

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 3RD DECEMBER, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 3RD DECEMBER, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.52 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Attorney-General; the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management; the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources; the honourable A. Bia; the honourable S.S. Kirpal; and the honourable J.N. Nand.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 2nd December, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

We send our best wishes to the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, who is joining us virtually this morning on an account of his being confined to bed in the last few days for some virus infections. We wish and pray for you and your speedy recovery, honourable Minister Ditoka.

Visitors - Fiji Association of Canada

Also, honourable Members, please, join me in greeting two visitors from the Fiji Association of Canada - Mr. Sam Basra, the organisation's President and Mr. Jeff Lal, the Association's Head of Commerce and Investment. You are both welcome to Parliament, gentlemen.

Youth Fellowship Group – Wainimako Methodist Church Circuit

Honourable Members, please, also join me in welcoming to Parliament today the Youth Fellowship Group from the Wainimako Methodist Church Circuit. I am given to understand that the group will also share the joy of Christmas through carols during the tea break at the Big Committee Room (BCR) for the Members.

2025 CALENDAR OF PARLIAMENT SITTINGS

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

That Parliament adopts the Sitting Calendar for the year 2025.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as all honourable Members are aware, under Standing Order 22(1), the Business Committee is required to recommend to Parliament a schedule of sitting times for each session of Parliament or each 12-month sitting period of Parliament, whichever comes first. Furthermore, Clause 2 stipulates that the suggested agenda must be submitted to Parliament by the third sitting day of the session, at the latest. In light of that, Sir, the Business Committee met and began deliberating over a suggested 2025 Sitting Calendar which is in front of you.

In terms of the appropriate dates, I can certify that the 2025 Sitting Calendar which has been distributed to our honourable Members this morning, was accepted and authorised by the Business Committee. While the Business Committee had accepted and approved the Sitting Calendar, it also agreed that in the event that some of the sittings needed to be readjusted immediately, that would be brought before Parliament for further consideration. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main reason for this is to allow for some flexibility in Parliament.

The following sitting times are listed in the approved Sitting Calendar for the benefit of all our honourable Members and the broader public. As most honourable Members may be aware, this has been the accepted practice in the last two terms of Parliament, of course, including the former Government.

2025 PARLIAMENT SITTINGS CALENDAR		
February	Monday 24 th	Official Opening of Parliament
March	Monday 3 rd – Friday 7 th	Response to His Excellency the President's Address and Parliament Sitting will be for two weeks. This had been discussed in the Business Committee where Government also brought up the issue of time for more debate and not only the Government, but also the Opposition side in terms of the Government's legislative programme and the Bills which were due.
	Monday 10 th – Friday 14 th	
April	28 th April to 2 nd May	Parliament Sitting
June	2 nd June to 6 th June	Parliament Sitting
	27 th June	Budget Announcement
July	7 th July to 11 th July	Budget Debate
August	4 th August to 8 th August	Parliament Sitting
September/October	29 th September to 3 rd October	Parliament Sitting
November	3 rd November to 7 th November	Parliament Sitting

As is now customary, Sir, the days for the Budget Address and the ensuing Budget debate has been set for July rather than done in earlier years.

The Sitting Calendar, Sir, will enable all six Standing Committees to continue working on Annual Reports that are pending with the Committees and any Bills that may be brought before this House. This is also the suggested Sitting Calendar which needs the cooperation of all honourable Members, as far as those two matters are concerned.

Committees are crucial channels for Parliament to communicate with the public, and their service is crucial for accountability and scrutiny tools. It is critical to give them time in order for them to complete their tasks.

Sir, this is a new Government and we are working to improve our services to the people of the nation. This will also enable us to carry out our plans, policies and programmes, while the Standing Committees must continue to carry out and fulfil their role, as stipulated in the Standing Orders.

I request all honourable Members to support the Sitting Calendar before the House as it will enable Parliament to continue its legislative representative and oversight duties.

I should add that 2025 is a very important year, as far as Government is concerned, in terms of its legislative programme. Cabinet has approved the setting up of a Cabinet Sub-Committee on legislation which will facilitate Government's legislative programme, and this Parliament Calendar will assist in enabling and facilitating that.

In light of those important points, Sir, I commend this resolution to Parliament and ask honourable Members to support the proposed Sitting Calendar for 2025.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now open the floor for debate on the motion.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for presenting the Sitting Calendar. There are two issues that I would like to raise, the first one is, the month of July. We are assigned only one week for the Budget debate. We all know that Budget is a national event. It has a huge impact on businesses, people and, of course, on other agencies.

During that period, it is very important that Members are given enough time to debate the Budget documents. We noticed in the last Sitting, that is, just last July, our speaking time was reduced and that is unacceptable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, simply because it is a national event. It is an important event. Why was the speaking time reduced? Now, even the Budget debate is reduced by one week. Previously, we were given two weeks.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Budget Debate is one week.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Previously, go and check!

The other point that I would like to raise is on productivity. As Members of Parliament, we expect everyone else to be very productive, including civil servants. They must deliver. Are we delivering?

Look at the time that the Parliament will not sit. Almost three months, we will not be sitting, and I do not understand why Parliament should be opening on 24th February and not earlier than that. Last year, we were given the reason that some renovation work was going on in Parliament, therefore, we could not open Parliament on time but now, everything is in order. Why can we not open the Parliament earlier? We have to set the example for the rest of the country, and I do not understand why we are opening Parliament so late. So, those are my two points.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Tuisawau, do you wish to respond?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the calendar as well, I have just checked very quickly and I see that we are going to be prorogued for nearly two months. I, as a Member of two Committees, including Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, knowing how much work we have, I know, Sir, that in the past, we have been allowed to sit during prorogation. I have just checked very quickly, so I am just asking all the Chairpersons to, please, write to your good office and your good self, Sir, to ask for permission to sit during prorogation.

As honourable Kumar has pointed out, there is a lot of work to do. There are Bills and Annual Reports and Committee Reports that we need to table as quickly as possible. So, just begging your indulgence and just reminding the honourable Chairpersons of all the Standing Committees to do the right thing and write to Mr. Speaker's Office, as has been accepted in the past.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was part of the Business Committee that had agreed to this Sitting Calendar, so I will not talk about the calendar *per se*, since I was a party to that decision. But, let me say that one of the things that we have seen ever since this Government came into being, there has been a decline in the number of days that we have in Parliament.

We have witnessed the ineptitude of Government. They would set a calendar and all of a sudden, they do not know in advance the dates on which they are supposed to have important gatherings, such as the United Nations General Assembly, the COP, et cetera. Because of this ineptitude and incompetence on their part, the inability on themselves and their staff to make sure that they know when major events are taking place around the world that they need to attend, they have not taken that into account.

Now, I understand that they have learned, two years in a row, sitting days have been taken out. We have endorsed this Calendar and it is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there is no further change. If there is any further change to this Sitting Calendar, it will demonstrate the incompetence and the ineptitude of those who are in Government.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to recall the comments by the honourable Deputy Speaker as well. It is not two months, it is going to be three months. We were allowed to actually sit next week, but because of the retreat, we will not be able to sit as well. So, it is November, December and whole of February.

Then looking at March, we are going to sit for two weeks. When there is no Committee meeting, what are we actually going to discuss in Parliament, because it is the Committee reports that are basically debated? All I am actually requesting Government is to reconsider the Calendar, and if we can actually have Parliament prorogued for one month and, at least, Standing Committees to be given time.

Looking at the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, we have more than 200 financial reports to be audited, because we have, at least, three years or four years of whole of Government reports to be scrutinised and it takes time.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Because of all the delays.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Oh come on man! Talk some sense. We are talking about the calendar, and you are talking nonsense here. You are not part of the Committee so, please, do not comment.

With that in mind, I will request if Parliament can be prorogued for one month and Committees to be allowed to sit from January so that we can complete our work. As the Standing Orders say that although we can actually come to the Speaker, but it is not part of the Standing Order. Standing Orders say that when Parliament is prorogued, all the Committee work comes to a halt. Considering that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my request is if the prorogation period can be reduced from three months to one month.

MR. SPEAKER.- Perhaps, if it will help in our arriving at a solution, as requested by honourable Qereqeretaua, we are all in this together, including this Chair. For my part, I will certainly entertain and request for sittings after prorogation if it is allowed under our Standing Orders. If there are precedents, we will consider that as well. So, that will probably help ease the burden which has been referred to by honourable Qereqeretaua and honourable Maharaj.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to quickly respond to some of the comments made by the other side on the Calendar, as honourable Usamate has quite rightly said, this has been agreed by the Business Committee. But on what honourable Kumar said, I find that hypocrisy from her never ends. We never had two weeks of Budget debate during your eight years in government and you people were sitting there.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the timetable that we have agreed to in the Business Committee makes a lot of sense. One week of Budget debate is fine and I can tell....

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has just stated that there were no two weeks of sitting...

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment, honourable Maharaj. Let me make this very clear. When you raise a point of order, it specifically refers to a Standing Order? So, before I allow you to continue, you cite me or you quote me the Standing Order you are referring to. Before I will let you proceed. Now, which Standing Order are you referring to?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Standing Order 70, relevance, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance just stated that there were no two weeks of sitting for the Budget. He was a part of Parliament and during the 2014 National Budget and 2015 National Budget, we were actually sitting for two weeks.

(Honourable Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No, you said for the last eight years.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to correct that in this Parliament, that there were two Budget Sittings that were for two weeks.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Maharaj.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know honourable Maharaj is trying to justify this based on one or two sittings, but the fact is, in the last Parliament, we had one week's Budget Debate. After the 2015 Budget, we had one week, and I can assure them that the next Budget will be a good budget. One week debate will be good enough for them.

So, this Calendar, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, we have agreed in the Business Committee, it makes sense, and it will provide enough time. A lot of the work that is being done is done in the Committees and I want to thank you for making that suggestion that you will look at whether it is allowable. If that is allowable, we will support that the Committees can meet before we sit in March. In fact, it was the Government side that suggested an additional week in March, so we have a two-week sitting in March, where we are going to look at a lot of the Bills that we are going to debate as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.-Honourable Members, I think enough has been said on the issue of the Calendar which had been agreed to by the Business Committee of which all of the Members are represented through your various delegates. So, I now call on the Leader of Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you alluded to, it has been approved by the Business Committee, so the Business Committee is represented by Government, the G-16 Bloc and G-9 Bloc.

Generally, it was a very cordial discussion, compared to what happened today. There was understanding by all Members, and we have also taken into account, even though honourable Usamate mentioned two words, “incompetence” and “ineptitude”, in terms of our management of the calendar, but let me stress that one or two of the changes which happened was in the national interest. So, you really cannot equate incompetence or ineptitude to national interest.

