan.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I want to thank the honourable Minister for bringing this topic into this Parliament. Just to let the honourable Minister know, whatever you say now, were all done during our time. However, we have to move forward. Now, there are certain things that are not being covered, not even in Parliament, not even by laws and it is of great concern.

We can learn from other countries like, for example, coercive control. Coercive control is now taken very seriously in other parts of the world, and we would like to see that this is also included in your plan, change the legislation and make it criminal so that we can protect women who suffer in silence.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Not for you too. I will ask when I want to ask.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need champions in the area, we need champions in this area, we need more men to stand up and protect women and we need more champions in this Parliament. Women issues should not be left to women to solve because it is not created by women.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- We know that!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You know it but what are you doing about it? Do something, knowing is not good enough, do something about it. You are in the Government, change the laws, enforce the laws, just do not work on the surveys, plans, implementation and consultation. We have to move away from it; action is what we need.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Sorry, Mr. Speaker, I just want to respond to honourable Premila Kumar.

Mr. Speaker, there was a statement she made that was actually incorrect and I would like to correct her. In the last 10 years, they have not conducted a survey to men and boys and women and girls. In our survey that we will be conducting, we will be conducting to ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ... question men and boys as well, and this has never been done before. We are doing this under this National Action Plan. We need to include our men and boys, and honourable Kumar brought up a very valid point, thank you. We do need male advocates for gender equality, and I thank the honourable Member's initiative that will be coming soon, thank you, through the CWP that we may be seeing that kind of initiative here in Parliament where we do address the issue of coercive control as a crime. So, we are working on that also as a Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Group.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a question for the honourable Minister. Thank you for talking about women empowerment, but two of our senior diplomats just got sacked from our Foreign Missions and they are now pursuing their cases. One is the Deputy PRUN in New York and one is the Counsellor in Australia. Is your Ministry going to investigate this?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very poor.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, our Ministry has not received any formal complaint about these sacking.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I will live it to the line Minister concerned to address that. If any complaints comes to the line Minister's desk, that is, the honourable Prime Minister, and if there is any issue about them on the basis of being a woman, then we may or may not be involved. I will leave it to the discretion and the decision of the line Minister concerned.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, five about minutes ago you responded to honourable Rinesh Sharma, where you said that the root cause of gender based violence is patriarchy. Is that evidence-based, honourable Minister, and could we see it?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, there is a lot of literature proven by statistics on the basis that patriarchy is a root cause of gender inequality and that is the unequal power between men and women in decision making. I exhort Members who have questions about this to, please, have a read on it. We have conducted the evidence-based, all of government and society approach in the National Action Plan, which is already documented and the survey conducted by thousands of Fijians identified patriarchy as the root cause. This is the first Government document, first official document to actually state that patriarchy is the root cause. That is actually an achievement in itself, Mr. Speaker, coming from the thousands of Fijians who were consulted and surveyed for the National Action Plan to prevent gender-based violence.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I had asked gender-based violence not equalities because she mentioned the root cause of gender based equality now. I was actually talking about violence.

MR. SPEAKER.- She has responded by saying that the survey they conducted brought out this continuance of gender based violence, based on patriarchal position because we are a developing

country. Everything we will try and strive for, we have to come to understand or first of all, try and understand fully where we are; we are a developing nation. We are tied by traditions and cultures; ours is better even though its patriarchal. Then you have the ones that exist in very extreme situations like the Talibans, et cetera. That is a different kind of world altogether that they live in, they do the worst of the worst and as such, I kind of agree with that finding that at least that has come up - the patriarchal influence.

In Fiji, that is the way it is, the culture and tradition are mostly patriarchal. In other parts of the Pacific, you go up to Micronesia, it is matriarchal. That is in our world. At least, we are kind of moving ahead slowly, but compared to some other countries in the region, it is quite difficult. Tonga, for instance, they could not ratify that because their Commissioner of Police punched the wife, so tradition and culture still very much operates in that area. I hope I am sharing that to bring some light into what we are discussing here.

Benefits of PPP for the Healthcare Sector
(Question No. 167/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the benefits of the Public-Private Partnership approach for the healthcare sector (and I am sure he is not going to tell us it is going to depend on the survey)?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Usamate for asking the question on behalf of the honourable Maharaj who is not here with us. Nevertheless, I will try and answer with the best of my ability. Are you referring to PPP in general or in particular to Aspen Lautoka Hospital or the GP Scheme?

HON. J. USAMATE.- In general.

MR. SPEAKER.- He has fired the question, the bullet still has not landed, so he is making some adjustments again.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I will answer the question based on what we, as a Ministry faced, not from any survey done. There are benefits of PPP, as you are well aware. As previous government you should be well aware of the PPP arrangement and how it was brought in during COVID-19 and the PPP arrangements with Aspen Medical so basically, you would know most of the answers to this question. As we would say in Taveuni, *taro va Wainikeli* - you ask when you already know the answer.

That being said, Mr. Speaker, I will try and answer it first from the perspective of PPP with GPs and what the Ministry is also doing in terms of the new arrangements and the programmes that are in place, then touch a little bit on the issue with Aspen Medical.

Before touching on the benefits, since taking office, we have noted the challenges in trying to ensure that PPP goes ahead and, at the same time, in terms of monitoring and evaluation - the impacts it has on why it was made in the first place.

We are well aware that it was done during COVID to assist with the busy schedule of public hospitals but then, it moved further. So, there are numerous PPPs, together with the Ministry of Health and the private sector. That is to do with laundry, security and other services like radiology, et cetera, which are being outsourced when the need arises.

In terms of the benefits of the PPP arrangement, as we speak, we have the:

- Free Medicine Scheme. So, 59,000 individuals have been registered under this Scheme to date.
- Kidney Dialysis Subsidies Scheme where 419 individuals have been registered and are doing it.
- PPP for GPs where 17 are engaged as of 2021 and currently, 59 GPs are engaged in the Scheme to date.
- 54 Hospitals have outsourced security services and five Hospitals have outsourced housekeeping services - CWM Hospital, Labasa Hospital, Nadi Hospital, Sigatoka Hospital and Navosa Hospital.

With any agreement, there are also risks and if preparatory work is not done right, then what we are currently experiencing are the risks from those issues. Some of the risks include:

- (1) Poor understanding and application of the concept of Public Private Partnership (PPP).
- (2) Weak institutional capacity in the public sector agencies.
- (3) Donor-driven PPPs that lose momentum and the interest die down.
- (4) Lack or weak monitoring which is an area we are trying to improve on.
- (5) Limited sustainable resources.
- (6) Political affinities and inability to sustain the PPP arrangement.
- (7) Peace and order at PPP site.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, the arrangement between Government and Health Care Fiji, which is the concessionaire, on how it manages Aspen, as it is, they have brought in new services that has improved the quality of services at Lautoka Hospital, such as the:

- Modern Accident and Emergency Department;
- New radiology equipment;
- a theatre;
- a Cardiology Unit which tends to look after, I can say, low risk cardiac cases;
- open cardiac surgery; and
- other areas within the Lautoka Hospital and also the new Ba Aspen.