National interest is something that we really need to consider, especially if it involves meetings related to the Heads of Governments, of key powers in the world and with the honourable Prime Minister, which is very strategic for our country. We have also taken into account the UNGA, COP, the CHOGRM, et cetera, and after consultation with all Ministries, and I thank the Members of the Business Committee for endorsing the Calendar.

MR. SPEAKER.-We will now proceed to vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER- Thank you, we will now move on to the next item.

POINT OF ORDER

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order, Standing Order 74. I am raising this issue in relation to something that was quite unprecedented to my memory, something that happened yesterday, when a Member of the Opposition, the honourable Alvick Maharaj, raised a Point of Order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in accordance with Standing Order 74(1), it says, and I quote:

“Any member may only raise a Point of Order if –

- (a) there is an alleged breach of Standing Orders or practices of Parliament;
- (b) the member specifies...

The normal practice has always been, when a Member stands up on a Point of Order and quotes the Standing Order and talks about that issue, that issue is then addressed by the Speaker. That is the way that it has always been handled. When a Point of Order is made, the matter is then addressed by the Speaker.

Yesterday, for the first time ever, without the Speaker ruling on that Standing Order, we had a Member of Parliament stand up. In this particular case, a Cabinet Minister, standing up and talking about that issue without giving the courtesy to the Speaker to address the issue. This is something that has never happened before.

Always, when Point of Orders are made, they are addressed by the Speaker. So, we believe this is a serious breach of the whole process by which Point of Orders are made. A Point of Order is made by a Member of Parliament, it is the Speaker who makes the ruling. But in this particular case, a Cabinet Member, stands up and starts commenting on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are worried that this might change. It has never happened before. It is always the Speaker who makes the decision. Now, if we are going to allow this to happen, every time a Member of the Opposition stands up to raise a Point of Order, a Cabinet Minister will then stand up to defend against it, without allowing the Speaker to make a decision on that Point of Order. And we see this, Sir as something that is very serious, and that needs to be stopped.

When a Point of Order is raised, it is the Speaker, it is the position of Speaker that needs to make that ruling and not for anyone else or Member of Parliament to talk on this. So, we will beg your indulgence, Sir, to make a ruling on this, so that it does not happen again, because there could come a time whereby every time you make a Point of Order from this side, a Cabinet Minister stands up all of a sudden, without giving the courtesy to the Speaker to make that ruling and start talking on the issue at hand. So, that is the purpose of my raising this, and I hope you can see fit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make a ruling on this matter so we do not persist with it, because it has never happened in the past.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Usamate. I take your point to the extent that I understand that the practice, as far as the Standing Orders are concerned, when there is a Point of Order raised, it is specifically addressed to the Speaker and the Speaker decides on the Standing Order before any other Member indulges in that. I understand all that.

Also, if you are referring specifically to Standing Order 74, it not only says that the matter is raised under Standing Order 74, but that it relates to another Standing Order which is breached. So, you are not only raising the issue under Standing Order 74, as far as honourable Maharaj is concerned, but he should have gone on and raised what specific Standing Order within Standing Orders are being breached. That we had not gone or indulged in. It just went as far as him raising the Standing Orders, and I did ask after my indulgence or my considering the issue, I had then asked honourable Tabuya to make a comment. After that, then I made a ruling on the point that was raised by him.

So, I agree with you that there are certain rules that are to be followed as far as the Speaker is concerned, in so far as Standing Orders are concerned, and the Point of Order raised as a result through that under the provisions of Standing Order 74. Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when honourable Maharaj rose yesterday, he stood on Standing Order 7, and that was the issue. I am standing here to clarify to my viewpoint that Standing Order 74, what happened yesterday was not in accordance with what we have in Standing

Order 74. That is my point, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Usamate. I will take your comment on that. We will proceed to the next item.

Honourable Members, there will be seven Committee Reports for tabling this morning.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report – Legal Aid Commission 2018-2023 Annual Reports

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on the Legal Aid Commission 2018-2023 Annual Reports.

The Legal Aid Commission is a statutory body established under the Legal Aid Act 1996 and the Legal Aid Amendment Decree 2009. The primary purpose of the Commission is to assist eligible individuals who may not be able to afford the services of a private law practitioner, to be able to still gain access to quality legal services and ultimately access to justice.

The Commission provides free legal services to members of the public by giving advice, providing legal representation in court, and providing services in all areas of family and criminal law. Assistance is also provided in civil law matters but is restricted to certain areas of practice. Some of the services require fulfilment of eligibility criteria, which is often waived if there are extenuating circumstances, especially for vulnerable clients.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report captures the trends in the various activities reported in the reporting period. This Report contains six recommendations for consideration.

Just for information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee had called for an oral public submission from the Legal Aid Commission on 5th November, 2024. During this consultation, there was a technical fault with the audio on the broadcast system within Parliament, which did not allow the hearing to be aired publicly, as a requirement under the Standing Orders. However, the members of the media attended the meeting in person.

I thank the Commission for the completion and submission of its 2018-2023 Annual Reports. Now, they are up to date with their Annual Report.

I thank the members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and the Secretariat for the work towards the completion of this bipartisan Report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Orders 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report – Office of the Attorney-General 2006-2023 Annual Reports

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on the Office of the Attorney-General's Annual Reports from 2006 to 2023. This is a period of 17 years and upfront, I would like to thank the Office of the Attorney-General for providing these Reports from 2006 to 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Committee did was, we grouped the Reports into three lots for ease of scrutiny. So, we had three separate Reports that can be read separately or the three read together. The first one is from 2006 to 2013, this is the period when there was no Parliament. The second lot is from 2014 to 2022 and the third is the 2022 to 2023 Annual Reports, to be fair, and that is when the new Government was in place.

The structure of the Reports were all the same, that it was quite easy for the Committee to look at the Reports and look at the trends of activities of the Office of the Attorney-General. We thank the Office of the Attorney-General for keeping that data that they used from way back in 2006 right up to 2023. As an example, it stood out as one of the issues - that when it comes to litigation, the biggest number of litigation that the Office of the Attorney-General does is on accidents of government vehicles, and it is the same right throughout the period. So, when you read the Reports, it shows those trends, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I thank the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for the work and the Secretariat on the work done to compile these three Reports to cover the period from 2006 to 2023. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit these three Reports to Parliament.

(Reports handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- I am happy to second the motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report – Suva City Council 2016-2018 Annual Reports

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Standing Committee on Social Affairs Consolidated Review Report on the Suva City Council 2016 to 2018 Annual Reports.

As mandated under Standing Order 109(2)(b), the Committee looks into issues related to

health, education, social services, labour, aviation, culture and media.

The Committee reviewed the Annual Reports and identified important issues which were then brought to the attention of the Suva City Council for their necessary actions.

Apart from its primary function of collecting rates and providing services to ratepayers, the Suva City Council now faces many other challenges. This include the drug situation, the city's security situation and dealing with street dwellers.

The Committee is of the view that given the current situation, the Municipal Council must review its functions and operational procedures as a matter of urgency to address the serious social issues within the Municipality. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government will need to provide guidance and oversight to the Suva City Council for its operations' compliance, operational efficiency and effectiveness.

I would like to sincerely thank the Chairman and Special Administrator for the Suva City Council and his team, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Local Government and her Officials, for their valuable contributions to this review process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I would like to thank the Members of the Stading Committee on Social Affairs - honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Iowane Naivalurua and honourable Viam Pillay, for their valuable input and support. I would also like to thank honourable Joseph Nand and honourable Alipate Tuicolo for the assistance they had rendered on several occasions as Alternate Members.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Report to Parliament and request that all Members of this august Parliament take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this will be an opportune time to take our tea break and enjoy the carol singing. Parliament will resume in half an hour. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.33 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.13 a.m.

Review Report - Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance 2023 Annual Report

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Review Report on the Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance 2023 Annual Report.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF), under the Insurance Act 1998 and the Insurance Regulations 1998 is responsible for the regulation and supervision of the insurance industry in Fiji.

The RBF aims to achieve the underlying objective of safeguarding policyholders' interest by overseeing the soundness and stability of the insurance industry. The RBF executes this role by issuing licences to market participants and supervision policies to govern the conduct of insurance business in Fiji.

It is a requirement under the Act that all insurance companies and intermediaries conducting insurance business in Fiji to be licensed by RBF. Supplemented by the requirements of the Regulations, the RBF has the responsibility to ensure that people seeking to undertake insurance business are fit and proper, and in compliance with regulatory requirements at all times.

The Committee would like to report that the insurance sector, during the reporting period, fared well and contributed positively to the Fijian economy.

This Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, contains two recommendations for consideration, one is to the Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services. I hope that when this is made available by Parliament, they will look into it quickly. This has to do with parametric insurance, and I hope that the Ministry can take up an action on it very quickly.

The Committee had called for an oral public submission from the RBF on 13th November, 2024. Again, this session was not aired live due to technical issues. I raised this point twice about the technical problems that we have here in Parliament because there is a requirement under Standing Orders that we conduct public hearings. But in this instance, it was later aired on the Walesi Parliament Television Channel, but it was not live when we were having the meeting.

I wish to thank and commend the RBF for being up to date with their Insurance Annual Report.

I also thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and the Secretariat, for compiling this bipartisan Report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report on the Heritage Bill 2023

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I table my Report, let me join the House in also congratulating you on your appointment as the honourable Speaker of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, on 21st November, 1990, Fiji became a party to the Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage, which was adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference in 1972 (World Heritage Convention).

Fiji, as a State party to the World Heritage Convention, is required under the World Heritage Convention to adopt legislative and administrative provisions to give effect to the World Heritage Convention. Therefore, the Heritage Bill 2023 provides for the domestic application of the World Heritage Convention in Fiji.

The Heritage Bill 2023 (Bill No. 25 of 2023) was introduced to recognise and manage places in Fiji with potential and actual world heritage values. The Bill aims to align Fiji's domestic laws with the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, ensuring the protection of Fiji's unique natural and cultural heritage.

Mr. Speaker, while there are existing national laws that cover the designation and protection of cultural and natural heritage sites, monuments and places, there is no law that specifically covers for sites that are recognised internationally, pursuant to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which Fiji is a party to. Simply put, there are no protection mechanisms for sites (as per current Bill) that are declared as:

- (a) Potential World Heritage sites (National Level);
- (b) Tentative World Heritage sites (International Level); and
- (c) World Heritage sites (International Level).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same, there are gaps in our current laws that resulted in the proposition of the following attributes which have been reflected in the current Bill:

- (a) Sustainable management or potential places, sites and monuments that meet the requirements of outstanding universal values of UNESCO.
- (b) Establishment of a trust fund for each nationally and internationally designated sites, places and monuments, to ensure that it can sustainably manage itself.
- (c) Establishment of management organisations on site to spearhead the operations of the site.
- (d) Establishment of a Fiji Heritage Council at national level to ensure coordination and designation of sites that meet international criteria.
- (e) Establishment of a Fiji Register that will ensure sites designated are systematically organised for reference purposes and other measures necessary for the administration of the nominated sites.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee conducted public consultations in various

communities and invited the public to provide submissions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of those who participated in the public consultations supported and commended the introduction of the Bill. However, mixed feelings were expressed by landowners where their land are within the buffer zones. There was support due to the potential for increased tourism and preservation of cultural heritage, but concerns were raised about restrictions on land use and development.

The Committee deliberated at length on concerns raised by submittees and is confident that all issues raised have now been addressed through the amendments made to the initial Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the current Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights - honourable Iliesa Vanawalu, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua, honourable Jone Usamate and honourable Mosese Bulitavu.

I would also like to thank the previous Members of the Committee, namely, honourable Faiyaz Koya, honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu, honourable Viliame Naupoto and honourable Taito Matasawalevu, including honourable Sashi Kiran, who are Alternate Members on certain occasions. A big *vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the drafters who have made amendments to the Bill that is tabled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, through this bipartisan Report and consensus, commends the Heritage Bill 2024 and its amendments to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament on Friday, 15th September, 2023 and Friday 15th March, 2024, and the Communication from the Chair on 24th November, 2023, the Standing Committee has now tabled its Report accordingly and the Bill will be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 5th December, 2024.

Review Report on the Child Justice Bill 2024

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I stand as the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. The Committee has entrusted me to table this Report on behalf of the honourable Members of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by giving a brief background of the Bill. The Child Justice Bill 2024 aims to establish a comprehensive specialised criminal justice system for children and for related matters. At the commencement of the review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee made preliminary deliberations on the Clauses of the Bill and noted that the Child Justice Bill 2024 seeks to repeal the provision of the Juveniles Act 1973, that deals with children in conflict with the law, formally known as juveniles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill provides a more comprehensive framework for the special treatment of children at all stages of the child justice process, from the point of their initial contact with the Police through to trial, rehabilitation and reintegration into the community and into their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amongst the key changes to the Bill, are the new provisions which specifies the following:

- (1) The Bill replaces the term “juvenile” with “child in conflict with the law”, as the stigma

attached to the term “juvenile” is detrimental to the rehabilitation of an offender who is a child.

- (2) The Bill introduces new objectives and guiding principles that require a balanced approach, ensuring that the children in conflict with the law are held accountable for their actions, as well as supporting their rehabilitation and re-integration into society.
- (3) The Bill also raises the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years, and clarifies that special juvenile justice procedures apply to all children under the age of 18 at the time the offence was committed.
- (4) The Bill provides a detailed statement of the role of the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection’s Department of Children and new specialised Child Justice Officers (formerly known as Probation Officers) in developing rehabilitation and re-integration services for children, in partnership with other Government agencies, NGOs, faith-based organisations and traditional and community leaders.
- (5) The Bill provides new provisions on police conduct towards children, incorporating the Fiji Police Force Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for children in contact with the law.
- (6) The new provisions on diversion in the Bill, allowing the police or prosecutor to deal with non-serious offences committed by children through cautions, a diversion plan, or referral to a restorative justice process, commonly known as community conference, without sending the child to court.
- (7) New sections on bail for children in the Bill, in line with the Bail Act, but with special considerations for children to reduce the use of remand.
- (8) New option for Child Justice Officers to step in earlier and start assisting children at the arrest stage, not just when they get to court.
- (9) The Juvenile Court has been renamed the Child Justice Court, and more detailed guidance is provided on child-friendly court procedures.
- (10) New section requiring Child Justice Officers to prepare social inquiry reports about the child’s background and circumstances, a more detailed guidance on the contents of those reports and deadlines for submitting them.

As part of the review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee conducted public consultations in various communities and invitation to the public to provide written submissions. Majority of the public that had participated in the public submissions supported and commended the introduction of the Bill. However, there were some suggestions on how to make further improvements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee acknowledges the concerns raised by the submitters and has deliberated at length on concerns raised. The Committee is confident that all issues raised have been addressed and that the Bill is sufficient as it is with some minor amendments. The Committee also felt that a few recommendations need to be considered in order to fully implement this Bill, and these are also provided in the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this stage, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the Committee and also the previous members of the Committee on the compilation of this report for the Child Justice Bill 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, through this bipartisan Report and consensus, commends the Child Justice Bill 2024 and its amendments to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024 and Communications from the Chair on 5th August, 2024, the Standing Committee has now tabled its Report accordingly and the Bill will be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 5th December, 2024.

Review Report – Child Care and Protection Bill 2024

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by giving a brief background of the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill replaces the child protection sections of the Juveniles Act (Cap 56). It outlines what the country will do to promote the wellbeing of children and to protect them from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The Juveniles Act provision on children in conflict with the law has been incorporated into a separate Child Justice Bill.

The aim of the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 is to provide a more comprehensive framework for child welfare services, and to better guide the work of the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection in preventing and responding to child abuse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 introduces significant reforms to strengthening child welfare and protection. It establishes a new guiding framework for child protection, emphasising the responsibility of parents and families for the children's care and wellbeing.

The Bill creates a new Department of Children under the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, with a clear mandate to provide social welfare services in collaboration with various stakeholders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the focus shifts from merely responding to abuse to preventing it through early intervention. It streamlines the process for reporting and responding to child protection cases, integrating existing procedures into a clearer system now overseen by the Director for Children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill also defines specific actions to safeguard children, either through family agreements or court orders. Responsibility for child protection orders shifts to the Family Division of the Magistrate's Court, with more child-friendly procedures. It also introduces new forms of alternative care (kinship, foster and residential care) with a priority on family-based care and includes new offences to address emerging issues, like online exploitation and child grooming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the review, the Committee conducted public consultations in various communities and invited the public to provide written submissions. The Committee received support and recommendation on the introduction of the Bill from most of the public that had participated in the public consultations. However, like most activities that impact the lives of the people of a country, they will also be other suggestions that are based on the premise of making improvements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill addresses gaps in outdated laws, like the Juveniles Act, and establishes a comprehensive responsive child protection system focussed on prevention, early intervention and family preservation. Moreover, it emphasises a community-based approach

involving families, government agencies, NGOs and traditional leaders in safeguarding children. Key provisions include clearer mechanisms for reporting and responding to abuse, promoting family-based care and strengthening the role of the Department of Children.

At the conclusion of the review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee acknowledges that a few concerns were raised by submitters, highlighting issues such as the need for better parenting support, stronger laws on child sexual abuse and improved digital safety for children.

The Committee extensively deliberated on these concerns and concluded that by balancing legal reforms with cultural sensitivity and community involvement, the Bill represents a positive shift in Fiji's approach to child welfare. It aims to create a society in which every child is safe, valued and able to thrive.

The Committee believes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Bill is sufficient as it stands, with only minor amendments needed. Additionally, the Committee recommends a few measures for the effective implementation of the proposed law, which have been put forth for Parliament's consideration, which are detailed in this Report.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Justice Law and Human Rights for their deliberations and input. The Committee, through this bipartisan Report and consensus, commends the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 and its amendments to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024 and the Communication from the Chair on 5th August, 2024, the Standing Committee has now tabled its Report accordingly, and the Bill will be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 5th December, 2024.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
- (3) Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry; and
- (4) Honourable Minister for Education.

Honourable Members, Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes and 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 the G9-Bloc or his designate, to also speak for five minutes. There will be no other debate.

US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive 2024

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; good morning to the people of Fiji who may be listening in today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share some insights on the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive 2024, that was conducted along the West Coast of the United States from 6th October, 2024 to 12th October, 2024.

The US Fiji Investments Savings Drive, a first of its kind, was organised by the Ministry's Trade Commission in North America as a direct outcome of the Fiji-North America Business Mission to Canada and the United States in May 2024, which I had the honour of leading.

The drive was focussed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on bridging the gap between Fiji and the Fiji diaspora by providing crucial investment and savings opportunities. This initiative is a clear testament of the Coalition Government's commitment to inclusivity, ensuring Fijians across the globe to remain integral to the national growth story of our country. It reflects our understanding that while the borders of our nation may be physical, the spirit of Fiji transcends geography.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's diaspora community plays a pivotal role in the development of our economy. The numbers speak volumes or speak for themselves. Between 2019 and 2023, Fiji has received a staggering \$4.5 billion in remittances alone. Remittances from the United States are the second highest at 24 percent, Australia being the highest at 44 percent. Personal remittances increased by 23.2 percent to \$1.1723 billion in the 2022 to 2023 period. These figures have been increasing on an average of about 17 percent since 2019.

To put this into perspective, it is almost 10 percent of the GDP, directly supporting countless households and businesses across the country. Many of our diaspora members, particularly in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, are eager to do more. They want to invest in Fiji, plan for retirement and actively participate in the country's development. What they often lack is information, access and support, and the right policies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to turn these aspirations into reality. This is where the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive comes in, to bridge these gaps and provide our diaspora with the right tools and support they need to contribute meaningfully to our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 70 agencies and financial institutions, namely the Fiji National Provident Fund, Fijian Holdings Unit Trust, Fijian Holdings Stock Broking Limited, Solar FinTech, iTaukei Land Trust Board, the Ministry of Lands and the Fiji Embassy in Washington DC, participated in the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive, coordinated by the Fiji Trade Commission in North America, and ably led by Mr. Alika.

These agencies provided a range of services including:

- investment advice to empower diaspora members to diversify their contributions;
- savings promotion to support financial security and retirement planning;
- land and lease conditions, ensuring transparent and accessible pathways to owning or leasing land in Fiji;
- passport services to simplify logistical challenges for our diaspora; and
- linking services where diaspora members were linked to Fiji agencies and partners.

Honourable Members, these services were made available in four key cities, namely, Seattle, San Francisco, Sacramento and Santa Rosa.

The response from our diaspora, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was overwhelmingly positive. Over 1,000 members were served and new diaspora investments exceeding \$1 million was recorded over those six days. These numbers to net accounts for the long-term impact of the relationships and the accounts established during this drive. This is a true reflection of what we can achieve when we listen

to our people and work together for the betterment of Fijians, especially for our people overseas.

Beyond the numbers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the human stories are what truly highlight that full impact of this drive. Among the many stories shared, one that stands out was the story of a Fijian woman who had lived in the United States for decades unaware that she had substantial funds in her FNPF account. Misinformation had led her to believe that she had nothing in her account. Learning otherwise was an emotional moment for her. Tears of joy and gratitude were expressed and are a powerful reminder of why these engagements are so critical.