Again, the benefits are there but in terms of how planning was done, I believe it was not done properly. Since taking office, it was the first time for me, together with the Permanent Secretary and our Senior Executives at the Ministry of Health, to be looking at the Concessional Agreement. I believe, if anything that has to do with health, it should involve health from the initial stages of partnership.

Nevertheless, it is something that Government is trying to look at how best we can come out of it because as it is, they are employing our former staff, and they are providing much needed services within the Western Division.

I have mentioned some of the benefits in both, the PPP arrangement between the GPs and the current one we are having with Lautoka Aspen and Ba, and I am willing to take questions with regards to any clarification.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I want to thank the honourable Minister for informing this House that there are benefits on Public Private Partnership (PPP). Thank you for the honest answer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Budget Debate, I did raise this, but the answer was not given or provided that before Aspen took over the Ba and Lautoka Hospitals, what was the cost of the operations at that point in time?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, honourable Bala, for your supplementation question. As I had alluded to, the Ministry of Health was not involved in the initial arrangement or the concessional agreement. Therefore, I cannot answer the question that he is asking.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am just asking what was the cost of operations for Ba and Lautoka Hospitals before Aspen took over?

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am not asking you, you are not the Minister for Health.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- It is much less than what you are paying right now.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, I have a supplementary question. We thank the honourable Minister for the answer, especially, on the benefits of keeping the PPP. He has also mentioned about the monitoring and evaluation of how this programme has been rolled out. With all the PPP agencies that are available whether it be Dental, General Practitioner (GP) or private hospital, there was accreditation done by the Fiji Medical and Dental Council for the facility, the specialist licence, et cetera.

There has been a lot of deaths lately in our public sector. So, we must keep the PPP, enhance it and improve it. My question to the honourable Minister is whether accreditation was done with the public sector, as well in carrying out their healthcare services.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- By law, accreditation is a must before you are allowed to practise. For doctors, accreditation is done by the Fiji Medical and Dental Council. I am sure he knows this very well. For nurses, accreditation is done by the Fiji Nursing Council, as well as other cadre. To answer his question, yes, by law, accreditation is a must before anyone is allowed to practise locally or coming in from overseas to try and practise in Fiji.

FRA Plans for Road Extension – Tawake to Wainika Village
(Question No. 168/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on plans by the Fiji Roads Authority to extend the road from Tawake to Wainika Village in the Udu Peninsula in Cakaudrove?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for that question. In terms of the route from Tawake to Wainika in the Udu Peninsula, that is part of the Rural Roads Programme in terms of the programme of Fiji Roads Authority (FRA). As of now, there have been progress in terms of the survey works. It is about 10 kilometres within the *District* of Tawake, Cakaudrove, and currently progressing with final design, including alignment detail, et cetera.

There are also due diligent processes to be undertaken in terms of the land, environment and also social safeguard requirements before the project begins. So, it is crucial that these are all covered

in order that the project progresses smoothly and meets the needs of the community, of course, with their input into the project.

In terms of design, as I have mentioned, we are looking at the completion of the complete design and technical specifications, that due diligence, as I have mentioned, and also a tentative budget. It is not in the current budget, but once that work is complete, we envisage to include that in the 2025-2026 Budget.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for informing us of the plans for this road which has been talked about at the end of 2022, and we were looking forward to it. I am just trying to confirm with the Minister whether the road from Lagi down to Tawake that will connect with the new one, is that road in working condition, and if it is not, is that something that you will also upgrade?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, according to Manager North, that has been part of the current maintenance programme but I will have to double check with him. We will need to crosscheck with him again.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just clarify because in 2022, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics visited the area and that was about Wainigadru to Wainika. You have talked about Tawake to Wainika.

The problem with Lagi to Tawake is the hill. You have to do a big cut on the hill from Lagi to Tawake, so that it becomes accessible. That is the big challenge. So, is it Tawake to Wainika or Wainigadru to Wainika. Thank you.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- He is sharing his experience from up there in the North.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The question is Tawake to Wainika and that is the information that has been provided to me.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question. Honourable Minister, one of the problems in the past but I am not sure about now, after the road has been designed and constructed, is trying to get the PSV vehicle to service those roads, especially the heavy ones. The aggregation part of the road to be able to accommodate heavy PSV vehicles such as carriers and buses, is that part of this project, or is it only like a one stop shop for the construction of road?

I noticed that the one in Cakaudrove, especially in the Wailevu area for the Vuadomo Road, Natua Road and Vunidamoli Road, they have been constructed but they are having the problem of trying to get PSV vehicles on those roads. What measures are you taking to ensure that roads are being constructed and accredited to service heavy PSV vehicles?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, definitely, if we construct roads, of course, they should cater for PSV vehicles. From my understanding, that should be done accordingly as per the specifications and technical requirements when we do roads. So, when it is done, it is according to those specifications which will definitely cater for all vehicles, including PSV vehicles, such as public buses and carriers or taxis.

I accept that there have been issues after roads are done and the maintenance, but that is something we are working on to ensure that, that programme maintenance is monitored and done as and when it is needed rather than being left there to deteriorate, like in the last 16 years.

In terms of what had happened with the withdrawal or closure of PWD, it has impacted on the programme maintenance because they were based on location in various areas in Fiji with the required equipment, such as graders, rollers, deep truck - the basic equipment. That was withdrawn and, definitely, that created problems because you withdrew that public service and replaced it with private contractors. Unfortunately, that standard has not matched, or the efficiency does not match with the operations of the depots.

I suppose, moving forward, that is something as a government, you and us, it is not us against you, we need to work together and have the right mix in terms of moving forward. So that is something we are looking forward to in terms of acquisition for the depots to supplement the programme maintenance side.

MR. SPEAKER.- He wants the right mix.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, just leading on the supplementary question about PSV access to these villages. The base permit for these PSV vehicles from the village to towns need to be considered as well in the specification. I just want to ask the honourable Minister if that is part of it?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- We are moving from PWD, FRA to LTA.

(Laughter)

I will not answer that because there is a question on that tomorrow to be asked by honourable Tuinaceva.

Before I finish, we had discussed land acquisition, that is clearly specified in Section 27 of the Constitution, I mean your Constitution, necessary public purpose. So, it is clearly specified there in terms of the owner who will be promptly paid an agreed compensation for property. There is also a framework which had been developed by FRA regarding that.

There are various steps in terms of that acquisition including the various social economic analysis which needs to be done, including proper consultation before any project is started, that needs to be all paid for and dealt with. So that is the process being followed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this junction for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call on 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:

Under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have two Oral Questions and a Written Question, as well as Schedule 3 on Motion for Debate in today's Order Paper.

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

I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply, also if any.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for afternoon tea. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.39 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.05 p.m.

Distribution of Solar Freezers – Rural Fishing Communities
(Question No. 169/2024)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry update Parliament on the distribution of solar freezers to rural fishing communities?