We also heard from diaspora members who plan to retire in Fiji and look for the opportunity to open investment accounts in Fiji. These are powerful reminders of the latent potential within our diaspora and their eagerness to maintain strong connections with their homeland. These stories, Mr. Speaker, Sir, highlight the deep desire of our diaspora to stay connected to our homeland and contribute in tangible ways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the success of this drive is undeniable, it also has shone a light on the challenges faced by our diaspora. One major issue is the difficulty of opening bank accounts in Fiji remotely. Many diaspora members, particularly those who are unable to travel to Fiji, are excluded from accessing banking services due to stringent in-person verification processes.

To address this, our very own local bank, HFC, in partnership with the Fiji Trade Commission, is looking at a way to allowing diaspora members to open bank accounts remotely. The teams have registered a few new bank accounts as part of this, and a formal announcement will be made as soon as everything is worked out logistically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will mean that we will witness an increase in deposits and investments from our diaspora community. I would like to also acknowledge the Board Chairman and Management of HFC Bank, who have been working actively with the Trade Commissioner of North America. This initiative, Mr. Speaker, is the first of its kind in our country and a testament to the combined dedication to overcoming barriers with our diaspora.

Honourable Members, let me take a moment to reflect on why supporting our diaspora is so crucial.

- (1) Diaspora investments and savings directly contribute to Fiji's GDP. The funds raised through initiatives like this drive support for businesses, create jobs and fuel infrastructure development.
- (2) Facilitating investments such as this, in areas such as land and housing, will encourage long-term participation in our economy, ensuring a stable future for our nation.
- (3) Engaging with our diaspora fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty to Fiji, encouraging them to return home, retire and even start businesses here. I am pleased to report, Mr. Speaker, that there are already quite a few doing that as we speak.
- (4) Beyond financial contributions, our diaspora represents a wealth of knowledge, skills and networks that can be harnessed to drive innovation and development in Fiji.

The two gentlemen, Sir, that we saw in Canada are quite well-heeled gentlemen who have made names for themselves in Canada, and they are here as an outcome from the North American Mission that we also conducted in May this year.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Both from Ba.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, this drive was a trial, but we can see, and it is

now being hailed certainly as a success.

As we look to the future, Mr. Speaker, our goals are very clear:

- (1) Annual engagement - we plan to make the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive an annual event, aligning it to Fiji Day celebrations to maximise participation.
- (2) On top of that, we will be looking at rolling this out to other countries in the diaspora, so that we deepen our penetration with the diaspora. The next step of course is to look at Canada and a few other countries in going forward.
- (3) Tailored solutions - through key partnerships, we will continue to identify barriers and work on innovative solutions such as the partnership with the HFC Bank.
- (4) Diaspora empowerment - our aim is to create an environment to every Fijian, regardless of where they live, can contribute to our nation's success, without any unnecessary huddles.

Our vision, Mr. Speaker, is to expand to other countries, as I have mentioned, and ensure that going forward, our diaspora, our family, become a central cornerstone in the economic development of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to highlight in this House some other developments that are in train. Of course, changes to the rules of immigration that were introduced by the Coalition Government have been warmly received by our diaspora. The new exemption categories is based on membership in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* and also your birthright in Fiji, sends a powerful message to all our diaspora, in terms of their ability to come home and work at home and strengthen bonds between Fiji and where they reside.

While there are existing investment incentives as well, Mr. Speaker, we will tailor some of these incentives to the diaspora. The Ministry of Trade is currently designing some policies which will be tabled in Cabinet, targeting the diaspora specifically. This is expected to attract more investment, wealth creation and improve the wellbeing of our people.

Mr. Speaker, by creating a consistent and structured approach, we can ensure that every Fijian abroad has the opportunity to invest, save and stay connected to their homeland.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish also to acknowledge at this stage, the local stakeholders in the United States, whose collaboration made this event possible. This includes the venue organisers, the Fiji Day Santa Rosa Event Coordinators, community and church leaders, who supported this drive. Their contributions in facilitating logistics, rallying the community and providing an inclusive platform for engagement, were invaluable.

I would also like to acknowledge the Fiji Embassy in Washington, His Excellency Ambassador Ratu Ilisoni Vuidreketi, and his team, for their support in providing passport enrolment services to the diaspora in California during this drive. Of course, I also would like to thank the Fiji Trade Commission in North America and their leader, Mr. Cooper, for their tireless efforts in coordinating the drive, providing immense support to the agencies.

Perhaps, now, a note for the Government, the desire for passport processing to be brought closer to the community is something which came up quite significantly in America and, perhaps, with the permission of the honourable Prime Minister, we are looking at setting up something on the West Coast to deal with those of our people on the West Coast, where the bulk of the population is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, the success of the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive 2024, is a shining example of what can be achieved when we engage our diaspora. This

initiative will not only strengthen our economy, but also reinforces the invaluable connection between Fiji and our people abroad. To our stakeholders and every Fijian who participated in this drive, *vinaka saka vakalevu*. Your efforts and enthusiasm are what make such initiatives possible.

Together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are building bridges between Fiji and its diaspora, bridges that will not only carry investments, but also the hope, pride and the shared vision of prosperity for generations to come. Let us continue to build a Fiji that every Fijian at home or abroad, is proud to call their own.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing me to deliver this Ministerial Statement.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement and his brief on the US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive, which was conducted along the West Coast of the United States. I think he somewhat touched on Canada also.

Of course, yes, Mr. Speaker, this initiative was aimed to strengthen our economic ties and attract investment and encourage more of our Fijian diaspora to participate in Fiji's economic growth. But let me just correct him, Mr. Speaker, this is not the first, it was done before in North America, and proof of the pudding is a very large investment that came out of the States. This is in Wailoaloa, in a hotel that has currently just finished. That was done under the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said all of that, I take my hat off to the honourable Minister for having taken the initiative to do this. It is a great place for us to try and tap into the diaspora because there are many success stories that come out of North America that we can tap into. The last time, I think, we did all of these, COVID had put back to a lot of things, therefore, it stood still.

As mentioned by the honourable Minister, we have a huge diaspora and that relates to remittances that come into the country. That is actually a pittance in terms of the capability that exists within North America in terms of investment into Fiji. We have many success stories of former Fijians who have done extremely well in the US and Canada and are willing to come and invest in Fiji. One such case, as I have said, is the Crown Plaza that is being built in Wailoaloa and it is a massive success story, and this is a gentleman called J. Singh, who is a former Fiji citizen. He has done extremely well in the United States, and he has now decided to invest in Fiji. That is just one example.

The other example is sitting in the room today. As mentioned by the honourable Minister, a very well-heeled gentleman, Mr. Jeff Lal, who is also a very successful businessman, who also wants to come and invest in Fiji. But it just so happens, Mr. Speaker, that Mr. Lal, even yesterday, pointed out some things that probably need to be looked at. This is not pouring scorn on anything but just something that we need to look at.

This is, again, a Ba-born Canadian businessman. He talks about the investment landscape and there are issues with respect to scrutiny that they actually look at. The investor's concerns come out of stability, of Government policies and overall investment climate. So, I think, maybe the honourable Minister needs to just take heed of the kind of stuff that actually comes out in the press and address these issues.

Also, in terms of investments and incentives and policy stability and the different sectors that they are looking at that need to be looked at, the key issue that he raised, I think, was land lease

issues, et cetera, and whether different sorts of land was affordable. Investors were questioning whether Government would provide incentives. So, I think these are questions that need to be answered.

But this is not a question that singularly comes from Mr. Lal, it actually comes from the entire diaspora. As I have said, they look at the potential long-term risks if they are going to invest. And we must remember, Mr. Speaker, that these are large investments that they intend to undertake.

The honourable Minister for Tourism will understand that the Crown Plaza is now a jewel in the crown with respect to tourism. These are the kinds of investments that we can attract, regardless of who is in Government, so we can attract. We just need to get it right. So, when an investor or someone who is about to invest is raising these issues, I think they need to be spoken to and we need to also ensure that we look at it in terms of when Budget time comes and the investments that can be done.

Mr. Speaker, one of the other things also is that we have a young population who actually exists in these parts of the world who are not born here, but they are children of Fijian citizens who have also done well. And there is a large interest in them taking up Fijian citizenship and wanting to come here and work. So, there is a skill that they now possess that we can actually tap into. So, these are areas that we most definitely need to expand on and look at.

As I have said, there are challenges that exist, but like anything, there is going to be challenges and I think these challenges will be addressed by the Minister because he is, obviously, got a team working on it.

Investment Fiji, the main arm of all of these, also needs to be beefed up, Sir. They are an investment promotion agency and when Budget time comes, I think the honourable Minister will need to ask the honourable Minister for Finance for more money so that we can actually tap into these places, like we should, so that we can get more investment into the country.

I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the time.

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

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the Ministerial Statement given by the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Trade, Co-operative, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, I commend the initiative aimed at the strengthening of economic ties between Fiji and the United States, as well as the encouragement of the Fijian diaspora to engage in building our economy and the economy of their home country.

The US Fiji Investment and Savings Drive 2024 is a commendable initiative, Mr. Speaker, not just in the impact it promises for the economic growth of Fiji, but in its potential to create a global platform for local MSMEs. Such a drive could enhance the capacity of these businesses, fostering innovation, competitiveness and economic diversification.

By targeting the Fijian diaspora in North America, the initiative recognises the significant contribution of our fellow citizens abroad, what they could bring in terms of investment, their skills and knowledge, and the potential boost for economic and social development in Fiji. This strategy, Mr. Speaker, aligns with our global trend, leveraging diaspora for development and foster a sense of belonging which could, undoubtedly, be transformative. I also acknowledge the Government's effort in adopting the long-term prosperity and collaboration, but also would encourage and strengthen the strategy for all members of our society, including our youth and our women.

Building a prosperous nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, requires the active involvement of all citizens, both at home and abroad. That being said, it is fundamental that such initiatives come with robust mechanism to manage and monitor the execution and impacts of this investment. Transparency and accountability should not be compromised, and Government deliverables must result in tangible and meaningful progress for all Fijians.

In conclusion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the effort and the direction, and I urge the Government to ensure that this initiative does not only attract financial investment, but also translate to real socio-economic development, job creation and, ultimately, a better standard of living for our people. It is also important to ensure that the interests of local communities and their environment are protected in any development strategies, and to be in line with Sustainable Development Goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Ravunawa. I was going to add the fact of the presence of the business individuals in our midst this morning, Mr. Sam Basra and Mr. Jeff Lal, who are hugely successful businessmen in Canada. I understand that the honourable Prime Minister had met them in one of his trips there, but I am beaten to it by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Koya.

If I only would like to add my own personal experience, is one of my most enjoyable line of work as Vice Consular in New York in the late 1970s was to visit our Fijian communities, the diaspora all around America and Canada. What I noted then and it was untapped then, was the huge enthusiasm to assist our country and the contact that they have maintained. I am only adding that as an observation to the statement by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister this morning.