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the distribution of solar freezers to Fiji's coastal and rural communities is a programme that is designed to address the challenges faced by our isolated fishing communities, particularly, in preserving their catch and ensuring that fish products maintain their quality as they make their way to the markets. This initiative was a result of extensive consultation with these communities with the goal of preventing fish spoilage, reducing post-harvest losses and enhancing the overall value of their catch. It also aligns with our commitment to environmental sustainability, supporting the going green concept by utilising renewable energy resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Fisheries, other Government agencies and international partners, the Ministry has distributed a total of 33 solar freezers to rural fishing communities. This includes 21 solar freezers distributed to the Eastern Division, benefitting communities in Lomaiviti, Kadavu and Lau. The Western Division received nine solar freezers that were delivered to the coastal villages in Yasawa, Ra and Nadroga/Navosa. The Northern Division received five solar freezers which were provided to remote islands of Yadua, Kia and Cikobia. The Central Division received three solar freezers which were distributed to areas including Qoma and Yanuca Island.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the issues encountered was that the solar freezers were not only distributed by the Ministry of Fisheries and their donor agencies, but were also distributed by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection and the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development through the Commissioners as assistance to our rural communities. One of the issues raised was the different agencies that provided solar freezers and the back-up that was provided in regard to the solar freezers. I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister if she has faced this issue and if she can look into the matter so that the provision of these solar freezers are centralised so that it is easier to monitor and maintain.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform the honourable Member that as of this financial year, the procurement of solar freezers is done entirely with the Ministry. So, the Ministry will procure the solar freezers and distribute it accordingly to the communities that ask for this assistance.

MR. SPEAKER.- And the ones that were supplied by the other donors, the Ministry of Women is also involved in it?

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, like what the honourable Member mentioned, in the past, other Government agencies were also donating solar freezers which were then distributed to the communities by the Ministry of Fisheries. But as of this year, the Ministry of Fisheries has decided to take on the initiative to continue this assistance by budgeting for the procurement of solar freezers and distribution to the various communities.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for her answer. I am wondering, how does the Ministry calculate the impact of these solar freezers? Is it just ticking off the box that the solar freezer is in, or do you have some sort of a measure to ascertain the impact it is having on that community? What sort of things are you looking at?

MR. SPEAKER.- I will allow that question to be answered, honourable Minister.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the distribution of solar freezers to our rural fishing communities, as mentioned earlier, the Ministry has distributed a total of 33. With respect to the impact, the communities are assisted with solar freezers because of their geographical location and accessibility. They do not have accessibility to ice plants where they can purchase ice and preserve their catch.

There are four factors that the Ministry uses to determine who can receive this assistance:

- (i) Accessibility and isolation;
- (ii) Community readiness and organisation;
- (iii) Previous engagement and data sharing; and
- (iv) Donor and partner priorities.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the answers that she has provided. I had raised a question of other government agencies that distribute the solar freezers, more so with the divisional Commissioners.

My concern, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is when we visit the different islands, the question arises, will the Ministry of Fisheries repair the solar freezers even though it is distributed by other agencies? Just because of the storage of fish, they think that the Ministry of Fisheries becomes responsible for those units that was distributed by other Ministries and agencies.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, with this initiative, we have seen considerable success and we are also aware of the challenges that have arisen with the distributed units. So, there have been reports of technical issues with solar panels, invertors and battery systems, particularly in areas with inconsistent sunlight and extreme weather conditions. So, the Ministry is actively addressing these issues by working closely with the suppliers to improve the technology and tailor-made systems to the specific needs of each location of each community.

Outcome of the 2020 Meeting of PRC4CD
(Question No. 170/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the outcome of the 2020 Meeting of the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Even though I cannot update Parliament on the outcome of the 2020 Meeting because I was not yet a Minister then, nevertheless, the Early Childhood Development topic, especially the policy as it is now, has been a topic of discussion for some time and, therefore, I will share my experience and what has transpired since taking office.

In early February 2023, there was a regional meeting which involved Pacific Island nations that met in Nadi that endorsed the Early Childhood Development and all agreed that it be recognised respectfully in the region. That being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the current development of Early Childhood, what is Early Childhood Development?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the first 1,000 days of life for an infant, and studies have shown that there is an investment case in terms of a dollar being invested into Early Childhood Development, there is a return of \$13 worth of investment. Therefore, I can say that Fiji, within the region, is taking the lead and we are very grateful to the previous Administration for ensuring that Early Childhood Development is a priority of Government.

The Ministry of Health together with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection and other relevant Ministries and stakeholders, have formed a steering committee and did consultation. Last month, Cabinet endorsed the National Early Childhood Development Policy and the Monitoring and Evaluation Accountability Learning Framework. Cabinet has also endorsed the Early Childhood Development funding under the respective Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Children and Social Protection, to be provided through the normal budgetary process.

With that being said, I can also say that as part of the new National Development Plan that is also being factored into the Early Childhood Development Policy, as I have said, Fiji is one of the leaders in the region and we are very grateful to the previous Administration and the current Government on how it is prioritising Early Childhood Development.

We are not only ensuring the first 1,000 days of life but we are also ensuring that maternal health is where development starts. So, we are looking into the development and welfare of our mothers during the early stages and in doing so, we want to ensure in our future generation in terms of combatting NCDs, in terms of combatting other current challenges we are facing now, ensuring that we start from an early age, ensuring that our younger generation get the support in terms of their development, they are able to make wise and good choices. Something I believe was not available to the current generation as we speak.

That is the current status of the Early Childhood Development, it is a policy now and in the space of the meeting on PIFS in Tonga, I was very fortunate to attend a day, sponsored by UNICEF, to share Fiji's experience. Fiji is grateful to our development partners, MFAT and UNICEF, for assisting us in this space.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Minister, I have a question. You have just mentioned UNICEF. In every early childhood workshop, meeting or whatever we may call it, one of the key items on the agenda is nutrition because for Fiji particularly, we have issues with anaemia, stunting and apart from those, under nourished. How is this being handled together with the key agencies involved? Again, I keep asking about Fiji's Food and Nutrition Security Policy, where is it now because this is a key agenda when it comes to the multilateral partners.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his supplementary question. In short, yes, nutrition is part of Early Childhood Development Policy, as well as immunisation and education. The Food and Nutrition Policy links with the Ministry of Agriculture and I hope very soon we will meet and sit down and see how best that can be brought to the table so that it is adopted. But in short, yes, nutrition is very much part of the Early Childhood Development Policy.

Written QuestionReported Fires and Casualties – July 2021 to July 2024
(Question No. 171/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on:

- (a) the total number of fires from July 2021 to July 2024;
- (b) the total number of casualties from July 2021 to July 2024; and
- (c) the causes of fire reported during the same period?

¹ HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby submit my response to the Written Question this afternoon.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

**REVIEW REPORT ON THE PUBLIC ENTERPRISES AND
OTHER ENTITIES' 2019-2022 AUDIT REPORTS**

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Audit Reports on Public Enterprises and Other Entities for the audit year ending from 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 which was tabled on 8th August, 2024.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion .

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I, as Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts do move the motion and take this opportunity to speak on the motion on the review of the Audit Reports on Public Enterprises and Other Entities for the audit year ending from 2019 to 2020 and 2021 to 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as one can see from the Report, they were for the audit years ending 2019 to 2020 and 2021 to 2022, that is, during the previous Government's reign and there are few important points to note. The 2019 to 2020 audit accounts were sent over to the then Speaker on 17th September, 2021 and referred to the Committee on 23rd September, 2021 and was not looked into before the Government changed hands. So, there were 11 financial statements, 11 audit opinions, 10 qualified or unmodified and one qualified.

In 2021-2022, the audit report was sent over to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 30th March, 2023 and referred to the Committee on 6th April, 2023. It covered 30 financial statements, out of those, 25 were issued with qualified opinions and five were with modified opinions which included Walesi, Fiji, Food Processors Fiji, Fiji Rice PTE Limited and Yaqara Pastoral Company Pte Limited.

Sir, I have already highlighted some of the common findings identified by the Committee and I wish to reiterate the significant matters that needs to be brought to the attention of the House for

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 171/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.

consideration includes the delay. Public enterprises and other responsible Ministries to address significant delays in submission of quality draft financial statements for audit. They have to be carried out by those respective Boards and those in the Ministry of Public Enterprises and those Ministries responsible, including the Permanent Secretary and the Minister.

We believe that the previous Government did not carry out its supervisory role on this. As an example, we note a lot of delays, the worst is Fiji Investment Corporation Limited which has not provided its accounts for audit from 2006 and also Viti Corporation's last audit was in 2007. Apart from that, there were system issues, staff issues and continue to other issues as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second is qualified opinions that needs to be rectified as soon as possible by the current administration. The third is the auditor needs to be an external auditor or a certified one for all State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and should have the powers to carry out audit. Their financial or performance on those organisations that receive funding from the Government directly or indirectly to ensure that the findings can be reported to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a few that are still outside the ambit of the Office of the Auditor-General and they are Fiji Pine Limited and Fiji Sugar Corporation. We wish to thank Fiji Airways, they have already produced theirs last month, Air Terminal Services, Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Limited and Fiji Ports Corporation Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the findings, there were recommendations as well based on those findings and we wish that the Ministry of Public Enterprises carried out most or all of those recommendations including one that I probably assume is important which is all these Public Enterprises to be well supervised by the Ministry of Public Enterprises, as well as Ministries responsible. Even better, to have a separate ministry of its own with the Minister, so as not to fall back into what happened in the last Government, where a Minister was responsible for a lot of portfolios.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and for that, I also have a list of speakers supplied by the two Whips, as follows:

- (1) Honourable P.D. Kumar;
- (2) Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprise and Veteran Affairs;
- (3) Honourable H. Chand;
- (4) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Aviation; and
- (5) Honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this motion. Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for their thorough Report and for presenting practical recommendations, which is cost effective that we must consider seriously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are vital to our nation's economic growth. They manage crucial infrastructure such as, ports, housing, transport utilities, financial services and agriculture. They provide services that are not just essential for our daily lives, but also for the functioning of businesses across the country. Many of these SOEs operate as monopolies, and we know, EFL, Fiji Airways and many more, which means there is no competition to drive innovation, improve efficiency or deliver better services to the people.

While SOEs are meant to serve the interest of the people and the private sector, their track record is often marred by inefficiency, bureaucracy, corruption, lack of competition and mismanagement. These are recurring issues that demand immediate and serious attention. We all know that when SOEs fail to be profitable or break even, they become a financial burden on the Government, draining resources that could otherwise be invested in crucial sectors like, health and education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot allow our economic progress to be held back by inefficiencies within the SOEs. Reform is essential and we must continue to create opportunities for private sector engagement or Public-Private Partnerships. The Committee made eight recommendations, and being a Member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, we also received some of these reports on SOEs, not all, but few reports come to us. Based on our experience, working with these reports, I fully support the recommendations made by the Committee.

Recommendations 1 and 2 suggests that smaller public enterprises with similar nature of businesses or synergies should be merged. This is to be done to enhance strategic direction, governance and improve cost efficiency. For example, shared services, this can allow entities to pull resources such as accountants, HR personnel, internal auditors, and even accounting software, a similar arrangement we had introduced with the Ministry of Local Government with all 13 Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a clear example is Fiji Meats Industry Board (FMIB) and Yaqara Pastoral. These entities are struggling with no clear direction, both operating at a loss. Yaqara Pastoral is engaged in cattle farming to produce high quality beef, while FMIB is in the business of slaughtering animals. The FMIB is finding it difficult to keep its abattoirs operational daily due to low throughputs.

Let me just emphasise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that FMIB has land worth around \$31.9 million, which is not producing any results, it is just there. They are not using it to create revenue. A single board could oversee both operations more effectively and we know that when the boards are separate, they become territorial, but if you have a single board, there will be a single vision, and they will be able to drive the process to success.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when SOEs consistently fail to submit annual reports or operate commercially, it points to a deeper issue - the appointment of Board of Directors. Are we appointing fit and proper persons to look after these entities? We must stop appointing Permanent Secretaries and CEOs to other Boards when they fail to manage their ministries or companies.

We need merit-based appointments, selecting individuals with strong financial or commercial expertise. If board members are not delivering, the Government must be prepared to replace them. It is concerning that some SOEs are unable to submit timely Annual Reports. They rely on private accounting firms to prepare their financial statements and strategic plans. This raised a serious question, why are we paying the CEOs and financial officers if they cannot perform this basic function?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also recommended that the Ministry of Public Enterprises be established as a standalone Ministry. This Ministry would focus on modernising processes, strengthening institutional capacity, developing a corporate culture, implementing the Public Enterprise Act and monitoring SOE performance to ensure efficient service delivery and better returns for the Government. I just want to highlight that not all SOEs are commercially based. There are some which are created to perform basic functions for the public, they are not expected to generate any massive revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SOE portfolio has a total asset-base of over \$9 billion in 2022, yielding only \$30.8 million in dividends during the COVID period. The Government is expecting a lot more in dividends from these SOEs, now that the situation has normalised, we are back into business and so forth. However, even considering that, this return is far too low for the scale of assets involved; \$9 billion is a lot of money. It is evident that a dedicated Ministry is justified to oversee and optimise the performance of SOEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government initiated the reform process with the enactment of Public Enterprise Act in 2019 to improve SOE governance and commercial frameworks. The legislation places a single Minister in charge of overseeing SOEs. This clearly defines Director duties, sets out governance practices, simplifies SOE legal structures and clarifies the processes for community service obligations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Asian Development Bank's Finding Balance 2023 Report which I understand, honourable Gavoka was the chief guest, Fiji's SOE portfolio was among the best performance in the region from 2015 to 2020 largely due to the various reforms. However, the Report also identified gaps in the Act. There are no specific deadlines for the SOE to submit their accounts to the responsible Minister nor is there a requirement for these accounts to be presented in Parliament. This is the finding of ADB. However, in my personal view, individual legislation guiding the entity has provisions on the submission of Annual Reports to Parliament.