There is a bit of bad news. Honourable Members, our Secretariat has been advised by the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project that the workshop that was planned for next week at the Coral Coast has been cancelled. But maybe this is a blessing in disguise. I think after this morning's intervention by the various Members, I would like to encourage, in the light of the cancellation, the respective Standing Committees to continue with their Committee meetings until prorogation. Our Secretariat stands ready to facilitate these meetings, if required. Thank you, honourable Members.

Pilot Tourism MSME Grant Fund

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august House, members of the public, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen; that retreat was actually going to be held in my neighbourhood.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the day I took on the tourism portfolio till today, I receive requests from Fijians wanting to grow and to diversify their businesses in tourism. There was a gentleman who got a space by a big resort to set up a stable to operate horse riding, but he was not able to purchase the needed equipment. There was a lady who owns an art business, who wants to supply to more hotels, but needed help. But these businesses for whatever reason, could not tap into any of our established finance programmes. It was either that the programme had closed, they were ineligible, or the programme was focussed on other sectors, so we saw a gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a critical

role in our nation's economy. They represent the vast majority of businesses, contribute significantly to job creation and drive innovation at the grassroots level. The same is true for the tourism sector, not just in Fiji but globally. Some of today's greatest companies began as ideas. Some data suggest up to 80 percent of the sector comprises SMEs. These businesses are the lifeblood of our local economies, yet they often face challenges in accessing the resources needed to grow and thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recognising this gap, in the 2024-2025 financial year, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has been allocated \$400,000 to implement the Pilot Tourism, Micro and Small Enterprises Fund. The Fund, an initiative of the Coalition Government, is the first of its kind for the tourism sector. It is designed to directly empower micro and small enterprises within the tourism sector by providing financial assistance in the form of a grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative reflects our Government's belief that the growth of our MSMEs is central to building a resilient and inclusive economy. We recognise that these small businesses form the backbone of our tourism sector. From friendly-run guesthouses and eco-lodges to local tour operators and handcraft producers, MSMEs embody the essence of Fijian hospitality and culture.

Through the grants, we are creating a platform for these enterprises to rebuild, innovate and contribute to the larger vision of sustainable economic growth. These grants are not just for accommodation providers, it is to grow more experiences and activities.

Globally, we see that today's traveller is not choosing a destination solely based on the hotel brand. There used to be the belief that tourism in Fiji or sun, sand and sea, it is much broader than they are today. They want more immersive experiences where they leave their hotels and take part in community and cultural activities. This is an area that the Ministry wishes to focus on, because as investments takes shape in hotels and new markets come into Fiji, we need to be able to cater for their different needs.

I wanted to share that the programme is being overseen by a public private panel. Besides government agencies, we have partners like the Fiji Hotel and Tourism Association, Fiji Development Bank and Business Assistance Fiji. Through these grants, we want to support small businesses who want to enhance their product and experiences. It could be a village who has a waterfall and wants to build a small trail, it could be a new hiking route that wants to improve signage. To be eligible, you must be a Fijian citizen of 18 years of age and above, be a registered business in operation for two years, majority Fijian-owned or, at least, 51 percent engaged in tourism, with majority of revenue comes from the tourism sector; and ability to meet the one-third project cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative is more than just financial assistance. It is a demonstration of our Coalition Government's dedication to creating opportunities for all Fijians. Tourism remains a cornerstone of our economy, and we are determined to provide it with the right type of support - support that empower small businesses to succeed and innovate, ensuring their long-term sustainability.

This programme is not an isolated effort, it is part of a larger integrated vision to ensure Fiji's tourism sector remains resilient, inclusive and globally competitive. From the Na Vualiku Tourism Development Programme to the Farm to Fork Initiative, we are creating a network of support that empowers entrepreneurs, sustains communities and drives innovation. This Government has shown time and again that we are committed to the principles of inclusivity and shared progress. The Fund is yet another example of our resolve to bring impactful, transformative change to the lives of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now have the honour of informing this august House and the public that the pilot programme will be live and available effective tomorrow, Wednesday, 4th December, 2024. The application is available on our website: www.mpca.gov.fj and we will be reaching out to the various divisional offices of government to make these forms available.

To our partners and stakeholders, we invite you to join us in supporting this initiative and ensuring a success. Together, we can create an ecosystem where every business, regardless of its size, has the tools to succeed, and to all Fijians, this is our journey. The Coalition Government remains committed to working with you every step of the way, ensuring that no one is left behind, as we build a brighter and more prosperous Fiji.

With determination, vision and unity, we will ensure that tourism continues to be a source of strength and pride for our nation, empowering entrepreneurs and enriching lives. *Vinaka vakalevu* Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial speech this morning and just to support him, Sir, also to say that this is a very, very good initiative that is actually being started tomorrow in terms of the tourism MSME Grant Fund.

One of the things that we must remember is that this is not the only programme that MSMEs can actually tap into, so to his neighbour sitting next to him, there is the Trade Enhancement Programme (TEP) under his Ministry that the tourism operators can tap into as well. These are great things for our MSMEs sector.

Just to put it into perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, pre-COVID, I think the MSME sector actually contributed about 18 percent to Fiji's GDP and 60 percent of it was also to the national workforce. Now, following the impact of COVID, a lot of people also who lost their jobs went into the MSME sector and so a lot had to be done to encourage them and, again, the tourism industry has actually benefited from it. A lot of them supported themselves through these small livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the grant has some success. There are previous grants that we have done for tourism and through Tourism Fiji, similar ones, and two of them stand out as having done extremely well and these kinds of grants are also being supported by Tourism Fiji. I think everyone in Fiji and worldwide knows about our Sabeto Horseraces. Aviva Farms was actually a recipient of that particular tourism grant, and it is a massive success story of this particular initiative or this kind of initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know from having been at that particular races at that time that it is not just a Fiji phenomenon, it is a worldwide phenomenon now. Everyone looks forward to it. It is a great day out and, of course, it is the weather in the West where everything is the best, obviously, Sir. But these are the initiatives that actually work for our tourism sector.

I also know that Zipline Fiji was also one of the recipients for the earlier initiative. So, this particular initiative given by the Ministry of Finance in terms of about \$400,000 to support our small tourism businesses is welcomed and much look forward to, as an add on, to whatever else is being done at the Ministry of Trade. I think the TEP actually allows it also.

So, we have a wonderful opportunity for our MSMEs to grow and in order to increase our cultural and community experiences in the tourism industry, it aligns with the modern traveller demand. Most people are looking for authenticity nowadays and these are areas that we can actually tap into.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a small way, this also contributes towards our economy in terms of diversification and reliance on very little things, but these things actually manage to make us grow. We saw that in times of need, people started doing many small businesses that still exists nowadays through these initiatives.

The MSME sector is the engine for growth for our economy and I take my hat off to the honourable Minister for starting this particular initiative on the back of all the other small initiatives for our MSMEs that actually exist around the country.

At the end, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said regarding the TEP, I hope the honourable Minister for Trade is actually forcefully trying to encourage more and more people to get on to this Programme. I also understand which is commendable, Sir, it is not just about the handing out of the money, there are training programmes, et cetera, that exist which is also very commendable because this is an industry that we can actually grow more and more. I thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Leader of the G9-Bloc or his designate for his response.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, honourable Gavoka, on the statement that he has been delivered on the Pilot Tourism MSME Grant Fund.

We thank the Coalition Government for launching this particular programme in the 2024-2025 Budget. There is also \$400,000 that is allocated for this particular support to support small tourism businesses especially in our communities. It will offer about a sum of \$15,000 for applicants who can apply, given the applications will be available tomorrow online and also the requirement that is there that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has already announced, plus the one-third that they also have to contribute.

But thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister for addressing the gap, and that gap has been there for a very long time. This particular funding will address the financial access that many of those, for the last 8 years to 16 years, have been denied, especially when we go down to Inter-Continental, those operators are always at the borders of the hotel. They do horse riding, catering, plus other handicrafts. This will assist them in providing better facilities for them, given the demands of travellers are now changing, not only do they want the sun, sand and sea, they probably also want our heritage, spiritual tourism plus other things that they have more interest to them, *sigidrigi, mekes* that are available elsewhere, those kind of knowledge will assist all given another Bill that the Ministry of iTaukei are also consulting on cultural expression and traditional knowledge that will also capture this new form of tourism that marketing our culture and the taste of the tourist and travellers coming in.

That will generate more income to our community especially in villages. More activities they can do to improve their facilities, footpath, community halls and other things the ladies can also improve and empower them through business. It can also create employment. I thank the Deputy Prime Minister and that is my response, and again thank you for addressing that gap that has been there for long. I hope it continues and this particular programme that more awareness and consultation will be done so that the staff from the Ministry can go out there and explain to those applicants where the application forms are and what are the requirements that needs to be done.

On another note, also to assist our landowners. If the Ministry of iTaukei and TLTB can look into other services that can provide to our landowners in terms of making business plans. These are also costly to them, and it can be effected as part of this, so that it can help in the registration of businesses before they are eligible to the requirement of this MSME. Those are few words that I

would like to contribute, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank you for allowing me and giving me the opportunity to respond.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have two more Ministerial Statements to be made. In the light of the hour that we have reached at this point, honourable Members, we will suspend the proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.20 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

21st Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Meeting

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and all those tuning in live on Parliament's *Facebook* channel; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a Statement on Fiji's hosting of the 21st Commission for the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPFC), which was held in Suva from Thursday, 28th November till today, Tuesday, 3rd December, and catered for 470 participants. I would like to show my Ministry and the Commission's sincere gratitude in thanking the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji for his gracious leadership and support in accepting our invitation to be chief guest at the official opening of the meeting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission for the Conservation of Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean is one of the five global tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), and is, perhaps, the largest regional fisheries management organisation, catering to over 50 percent of the world's tuna catches.

The WCPFC convention area caters to approximately 20 percent of the earth's surface with the Western boundary to the East Asian seaboard, excluding the South China Sea and the Eastern boundary, to the overlap area of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission - one of the five RFMOs the southern boundary to the 60 degrees South and the northern boundary to Alaska and Bering Sea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the WCPFC Convention was established to conserve and manage tuna and other highly migratory fish stocks across the Western Central Ocean and was established on 19th June, 2004, with its Secretariat based out at Pohnpei in the Northern Pacific Islands of the Federated States of Micronesia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the WCPFC is made up of 26 co-operating members, seven co-operating members from participating territories and seven co-operating non-members. It should be noted that whilst all three categories take on the Conservation Management Measures (CMMs) developed under this RFMO, only the initial two categories may take part in the decision-making process. Observers are also welcomed to the meeting, and they are categorised with an observer status. There are 24 inter-governmental organisations and 38 non-governmental organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission is built on the United Nation's Fish Stocks Agreement principles to address the Western Central Pacific Ocean's unique political, socio-economic, geographical and environmental characteristics. The Commission progresses much of its work through its four subsidiary bodies on an annual basis and deliberates on their outcomes towards a decision-making process, like the WCPFC. The four such bodies of the Commission are the:

- (1) Scientific Committee which ensures that the Commission utilises the best available scientific information to develop appropriate CMMs in order to allow for a long-term sustainability of the highly migratory fish stocks in the convention area.
- (2) Technical Compliance Committee (TCC) is the enforcement committee which reviews members adherence to the Commission's decisions and compliance to the CMMs that are developed therein. This is often done in closed sessions with members only in the

deliberations.