In 2015, the FijiFirst Government established for the first time a government company called Asset Fiji Limited to allow divestment of shares to the private sector without selling Government assets, as we saw with the past government. The honourable Prime Minister is very well aware of the sale of Government Shipyard and the National Bank of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government divested shares in Fiji Ports Corporation Limited, Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Limited and the Government Printery and when that was done, there was a lot of noise being made that we had sold the assets. In fact, the assets were invested into Asset Fiji Limited and the shares in business were divested to private companies.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that the Government remains committed to improving our SOE to deliver better results for our people. We have a duty to all Fijians to ensure that these enterprises fulfil their intended roles and contribute meaningfully to our nation's development.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not normal for this thing to be brought up during one of these debates as we only have 10 minutes. I have a prepared text of 103 pages and most of the things that I will say will come from both sides of the House, and I thank the honourable Member who has just taken the floor, for highlighting some of the issues that are also highlighted here in this contribution.

On the general recommendation, she has spoken on some of those. I will very, very generally and quickly go over the first one on public enterprises should merge for better strategic direction as reported by the Committee. The comments are noted, and the Ministry will explore the recommendations further and the entities themselves and the stakeholders.

I was just thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that, perhaps we can relook 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.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to that, perhaps it would have been better if we put all our comments from the Ministries and the Accounting Officers and CEOs of those entities to have their recommendation put back to the Committee in a matrix. They make the matrix and look at those and see if they can recommend to Government a series of actions that can be taken to better the systems, improve the awareness of Government of what is going on in the public enterprises and also inform the people about the performance of their enterprises. That is, perhaps, something for the Committee, and I do not know which Committee, we will put that recommendation to.

Strengthening its monitoring, that is also taken into account and your response in the recommendation is that some of these are aligned to the Companies Act 2015 and support the modernisation of operations within our public enterprises and the various recommendations that touch on that aspect will continue to be improved.

On the fourth general recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is, all public enterprises accounts are updated by 2025. That is noted and the Public Enterprises leadership will be encouraged to complete the actions in accordance with that recommendation.

On the fifth general recommendation, on the size, strength and opportunities and potentials, et cetera, the response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the Ministry of Public Enterprises is a standalone Ministry under the leadership of the Prime Minister at the moment. It could be reallocated to another Minister. It is a big responsibility. When the Prime Minister is looking after Foreign Affairs, as well as the Public Service, perhaps, it warrants the commitment of a dedicated Minister to look at those.

The Ministry has a total of 31 positions with 22 filled. There are nine Technical Officers and 13 Administration and Accounts Officers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the technical positions are understaffed. However, the Ministry is currently in its recruitment phase.

The sixth general recommendation, the enterprises should focus on their core business and ensure they achieve the 10 percent return. The response to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noted and prior to 2019, public enterprises were required to provide the 10 percent return as required on equity to Government. However, given the unique nature of their respective operations, this may not be the most equitable course of action. Certain public enterprises, particularly those in the agricultural sector, operate in a very competitive environment, while others are doing remarkably well.

Furthermore, following the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these entities suffered losses and were not obliged to provide any form of returns and were scrutinised to utilise whatever profits they generated back into their operations.

The seventh recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ministry to follow-up those public enterprises' accounts that are not up to date, the Ministry will work in very close collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

On the eighth recommendation that all public enterprises should thoroughly review their current accounting systems and consider implementing an accounting system that would provide accurate and timely financial reporting, including a uniform system that can be used by all and consolidate all as well, the comments are also noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir. However, it is very important to note that each public enterprise differs in nature of operations and sizes, as having a uniform system may not work for all entities, as they are part of different sectors and industries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Committee findings, the Fiji Hardwood Corporation's audit was completed, and Financial Statement was issued for signing on 23rd June, 2022. The company is yet to return the Financial Statement, and the Committee asked, why?

The Fiji Hardwood Corporation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, delayed the signing as there was a change in the Board composition. The matter has been addressed and the Board has signed the 2018-2019, and the 2019-2021 Audit Report is in progress and now with the Office of the Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Viti Corporation Limited's response to the observation there, Viti Corporation delayed the 2008-2009 signing as there was also a change in the Board. The matter is currently in the process and being addressed.

On the re-organised entity of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, the audit is yet to commence and also the Committee asked, why? This matter has already been addressed. Audits from 2014 to 2018 have been completed and signed and 2019 is in progress and with the Office of the Auditor-General.

On the Yaqara Pastoral Company's 2016-2017 Report, the Statement was sent for signing in 2020 with a qualified opinion. The opinion was requested to be amended for signing in 2021 but was not signed when the audit report was finalised and sent to Parliament on 17th September, 2021. Now, the account has been finalised but with the modified opinion of 2018-2019 and the question from the Committee was, why? The response to that is that they have been completed and signed. The 2020 audit is in progress with the Office of the Auditor-General.

The Food Processers Limited is another problematic enterprise with the 2010 Audited Financial Statements finalised in January 2023, while the 2011-2019 audit is completed and will be coming in the next audit report. The question was, "why?" The response to that is that the preparation of financial statements was delayed as current management had limited information from the previous years which hindered the drafting of the statements. Furthermore, during the finalisation of the audit of the respective years, the Office of the Auditor-General completed its exercise at its discretion which the company did not have control over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will round off here and leave the rest of the issues with the Government Members contributing to this debate.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion. Thank you, Sir, for the opportunity.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Committee for a very detailed Report. I would like to thank the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman and Committee Members for the detailed Report. My contribution to the motion will be very brief.

I have noted from the Report that most of the public enterprises are not doing well in terms of profit and service delivery. Some of the public enterprises would not survive without Government financial support. It is high time that public enterprises should strategise and do well to make profit and provide better services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of financial reporting, sound financial management is needed for both quality and timeliness by many of the entities. I have noted from the Report that except for Fiji Public Trustees Corporation Limited, Fiji Development Bank (FDB) and Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), all other entities have major problems with timeliness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the idea that some of the smaller public enterprises which have the same nature of business should merge for better strategic direction, governance, management and cost efficiency.

Looking at the financial reporting, all the public enterprises, with the assistance of Ministry of Public Enterprises, should thoroughly review their current accounting system and consider implementing an accounting system that would provide accurate and timely financial reporting, including using a system that can be used by all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Standing Committee on Public Accounts met, the Fiji Coconut Millers Board in May this year, the Committee came to know that on 14th February last year, a boiler experienced an internal tube leaking which resulted in an explosion. I am not really sure whether the honourable Minister for Employment is aware of this issue or not. Management should ensure that our employees are protected and provided with an environment which is safe for our workers. Incidents of this nature can be avoided, and workers are not put at risk if the directors and management are proactive. During our physical visit to Fiji Coconut Millers, we saw that it needs urgent attention and upgrading.

While some public enterprises are not doing well, one entity stands out and that is Fiji Airways. Fiji Airways has performed extremely well both, in profit and service delivery, and they have won many awards recently and this is mainly due to the previous Government's commitment to keep our Airline from collapsing during the COVID-19 period. Today, we can see the huge contribution Fiji Airways is making to our tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if it was for some of the honourable Members sitting across, who suggested that we should return the planes or let Qantas with minority shares manage our airline, it would have resulted in disaster.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity, I support the motion and thank you for the time that you have given me.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will speak briefly on the State Enterprises, which according to my colleague, honourable Premila Kumar, play a vital role in our economy, given their vast asset base which is \$9 billion, plus, their contribution to GDP, employment generation and provision of public services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today's headline in *The Fiji Times* says that our debt is now \$10 billion and growing. I am one who is not worried about our debt when I see the asset base of our State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). There is only one part of the equation. I believe the fundamentals for Fiji's economy is very strong and we can pay off our debt without any fear that we would fail in doing that which has plagued other countries.

I had a bit of time in the banks in my younger days and a fundamental in lending money is to ensure that the borrower has the ability to pay. For Fiji, we have the ability to pay our debt and I just wish everyone not to spend too much time worrying about our debt. It is manageable, Mr. Speaker, and that there should be no fear as some people like to create.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today is 2nd September. We came into power in December 2022, and we were telling you, "Wait, the economy is going to grow". Right now, Sir, the dialogue on the economy, the tone is bullish.

Westpac, on Friday, upgraded their forecast on our economy. They initially said, “Look, we thought it was not going to go this way”, but you read the papers on Friday, Westpac said, “There are strong fundamentals in the Fijian economy”.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, ANZ has upgraded their growth to about 3.4 percent. We were telling you to wait for it, it will come, and it has come. The economy now is on a very strong platform, and it is now very bullish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was looking at other possibilities for the SOEs. I was at the listing of the Sun Insurance at GPH about a week ago and the last time we had a public listing was with the Denarau Marina in 2019. So, it has taken all these years for another company to be listed publicly.

We will be the new regime. The people in charge now are going to be aggressive, and we will see more companies listing in the stock exchange and some of them could be from SOEs. There is huge opportunities to list the SOEs and bring in that liquidity into our system.

In the case of New Zealand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SOEs were privatised and help pay off their debt. New Zealand today, I believe, their debt to GDP is about 24 percent, and it is through the privatisation of the SOEs. So, people of Fiji, do not be worried, you are in good hands. We have very strong fundamentals here and our SOES is part of the confidence going forward.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the recommendations of the Committee and I repeat what I have said, that the fundamentals are good, SOEs have a bigger role to play and the people of Fiji should be comfortable for the fact that the economy is in good hands.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good that the Government has seen the light and converted as well.

Sir, I base my short contribution on the ADB Country Partnership Strategy. It talks about the performance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Thank you, honourable Minister for Finance, for smiling because it talks about the improvements, particularly the profitability that the changes of the 2019 reforms have brought. So, these are the backgrounds that we need, apart from the work of the Committee.

I thank the Chairman and Members of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for such a good Report. It forms the basis for this discussion, particularly for the way forward as well. So, apart from the ADB Country Partnership Strategy Report, Sir, every now and then I keep referring to the World Bank Country Private Sector Diagnostic Report because it also has specific reports on the performance of SOEs.

As alluded to by honourable Premila Kumar, Sir, it has an asset base of around \$9 billion, probably something that is more than what FNPf has for now. So, if we can use this well to our advantage, again, this will be good for Fiji.

Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation for talking about the economy, this is what we have been saying all along and this partnership needs to continue. Debt is not a new thing, as long as it is well managed and our ability to repay, it is good rather than just focussing on per capita debt to GDP ratio previously. So, this is good, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

I have read the Report, I will not repeat what has been stated previously, but perhaps share some of my thoughts on some of the recommendations given, what has progressed over the years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, particularly with the few agencies that are highlighted in the Report. I wish to say this because it is important that I probably raise this issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Coconut Millers, Pacific Fishing Company, Fiji Rice, Food Processors, Yaqara Pastoral, Fiji Meat Industry Board, but I want to say is although the recommendation by the Chairman is for us to have a special dedicated Ministry to look after our public enterprises, I fully support that and if Government can afford, of course, it can seriously consider that.

However, what I want to stress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the link between the Ministry of Public Enterprises and the line Ministries, given the role that these SOEs provide and the services as well. For example, Yaqara Pastoral. The honourable Minister for Agriculture knows the frustration that we went through and as a result, honourable Prime Minister, Sir, the team that is in Papua New Guinea (PNG) avoided Fiji and went to PNG, but Fiji was their preferred destination.

There are two issues with Yaqara Pastoral that led to some of the developments. One issue, Sir, is the reason we brought this new beef breed. What I am trying to say is, although it is with Ministry of Public Enterprises, there must be some arrangements in place in terms of the operational and working relationships between the Ministry of Public Enterprises and the other line Ministries. The limousin breed is with Yaqara Pastoral but we cannot access that breed because it is with that other Ministry. That is why we brought Senepol, Droughtmaster and Wagyu as an example,

For your information Sir, Yaqara Pastoral has a lot of funds now from Fiji Water, but what are we going to do with it to expand and improve Yaqara Pastoral? This was raised to us when I was in the Natural Resources Committee by the team in Yaqara Pastoral and this is the opportunity to raise it here with you, Sir. The funds are there, but when can we make the decision so that it can be implemented? This linkage is very important.

One of the previous speakers has talked about biosecurity. Again, agriculture has an interest in the work that biosecurity does. When we brought these new breeds, we had to fly the animals again to Melbourne and then fly it over to Fiji because biosecurity cannot allow it just to come through Sydney and then picked up by the airlines.

I have talked to the honourable Minister for Finance already about some of the frustrations from the past and I am sharing this, Sir, because this needs to be addressed. If you may have a separate a ministry to look after Public Enterprises but the link between the service providers and the line ministries still needs to be maintained and there must be some clear guidelines and working relationships established because it is important for the economic growth and so forth. That is one of the issues that I wanted to raise, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the recommendation about merging some of the entities Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the issues I know previously that sort of stopped most of these was the decision to convert loans into equities, because some of these agencies have loans from God knows but still have not been written off or whatever the decision to be made. An example was Food Processors and Fiji Rice Limited. The honourable Minister for Education would know all these because he was in the Public Accounts Committee back then with Mr. Manu Korovulavula. These loans were there from those days but yet no decision was made, particularly conversion of these loans into equities so that we can move on.

Perhaps just a comment on the governance, this is one of the key issues, but I am optimistic, these things can change, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There has been some significant improvement in some of these entities - AMA, Rewa Rice, Fiji Hardwood, et cetera, it can change. Let us bring in fit for

purpose appointments in the board and, of course, in the management as well and very important is the scrutiny, the monitoring.