- (3) Northern Committee which provides recommendations to the Commission on species found 20 degrees North of the convention area. It should also be noted that not all members of the Commission are represented at the Northern Committee.
- (4) Finance and Administrative Committee is the Committee that deliberates and advises the Commission on matters related to its budget, finances and administration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission's decision-making processes are usually made by consensus. Where voting will be needed, the Convention also provides a two chambered voting mechanism, with member countries of the Pacific Islands Foreign Fisheries Agency (FFA) forming one chamber and the non-FFA membership countries forming the second chamber.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to this, Fiji has access to three funding mechanisms under the Commission, allowing it and other developing States and participating Territories to meet their obligation under the Commission, and they are the:

- (1) Special Requirements Fund;
- (2) Japanese Trust Fund; and
- (3) Chinese Taipei Trust Fund.

As a Commission member, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji ensures that it consistently meets its obligations under treaties and other legally binding arrangements regarding the harvesting and managing of highly migratory fish stocks in the Commission's convention area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to highlight that under Article 30 of the Convention text, there is recognition of the special requirements of developing States, an element that Fiji sees to in the development of the Commission's conservation management measures. Moreso, Fiji remains vigilant on the application of these elements, so as not to affect Fiji's sovereignty and sovereign rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is the only longline fishing industry in the Pacific Island Countries with a fully domesticated longline fleet. To ensure the protection, sustainable management and development of our domestic longline fishery, the Ministry prioritises the needs of our domestic fishing industry, to ensure its long-term viability as a thriving sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has obligations under the Convention and includes but is not limited to the implementation of the zone-based management, the adoption of the target reference points, maintaining rights in fish stocks, developing robust harvest strategies and addressing climate change impacts on tuna fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to the above and to maintain and protect our interests, and reinforce our support to the region, Fiji takes a proactive stance in chairmanship to the following technical working groups in the Commission and they are the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Intersessional Working Group on South Pacific Albacore Tuna.

The Southern Albacore Tuna species primarily dominates Fiji's tuna catch within our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Hence, the need for a scientifically based, regionally acceptable catch rate and an adoption of a target reference point that provides the best vulnerable biomass outcome for the long-term viability and sustainability of the species.

On the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization Port State Measures Technical Working Group, Fiji is combating illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing within our EEZ and the high seas, much like the Commission's membership and as such, it is leading the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) discussions in the region to address this phenomena.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because tuna fisheries is important to the Pacific Island countries as it provides economic benefits and food security, the 21st WCPFC Meeting was attended by Fisheries Ministers from Palau, Niue, the Kingdom of Tonga and Marshall Islands. Also included in the participation of the Meeting was the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, which clearly demonstrates, Sir, the importance of the tuna fishery in their respective island countries.

As the tuna stock are highly migratory, we have a shared responsibility to manage it sustainably. Meeting with fellow Fisheries Ministers underscores our leadership roles in managing and conserving the tuna fish stocks in our Pacific Ocean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji, along with the FFA membership in the WCPFC, reinforces the concept of a special requirement of developing States and Territories under Article 30 of the Convention, the:

- membership's commitment to developing robust harvest strategies that will build resilience in the light of ecosystem changes by climate change;
- membership's commitment to the South Pacific Albacore Fishery via the provision of a functional management framework;
- development of a conservation management measure on labour standards for fishing crews;
- development of an electronic monitoring longline minimum data requirements; and
- review of the regional transshipment measure that is poised to strengthen the regulation of this activity in the high seas.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the subject arising out of the WCPFC meeting agenda, Fiji continues to seize this and other like opportunities to foster and strengthen our relations with other Pacific Island countries, fishing nations and fishing stakeholders to collaborate and share knowledge, resources and best practices to address critical issues such as the impacts of overfishing, the IUU phenomena and climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will continue to support the region in ensuring that sustainable management of these highly migratory resources and their associated management decisions are based on the best scientific information available and the utilisation of the precautionary approach where this has been developed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will also continue to ensure that the elements of Article 30 of the Convention is reinforced in allowing developing States and Territories and even platform on developing and implementing the conservation management measures, whilst maintaining our sovereignty and sovereign rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I would like to reiterate our sincere appreciation to Cabinet support and decision to ensure the facilitation of hosting the 21st Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Meeting here in Fiji, and look forward to providing an outcome document once the meeting processes have concluded. *Vinaka vakalevu* and thank you for your attention.

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

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry for the detailed brief that she has given on Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and its role. I do not want to reiterate the detailed explanation that she has already made, which basically covers the responsibility of WCPFC and the technical areas that they are responsible for.

I would just like to make some general observations on the importance of WCPFC within the Pacific region, and Fiji has always been considered as the powerhouse as it leads the South Pacific in its negotiations with big island nations in this meeting.

The last meeting was held at Sheraton in 2015 and then in Manilla after that, and this is the third one that I have come across. But I thank the Government, and I thank the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, for having been able to accommodate and host such a huge concentration of people from all over the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of members who do not understand the content or the constitution of the WCPFC, it is the Pacific Islands that control the biggest tuna stock, which constitutes about 50 percent, and the honourable Minister has alluded to that. It is our responsibility as big ocean States to make sure the stock stays above normal and the resources are used for the benefit of the Pacific Islands.

The WCPFC and the Pacific Islands have a role that they understand very well. As the honourable Minister alluded to, every decision has to be on consensus, and this is the only time that the small island States in the Pacific can check off the big countries of Asia and Europe. In their effort to take the resources within the Pacific region, it is the consensus by the Pacific Islands that checks them and as it is by consensus, normally the Pacific Islands led by Fiji, would not agree to any conditions that will badly affect the resource owners in the Pacific, in other words, that will not benefit the Pacific Islands.

In two instances, I have found that the Ministers that were present can force the bigger islands, especially South-East Asia, like Japan and the other islands in South-East Asia and Europe, to listen to them because any walkout by the Pacific Islands will basically mean that the decision will be nullified. I must state here an example, Mr. Speaker, Sir. At one time, the Japanese did not agree to the repatriation of the sick on board fishing vessels to be the responsibility of countries that are fishing in the Pacific. Basically, the Pacific Islands stood their ground and said, "If you do not take that responsibility, we will not allow you to fish in the Pacific." That stand influenced the Japanese to reach back to their capital and ask them to agree to the Pacific and that was what happened in Manila, Philippines. Again, I thank the honourable Minister for highlighting the aspects that she has raised, and I thank you for your time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call on the Leader of the G-9 Bloc, or his designate for their response.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for her Statement this afternoon and certainly align with the sentiments she expressed with regards to Fiji's relationship under Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the obligations that we have, and the important role that WCPFC plays in our part of the world as far as the management of the migratory species of tuna and looking after our tuna fishery.

If I may just speak very quickly on the hosting of the event here in Fiji, I think Fiji is showcasing its ability to host big events in Fiji. I thank the Government for allowing and giving the opportunity for that hosting to be happening in Fiji and I am happy to see that this one is happening

in Suva, pulling it all the way back here to Suva. We had a lot of events happening on the other side of the island, but I think Suva is also developing its capacity to hold and host these types of events. It is an aspect of the nation that is now beginning to be well known as that we are able to host and manage these big events very well. I hope that that will continue into the future.

I thank the Ministry of Fisheries for the work that they do in trying to manage this tuna fishery, a very unique one for albacore that we have in Fiji and I am sure, as we have heard from the honourable Minister, WCPFC helps a lot in that regard.

MR. SPEAKER.- Out of interest, honourable Koroilavesau, I think one of my top students at the Marine Studies in my days of teaching there was your son. So, I think I know where knowledge and wisdom comes from. Thank you.

2024 World Vocational and Technical Educational Development Conference

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to provide a brief to this august House on my recent Ministerial engagement in the 2024 World Vocational and Technical Education Development Conference in Tianjin, China.

During the above visit, Fiji had been engaged in multilateral meetings with the Education Ministers from more than 100 countries around the world. As part of the visit, the Fijian delegation visited Luban Workshop Research and Promotion Centre to observe the technical and vocational programmes carried out at the Centre, as a follow up to the honourable Prime Minister's earlier visit to China.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Republic of China's honourable Minister for Education had extended an invitation for Fiji to be part of the 2024 World Vocational and Technical Education Development Conference which was held from 20th November, 2024 to 22nd November, 2024. The entire cost of the visit was borne by the Chinese Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the information of Parliament, the Conference is held every two years, the last being in 2022, whilst the next Conference will be held in 2026 where each participating country will be required to present on the achievements relating to their TVET systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian delegation had the opportunity to have a bilateral meeting with the Minister for Education, honourable Huai Jinpeng, to discuss the possibility of developing a communal-based programme for capacity building which is to be piloted in the Rewa Province. The programme will feature the utilisation of the Luban Model, which would be further explored through bilateral meetings with the Ambassador to China, Mr. Robert Lee, and the Minister for Education for the People's Republic of China. The discussions focussed on the student and teacher exchange programme, cultural exchanges, TVET teaching training, sharing of resources and the review and development of TVET programmes to include entrepreneurial skills for primary and secondary schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fiji's High Commission in China, the Fijian Ministerial Delegation was privileged to visit the Luban Workshop and Promotion Centre and were met with senior staff led by Vice Dean of Luban Light Industry Vocational Technical College, Professor Li Yunmei.

The Centre is an international cooperative project that focuses in cultivating technical skills and engineering practice in a modern apprentice's workplace, making it a distinguished representation of Chinese Vocational Education. The teaching model in Luban is based on Engineering, Practice Innovation and Project (EPIP) that had shaped the vocational education system in China through students and teacher training and has expanded its partnership to more than 30 countries through vocational and higher education training.