Thank you, Chairman of the Committee apart from Public Accounts, this led monitoring processes will be very useful in terms of the way forward and particularly the role that this Parliament plays as well. We do not only allocate resources, but we have to ensure that we monitor effectively and efficiently, so that we can have the return, because that return will provide the employment, will reduce our import levels and then raise our export levels and bring the much needed dollars to Fiji as well.

I also wish to conclude by stating that Government, I have also read the factsheet by the Ministry of Finance, I am quite worried by what you listed under “Challenges” honourable Minister for Finance, because the main thing is, you are in Government, fix it! It can improve and of course there are huge potentials, but if Government can seriously look into this because that will help us in the long-term. There are so many things, time is limited for the debate, but of course let us continue with these healthy dialogues because it is important for the country and of course the way forward.

I fully endorse the Report and look forward to more dialogue on it in future.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Prime Minister and all the honourable Ministers and honourable Members from the other side who have spoken on the motion. I want to thank the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, my Assistant Minister for Finance for producing, with the help of his Committee Members such a good report.

The history of State ownership in the economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an old one. We started during independence, the imports substitution strategy and State involvements. State ownership of entities was the best way to take the economy forward, to build infrastructure, to set the economy on a path of sustainable growth. As the honourable Prime Minister stated, the Ministry of Public Enterprises, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is responsible for public enterprises.

It is a bit amusing to hear some of the honourable Members from the other side, when they talk about appointments, when they talk about governance, if I could say this, I know they will not like this. For 15 years to 16 years of a kind of dictatorship that we had and the appointments, the opportunities that, that government had to do, the reforms, they did not do that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is this Government, a democratic one which has provided the transparency, the accountability and the freedom for public enterprises to now actually undertake some of those reforms after 16 years.

In the last session, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we presented the Annual Reports and the accounts of Fiji Airways in which Government owns majority shares. We understand the issues because State ownership is pervasive in Fiji’s economy. I agree with the Committee’s recommendation on some of the ways in which we can move forward. Fiji’s state footprint appears to be much larger than perhaps some of our peers within the Pacific.

Business of State, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we put it in another way as well apart from State-owned enterprises is done in a variety of ways. We have different sectors, different types of presence, different shareholdings, different models and it make sense sometimes to have those different models so that we can do things differently in different sectors. You might have to have a different model in the communication sector for example, in the airline industry, in the tourism industry. So, these are important considerations for any Government to ensure that State owner enterprises are functioning well.

It is true, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from an economic point of view, sometimes as I said, the role of Government in the business sector especially when Government owns commercial entities can be quite pervasive, it can crowd out investment from the private sector. It may stifle competition in certain sectors because of Government's presence and Government comes out in every now and then there is an issue to provide subsidies, to provide support so all those variables, Mr. Speaker, Sir, do have an intake on how State-owned enterprises do and how they affect the private sector.

Obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendations that the Committee has made, I have foreshadowed some of those in the last two budgets. We said very clearly that SOE reforms are necessary for us to unleash some of the economic potential in the economy.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism is absolutely right, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The fact that we have a very bullish, country laden with confidence in the economy is a direct result of the Government's leadership by the honourable Prime Minister in the area of reforms, openness and freedom, but also in the last two budgets, we set a reform agenda Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has now showed results. We are now a Government which is properly funded, our revenue base for the first time (honourable Kumar was saying that our revenue forecast is too optimistic), surpassed our forecast for the last financial year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I did not say that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And this is the first time ever that the Government has collected that kind of revenue and our forecast is on target and beyond target. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation is also right when he is talking about the confidence of the private sector in terms of businesses because we have shown that we are managing our deficit.

Our debt to GDP ratio in two years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is from 90 percent down to less than 80 percent and that is a direct result of what this Government has done in the last two budgets and setting up the confidence. So, SOEs that we are now dealing with, if I can just show honourable Kumar and others on the other side, just by reading some of the timelines. The worst Government ever in the history of this country where annual reports did not come on time, where audit reports did not come on time, the honourable Attorney-General today presented reports from the Attorney-General's Office from 2006.

If I read the audit is not completed as at 31st October, 2023, there are audits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that are pending prior to 2018 and I do not want to name all these entities. There are a whole list of public enterprises that have not produced reports and when the Assistant Minister and the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee makes this recommendations to say, we need Ministers and Permanent Secretaries to think about getting the reports on time, this is exactly what he means and he has provided this list of entities with the report that have not completed the audit reports.

And that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, actually should shame some of the honourable Members from the other side who are saying we did this, we did that when we were in government. Because if entities cannot produce annual reports on time, if they cannot get the audits done on time, obviously, they cannot manage those entities well. We, as a government, or the Ministers on this side, we are determined to get that right! We are determined to get audit reports on time, we are getting annual reports to Parliament on time and that is going to improve the accountability of SOEs and as I have said in the budget, we are open to reforming further, looking at possibilities of privatising, looking at models where we can work with the private sector, looking at models where we do not distort the competition in the economy. We were not doing that. And there are many instances and examples of people who were appointed that rigged off nepotism, there were senior civil servants from

ministries sitting on the boards and creating all kinds of distortions. We are changing that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are making sure that our governance, the freedom that the Government is giving to SOEs, Boards, and we are not interfering in those Boards.

I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that gives the confidence that creates the confidence in the economy among the investors, and that is what honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation was referring to when we were seeing good signs, bullish signs, confidence in the economy and it is showing in our revenue and the projects that are starting. That is part of the reform that we are also doing in our public enterprises. That is the leadership that the honourable Prime Minister and this Government is providing in managing our economy better.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the honourable Members who have contributed to the debate, and look forward to these public enterprises and other entities to improve their overall performance, and most importantly the implementation of the audit recommendations. As stated before, these reports are from 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 and they are old reports from the previous government.

However, we came up with most of the recommendations to move those enterprises forward to improve further. Firstly, on the audit reports and the governance; secondly, the timeliness of those audited reports; and thirdly, is the lesson that can be brought in from those public enterprises and SOEs with the reform that this Government is doing. It is good that we are deliberating on these reports now, Sir, because as I stated earlier, this is an area that probably was sleeping, there is potential.