Some of the key outcomes of the discussions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, held in Luban were:

- fostering and enhancing of bilateral relations between the two countries through vocational training in areas of need to Fiji.
- the possibility of exploring scholarships for Fijian students who wish to further their education through high quality vocational training at the Tianjin Luban Workshop.
- both the parties agreed to consider engaging on teachers upskilling training programme currently employed at the Luban Workshop and introduce the advanced teaching models and high-quality equipment to our vocational training.
- options for online training for both teachers and students have been explored with the possibility of utilising the Ministry of Education's digital and e-learning platform.
- the possibility for craftsmen's skills training at village level was also explored. The concept would provide villagers with entrepreneurial skills that could be tailor-made into the Fijian village enterprising context. It is an approach to develop communities and provide a mean to eradicate poverty through economic empowerment at village level.
- through the scholarship awards, both ethnic groups will be encouraged to understand each other's culture through the cultural exchange programme. The exchange scheme will help break down stereotypes and helps in building bridges of friendship and respect for other cultures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad to inform Parliament that the Luban Workshop have expanded outside of China to more than 33 countries, providing internationally certified training, and Fiji would be the 34th partnering country, and the first partnering country, and the first in the Pacific to partner with, through the development of technical and vocational training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, meetings between the participating Education Ministers agreed that each participating country conduct a SWOT analysis of its TVET system. On this note, the Ministry of Education through the Technical Vocational Education Training Unit submitted a proposal to China outlining the specific support, areas needed and how both countries can work in collaboration to enhance Fiji's TVET system before the next 2026 Conference.

The exercise would include visits to our national TVET training providers and industries to assess the strengths, weaknesses and plans which will assist in the development of a clear pathway, review and curricula mapping and prioritising of Fiji's TVET needs.

Sir, the TVET report would encompass recommendations, an implementation, plan and a monitoring and evaluation mechanism which focuses on the National TVET Policy. Fiji will assist the People's Republic of China's development of an implementation plan and monitoring mechanism for TVET Systems in participating countries as part of the Tianjin Consensus before the next World Conference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the key takeaways on Curriculum Review from the 2024 Tianjin TVET Conference include the:

- (1) Integration of Entrepreneurial Skills Training at Primary Level
A team consisting of Officials from the Ministry of Education's TVET and Curriculum Unit will develop a plan to pilot and implement the revised Integrated Entrepreneurial Education Curriculum for Primary Education by 2025. By incorporating creativity, problem-solving, basic financial literacy, collaboration and social responsibility into the classroom, the children can begin to develop skills at the early age that will benefit them in many areas of life. These entrepreneurial skills are not just for future business owners, they are also valuable for personal development, leadership and understanding the world around them.
- (2) Introduction of TVET Programmes at ECE and Primary Level
The team will explore the integration of TVET programmes into the Early Childhood Education (ECE) and primary curricula in 2025. Integrating TVET programmes into ECE and primary education requires a holistic approach that balances practical vocational skills with academic learning. It also focuses on enhancing capability of both, educators and students, through professional development, curriculum integration and community involvement.
- (3) Review of Education Act and National Curriculum Framework (NCF)
A team consisting of senior officers from the Ministry of Education will develop a proposal to be considered during the review of the Education Act and the National Curriculum Framework. The review will include the integration of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) goals and principles.
- (4) International Visits for TVET and Education System Improvement
The Ministry of Education will identify relevant officers to study the TVET and education systems in countries like South Korea, Japan, Singapore, China, Finland, New Zealand and Australia, between the period 2025 and 2026. Upon their return, these officers will develop discussion papers with recommendations for improving Fiji's TVET and education systems through pilot programmes starting in 2027. Their findings will inform the revision of proposals and discussion papers for implementation by 2028. The Ministry of Education's Training Unit will develop a proposal detailing the visits, their findings and suggestions for adopting best practices from these countries and will coordinate with the hosting countries on the purpose of their visit.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement on the 2024 World Vocational and Technical Education Development Conference in Tianjin, China, which obviously is addressing this problem which is a global one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister talked about various things that he has learnt, then he talked about the need for a SWOT. I will give my short analysis of what the weaknesses and the threats are of the system that we have in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our system in Fiji, coupled with a massive migration of skills that we have, means we have severe skills shortage that have been exacerbated over the past two years to three years. It has been severely exacerbated, which is going to have a strong impact on our country.

The fundamental problem is because we do not have a national skills development plan. In

this country, if you look at all the assessments, they are all talking about supply. This institute is supplying that, this institute is supplying that, but there is no good data on demand. If you want to be able to produce people for the sector, you will need to understand what the sector wants. This is the big problem about this TVET. There is that lack of information demand and this is not easy to do, I admit. It is not easy to get a firm grip on demand, on what is needed, because sometimes, demand is not very easy to be able to get.

Now, we have a good system that is established in Fiji. We have established a National Qualifications Framework. We have the Higher Education Commission, under that, they are supposed to establish national qualifications based on the industrial demands of each particular sector. But the link between this setup (infrastructure), there is a setup here and getting the demand data has been lacking. This is the big problem that we have. How do we know that this is happening?

We know that 70 percent of the workers that we need in this country are TVET workers, but more than 70 percent to 80 percent of our funding goes to non-TVET workers. This is a huge imbalance. So, there is an imbalance - what we know the problem to be and where we are putting money, that is a major imbalance. That is something that needs to be addressed. In order to meet the demand, you will need to understand the demand.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the setup in place, but it is not working well. Without that plan, without getting the demand, we will be just talking about supply and conceiving of things that need to be done, and you do not follow it through. This is the problem that you find throughout this particular system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TVET is different from education. The purpose of education is to increase someone's ability to understand something. Sir, TVET is about jobs. Jobs means it must be directly related to what the people who are going to employ them need. This is where the biggest weakness we have. Doing this sort of labour market analysis is not cheap. It is something that we have to invest in, systems and structures are going to take time, as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance will know. It is not easy to be able to do that, but it is something that we need to do.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, demand is frequent because it changes. Around the world now, there is a focus on digitalisation industry. In all these things, everything is digital, everything is to be changing fast. One of the problems that we have now, we identify demand, we design a programme, we put in the output for that programme, and by the time people graduate, it is too late, things have already changed. So, the way in which we structure courses has to change, it has to be short courses, it has to be continual learning or sometimes delay the specialisation in training and do the specialisation just before people are about to enter the job market so that the specialisation meets the exact need in the market at that point in time.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we go and learn, if we have gone on about all the things that are happening around the world, if you do not address this fundamental challenge of understanding demand, and then tailor-make the programmes that even if the demands change and they evolve, the product that you get will meet the requirement of the market at that particular point in time. I have made two suggestions - lifelong learning, short courses, modular types of packages, micro qualifications, all these things coupled together. I think it is already happening to some degree.

Polytech, whoever it is, is immaterial, Fiji National University, anyone that can deliver the job because one of the fundamental problems that we have, one of the mistakes that the honourable Minister for Education said, the staff from the Ministry of Education are going to look at TVET. Wrong approach! You need to have the right people with the right lens.

People from the Ministry of Education look at it from an education lens. That is how they have been trained. Academics look at things from an academic lens. That is how they have been trained. People need to look at these things from a TVET lens. People that have gone through these ways of thinking and training, their ways of looking at things are very different. You need to use the right sort of person. I talk about this passionately because it is something close to my heart. And the things that I am talking about here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are not easy to address, and I agree. However, I believe we have the structure that is there.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Usamate, you have exhausted your time.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Usamate.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Leader of the G-9 Bloc, or his designate, for their response.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to respond to the Ministerial Statement made by the honourable Minister for Education, updating this august House on his recent Ministerial Engagement at the 2024 World Vocational and Technical Education Development Conference in Tianjin, China.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I thank the honourable Minister for briefing this august House on what had transpired during the conference which is a major event for vocational education, characterised by high standards, significant exchange and fruitful outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Minister, the theme of the 2024 World Vocational and Technical Education Development Conference was, “Innovation Empowers the Future, Skills Shapes Lives,” which aimed at advancing vocational education as a driver of innovation and sustainable development worldwide. The event was meant as a catalyst for change, marked by openness and inclusivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to move with times, and with such conferences, it would enhance and benefit our education sector, and I concurred with honourable Huai Jinpeng, China’s Minister for Education, when he stated that vocational education should align with the trends of the times, uphold the essence of education and preserve its unique characteristics. It should anchor its development goals amid evolving opportunities and challenges, striving for innovative breakthroughs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) was established in Fiji in 2017 through the Higher Education Act and it is acknowledged as a cornerstone of educational reform and supporting sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is a type of education and training that focusses on providing students with practical skills and knowledge for a specific trade or vocation. It is often considered an alternative to traditional academic routes, such as university or college, and is designed to prepare students for a specific career or occupation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, I commend the Ministry of Youth and Sports for the work that they do with regards to youth development and providing second chance programmes throughout its five training centres in the four Divisions, targeted at disadvantaged youths, who cannot continue in the formal education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs plans and intentions to improve the standard of living for the iTaukei communities by lowering dropout rates and unemployment through prioritising TVET, so that it can help develop iTaukei students to be resilient and excel academically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, vocational and technical education should not only be regarded as providing second chances to our youth who cannot continue in the formal education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stated by Ellen G. White, all youth need to be taught that life means earnest work, responsibility and caretaking. They need a training that will make them practical men and women who can cope with emergencies. They should be taught the discipline of systematic, well-regulated labour is essential, not only as a safeguard against the vicissitudes of life, but as an aid to all-around development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, she further stated that schools should be established, that in addition to the highest mental and moral culture, shall provide the best possible facilities for physical development and industrial training. Instructions should be given in agriculture, manufactures, covering as many as possible of the most useful trade, also in household economy, healthy cookery, sewing, hygienic dressmaking, the treatment of the sick and kindred lines, gardens, workshops and treatment rooms should be provided, and the work in every line should be under the direction of skilled instructors.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, TVET is important as it will provide students with skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their chosen career, and to help address any skills gaps in the job market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this type of education and training can be an excellent choice for individuals who are looking for a more hands-on practical approach to learning, and who want to get started in a specific career as quickly as possible.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Proactive Measures to Discourage Children Becoming Homeless (Question No. 273/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection inform Parliament on the proactive measures or preventative strategy that is currently being used by the Ministry to discourage children from moving over to towns and cities and becoming homeless?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I answer the question, I wish Fiji a Happy International Day for Persons with Disabilities, currently being celebrated around the country and this is spearheaded by organisations for people living with disabilities and the National Council of Persons with Disabilities. Right now, our children living with disabilities are celebrating at Lawaqa Park in Sigatoka as the main event, especially there is a night programme as well planned for them. I want to thank the Disability District Committees in Sigatoka, Nadi and Lautoka, and also the parents and guardians and children for putting together the programme, as well as our donor partners who have come forward to celebrate with them.

Mr. Speaker, the core responsibility for any child is the parent. We live in a society where our people are embedded in our religious teachings, despite what their faith is or ethnicity or gender of the child. It is still the core institution in protecting the child and that is the family. So, when this crucial structure fails, then it is for the community or the village or the *mataqali*, the *yavusa*, wherever we live, has to step in and take care of the child.