The performance should increase further hopefully after this as we put in strategies to improve from the recommendations. Just an example, if we have \$4.2 billion assets with 4 percent return, that is around \$168 million; and if it is 8 percent, that is around \$336 million; if it is \$9.2 billion worth of assets, that is around \$368 million at 4 percent and \$736 million at 8 percent. So, there is potential, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the agenda for today. I thank you all for your contributions and Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.23 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 171/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government (Ref. Page 1713)



MINISTER FOR HOUSING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(Hon. M.K. Nalumisa)

Reply to Written Question No. 171/2024 is as follows:

Mr. Speaker Sir, for the period 31st July, 2021 to 31st July, 2024, the National Fire Authority (NFA) had attended to a total of 472 structural fires around the country, as outlined below:

Financial Year	Reported Structural Fires
2021-2022	102
2022-2023	171
2023-2024	199
Total	471

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst we pray that there are no fatalities during fire emergencies, it is with great sadness that we reveal that lives have been lost during the past fire emergencies, as follows:

Year	Casualties
2021	6 (including 1 child)
2022	6 (including 2 children)
2023	6 (including 1 child)
2024	3
Total	21

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we wish to convey our sincere condolences to all the families who have lost loved ones in past years. We can always rebuild our homes, but we cannot bring back the life of a person lost during a devastating fire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is leaving no stones unturned in empowering the NFA in its service delivery and quest in ensuring fire safety. The Coalition Government has given priority to the institution. The people's government knows that the safety of all Fijians is paramount and will ensure that fire safety and delivery of emergency services is enhanced to build resilient communities and effective emergency services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the period July 2021 to July 2024, the three main causes of fire have been electrical, arson/suspicious and unattended cooking. In their efforts to minimise electrical fires,

the NFA has been relentless in advocating for safer electrical materials to be installed in our homes. The attitude of buying cheaper electrical materials to install in homes has been very costly at the end for homeowners who have lost everything in a fire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NFA is working through its strategies in addressing its key outputs, envisioning to create a lasting impact on the community by reducing the likelihood of fire-related incidents and fatalities, preserving property, and fostering a culture of safety. In doing so, the NFA has stepped up its awareness campaigns by conducting house to house visits, school visits, as well as community awareness programmes. From January 2021 to July 2024, the NFA has conducted a total of 31,037 house to house visits, 1,170 school visits and 983 community awareness programmes. A total number of 388,033 people have been reached through the three modes of awareness stated above.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to these modes of awareness, the NFA has also implemented its Integrated Community Fire Wardens and Emergency Response Framework. Under this Framework, the NFA operations staff teach specific members of a community on fire safety prevention, first aid, evacuation procedures and how to be first responders to any fire and rescue emergency in their respective communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Community Fire Wardens are provided with two weeks of rigid training in basic firefighting and emergency skills, such as initial response assessment, first aid, evacuation procedures, et cetera, the catalyst for such a community programme is simple. These trained Community Fire Wardens will implement an initial response as first responders in case of a fire emergency in their communities. This is embedded upon the fact that practising of any change needs to start at home.

Since its implementation in 2021 till to date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NFA has rolled out its Integrated Community Fire Wardens and Emergency Response Framework to 107 communities and has since commissioned 1,842 Fire Wardens. Under the NFA's Five Year Strategic Plan, each of the 21 stations across the nation must implement the Framework to four communities annually within its operational area. We wish to thank all the communities who have put their hands up to be part of this Framework and for all the commissioned Community Fire Wardens who are now diligently monitoring their respective villages and settlements to engage in fire safety practices in their homes and within their surroundings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government understands the role that the NFA plays in keeping the community safe and endeavours to fully support the NFA in fulfilling its roles as an emergency service provider.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps, a highlight of the role of NFA will be to provide an understanding of why this Coalition Government is committed to the enhancement of the NFA. From July 2021 to July 2024, the NFA attended a total number of 11,349 emergency calls. These emergency calls include structural fires, small fires, rubbish fires, bush fires, car fires, road accident rescues and ambulance responses.

From 2021 to July 2024, Mr. Speaker Sir, NFA attended to 536 small fires; 3,959 non-property fires (rubbish fires and bush fires); 492 road accident rescues; 206 vehicle fires; and 1,635 ambulance responses. These attendances are all in the scope of the NFA's roles and capabilities. Emergency calls for special services, private fire alarm attendance, swift water rescue and ship and boat fires make up the rest of the emergency calls received by the NFA for the period July 2021 to July 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NFA is responding to all emergency calls inside the legislated fire boundaries and outside the boundaries. During the period being questioned, NFA noted that a high percentage of emergency calls were from outside the boundaries. The legislation is only applicable inside the boundaries, which means that property owners outside the boundaries are not paying any form of fire levy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NFA is now working with the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources in reviewing the current boundaries and extend where necessary to be better placed with resources to address the fire and emergency calls within its ambit of operations. With the project almost completed, a submission will be submitted for Cabinet's endorsement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fires in commercial and industrial structures are at a minimum. This is owing to the regulatory framework that empowers the NFA to vet building plans and conduct inspection on commercial and industrial premises, to ensure compliance with the National Building Code and fire safety related standards. From 2021 to date, the NFA Structural Fire Safety Department has vetted 1,226 building plans.

In the same period, they have inspected a total number of 14,862 business premises across Fiji. With limited resources and a heavy workload, the NFA stays committed to ensuring that structures and premises visited by the public are fire safe for occupation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in ensuring that the NFA continues to provide this essential service for the nation of Fiji, the Coalition Government is the first Government that has given the NFA the budget required under financial provisions of the National Fire Service Act 1994, that is, 25 percent of its annual budget. In doing so, it has provided the funding for its operations, the sum of \$6.1 million. I am also happy to announce that this is the biggest budget ever received by NFA from any government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this funding will assist the Authority in meeting the expenses for communication and ICT upgrade, fire station expenses, motor vehicle repairs and maintenance, procurement of firefighting equipment, staff recruitment, procurement of uniforms and personal protective equipment and personal emoluments. The funding will also assist in commissioning the Community Fire Wardens as per their strategic plans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is devoted to NFA's quest to be not only the best in the region but internationally recognised in its sphere of operational excellence. The aspect of ensuring good and robust human capital becomes vital. In doing so, it realises that its firefighters are exposed daily to health and physical risks. The Authority has ensured not only a well calculated insurance and medical care for its employees, but it has gone beyond that scope to maintain that their families have some assurance in the times of life after their delivery of services has ceased.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Authority has been able to provide its operations staff a 20 percent increase in wages and salaries. Perhaps, it may be worth noting that the last increment was in 2017 for NFA employees. This increase was made possible by the Coalition Government. The strategy is to recognise the hard work done by the Authority and its employees and provide a just reward for their commitment and unwavering support to the Authority's operational plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has embarked onto ensuring staff empowerment, technical training, and development for our Firefighters. The NFA has embarked on strategic alliances that can leverage excellence in service delivery, knowledge sharing and harnessing technical superiority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 17th April, 2024, the NFA now has an MOU with Queensland Fire & Emergency services, based in Brisbane, Australia. This MOU, which is part of the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership, will be the impetus of a five-year collaboration between the two agencies. It will focus on training, technical support, fire data analysis, mentorship, and equipment exchange.

The NFA was also supported in being a part of the inaugural World Fire Congress that was held in Washington D.C., USA. This event culminated with the signing of a Charter by the 58 Fire and Emergency Service organisations represented from around the world. With that, NFA has set a platform for global collaboration.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, with NFA's five Strategic Goals being "NFA Transformation", NFA recently launched its new uniforms, symbolising the transition from the old to the new, in line with their Five Year Strategic Development Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we stand together with NFA in ensuring Fire Safety and efficient delivery of Emergency Services for all Fijians.

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