Mr. Speaker, as alluded to in the question, when children leave their home and come into towns and cities and become homeless, this is of great concern and community members continue to flag this with the Ministry and in the media and in the Government in terms of what we do with these children.

Mr. Speaker, we as a Ministry are working on all levels and this is not anything new for the Ministry or this Government, it has been done by previous Governments. There is an inter-agency for children, as well as line Ministries that are working together, especially coming together for child protection because when a child is homeless, of course, their protection and safety is first and foremost.

Given the complexity surrounding this where there is a tussle between what Government can do, what our Child Protection Officers can do verses the primary responsibility and duty with the family or with the parents, we have had to bring in, of course, the assistance of the community in terms of where we draw the line, how we take care of our children, while their parents or guardians are still alive or still around.

It is very different, of course, as you know, for children who are orphaned and are not taken care of because they become wards of the State and we can place them in homes where they can be taken care of so often, we see this tussle. When we take children in and we place them in homes, family members will come and take them away or family members feel embarrassed that their children are at the homes and come and take them away, but not necessarily providing the care that they need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an actual taskforce set up for street dwellers, especially our children, working with UNICEF in the last year and identifying reasons for why they have moved to the streets and choose to live on the streets. I think I have mentioned that a few times now in terms of the associated issues with children living on the streets, whether it is abuse, whether it is drug use, whether it is just the lack of interest in education or being at home, or neglect.

Our Ministry has seen higher cases reporting on child neglect, rather than child abuse so children are being left unsupervised. They find friends and comfort living on the streets rather than living at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter how much of awareness programmes we run as Ministries, no matter which Ministry, it still comes back to the setting of the home and what is lacking in terms of what children need. I thank the support of our CSOs, who are working with us - Empower Pacific, Medical Services Pacific, Save the Children, ARUKA Fiji and, of course, Inspire Pacific and the Salvation Army, who are providing support and assistance for these children, and many churches and communities as well, taking in these children to take care of them. But it is obviously not long term or in a process that is complete to see their rehabilitation and reintegration back into their families.

A few things that we have done in the last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think this may answer Question No. 285/2024 as well on Wednesday, asked by the same honourable Member. As I have mentioned yesterday, Salvation Army has opened a shelter, working with street dwellers, street kids that they have taken in, so we thank the Salvation Army for that.

As you know in the current budget year, there was a commitment in terms of starting a child wellbeing centre in Vunirewa, Serua, and there was a commitment of about \$230,000. That is, obviously, taking a longer process because if we are to include a clinical component in this child wellbeing centre, for children to be rehabilitated from drugs, it needs to go through a thorough process, calling for proposals from private sector or clinics that have done this. It is, obviously, overseas because we have never done this in Fiji for children. So, it takes time in terms of calling for proposals.

These Centres that have been set up by the Salvation Army, as well as Inspire Pacific, hopefully, the Ministry will be able to see if we can repurpose that funding that is there to invest in current centres that have been set up and these centres, obviously, need the expertise, like child psychologists, child psychiatrists, which we lack in Fiji.

When we are taking our street children and they need assistance in terms of rehabilitation, whether it is drugs or other issues, there are no professionals to attend to them. So, unfortunately, children get turned away from the Stress Management Ward at the CWM Hospital. They only deal with adults, as well as St. Giles hospital. So, this is a huge gap that needs to be filled to have our professionals working with children. That is taking some time so, hopefully, we will be able to do that in this budget year so that we do not waste that money.

If we are to invest in current centres like, the Salvation Army Centre, Inspire Pacific, and we thank Inspire Pacific, we have just completed that five-week camp that I talked about yesterday. I thank the government of China for funding that to begin, but of course, we as government have a responsibility. There is very little money that is usually committed to children and the need to look after our children. So, this needs to change. And that is something that as we put these programmes together, working with our partners, that we hopefully see a bigger budget commitment.

We have begun with our Department of Children. As the programmes roll out and we submit that in our budget submissions, hopefully, in the coming year, we will be able to see more committed to our Department of Children. However, I want to thank UNICEF, who has come on board for technical support and have ensured to help our CSOs that are doing this, that the centres are safe for children, they meet certain minimum standards working with the Department of Children, so thank you to UNICEF.

The taskforce dealing with street kids are now looking at a wider range of issues, like children living with HIV, children living with drugs and other social issues that they are facing. So, we invite relevant partners and others that want to partner with the Ministry and these organisations. "Please, come on board and work with us." We are hoping to then set up also in the Western Division and Northern Division for the same kinds of programmes.

I want to thank our Churches as well - the Fiji Council of Churches. They continue to give a space and facilities to use for our programmes. I want to thank also our line Ministry, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Fiji Police Force, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and, of course, Ministry of Employment. Thank you for your continued support as we work together. It will take line Ministries to come together to get this done, but they are usually tapping into their operational budget to assist us. So, hopefully, we see more of that in the next coming Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we needed to build capacity, moving forward, it is really to help our children to be able to reintegrate back into families that they feel they are cared for. It is not necessarily their parents or their immediate family, they may choose another family member to be

with and that is what we are working with them, so we do really listen to our children. Again, I thank the honourable Member for the question.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, I do agree with the honourable Minister that the loitering around of kids, especially in towns and in their school uniforms is an issue to address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to ask the honourable Minister, she is talking about a safety net for these street girls, but at the same time, she makes a comment in media that there needs to be a children's curfew. If a child does not have anywhere to go, they get caught by the authorities, it is more issues for the children and even the authorities themselves. So, where are we going with this honourable Minister? One side, you want to protect them, the other side there is a curfew. It is more issues, where are we going?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. It is not a Government policy, at the moment, it is certainly something that is floated and not approved yet. It has been done in other jurisdictions, in other countries around the world, so it is nothing new.

But if you look at it, honourable Sharma and honourable Members, they are actually consistent because if you do introduce a curfew, you are not penalising the child. It is going to be the parents and carers that are held responsible to ensure that our children are safe. It has been practised right now in Fiji in the *Vanua o Sabeto*, they have imposed the children's curfew in their villages in the *Vanua o Betoraurau*. So, it is already happening here in Fiji, in the villages so a child must be at home during certain hours, cannot be loitering and it is the responsibility of the parent or guardian, so it is consistent with child protection.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you wish to have a follow up question, honourable Sharma, or are you satisfied with the answer?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the update that she has given. I think this is a very serious problem. All of us are concerned about it, when we walk into town, and we see the children. One of the things that struck me in particular, is the fact that the honourable Minister stated that they found that the cases of neglect was much higher than abuse. That is very interesting, that people are actually leaving because of neglect.

I was thinking along these lines, if neglect is a problem more than abuse, then there would be parents of these children that are recipients of assistance from the Ministry. Would that be something that you would look at to try and address, to link up the fact that those who are neglecting their children, are still getting assistance through the Ministry? Would there be a possibility of timely structure so that you can use the assistance provided by the Ministry to parents who are neglecting their children as a possible way to get them to change their views on the way that they do things? It just struck me that neglect is hiding the abuse, because most of the time we think abuse is a big problem. Thank you.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, certainly that is a good question. Again, it is not up to the Ministry when it comes to parental rights and parental responsibilities, the Ministry cannot hold parents to ransom. I mean, it certainly is a suggestion to link it to social protection, but not all of the parents or the children that have been reported have their parents in social protection.

The reasons are varied and there may be times when it is really not the parents' fault. There

are parents who are working parents that do not have the ability to pay for a caregiver, so the reasons are varied, but it leaves the child helpless. So that certainly needs to be a responsibility not just of the Government, but I think the community can come in as well. There are less and less interest from family members in taking children, do you believe it? But we are moving into the 21st Century.

I think as families become more or less extended families and more into nuclear families, we are even struggling to place children in kin care, in their family care, because it would not be the lack of interest, but just inability to take on more children to care for. So, if we are able to help parents and caregivers to be trained, to be better parents, so to speak, and it does not just take Government, it also takes our churches, our faith-based organisations, traditional leaders and communities, to help parents be better parents and provide the support when they need it. I think we will see less cases of neglect of our children, but, like I said, the reasons are varied, but we still need to be able to take care of the child when they are presented to us. Thank you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament, is there any policy or direction of taking the street kids to established homes? It may sound funny, but this is the reality in Ba. Some street kids are taken into established homes in Ba. So, those 10 to 15 boys who were taken to that home spoiled the existing boys and some of them had to leave that home. I know there are some Ministers who are good at making headlines when saying this and that, but this is the reality on the ground. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, honourable Bala, it is a very valid question. In the established Department of Children, the Department is the regulatory authority to ensure that any homes that are established for children must meet certain standards. You certainly cannot place children at risk, together with children who may be in conflict with the law. So, that is part of the regulatory standards that we need to enforce.

Let me continue, to monitor Homes, that is part of our job, but I think it is upon those who start up these homes to ensure that these children are not put together. I know that there are examples of children in the West, like the Tabitha Home. They ensure that the children who come are kept separate from the other children. So, what we are really missing is the need for more psychosocial support for these homes, where the child psychologist can deal with the children, to counsel them.

I think this is the general message when we are dealing with children. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we often focus a lot on the victims but we need to look at the perpetrators, the child perpetrators as well, whether they are bullies, whether they are committing a crime, those children need help as well. So, we need to be able to provide that psychosocial support to counsel those who are also hurting children. They need that as well. So, we need to encourage our homes to be able to have that kind of psychological services so that they counsel children and the issues that they present with. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Status of the IHRDP
(Question No. 274/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the status of the Integrated Human Resources Development Programme in its efforts to create employment and support livelihoods in the rural and peri-urban areas?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to thank honourable Vanawalu for

his question. Before I answer the question, may I just be allowed to respond to the comments made by honourable Usamate regarding the need for a plan and even the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, said that in 2009, he had produced a Labour Plan for Fiji and it was given to the Government. They totally flipped it on its head and cancelled all the TVET institutions. So, I think he is contradicting himself in his contribution.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief, given that there are a lot of things to go through, but this Integrated Human Resource Development Programme (IHRDP) was a construct of the previous Government and I have to say, actually before that, from the year 2000. But the previous Government continued with it, and it is probably one of the more successful programmes that the Ministry has.

We will certainly continue to push it because as we all agree, we need to really drive economic activity in our rural areas and stimulate the rural economy. And what we are finding, is through the IHRDP we are accessing a lot of these rural communities and starting to see significant movement and positive change. But what we also did, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was we increased the grant threshold to \$250,000 and that has allowed us to do more in terms of the assistance.

Just by way of context, in 2023 and 2024, the Ministry observed that we had received over 39 applications with \$2.7 million requests. But despite the budget of only \$1 million we managed to cover 21 applications valued at about \$1.5 million which clearly shows that there is appetite for the IHRDP and hopefully we will continue to grow the funds going forward to sort of assist the rural economy.

What we have also discovered, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there is a potential to do more within peri-urban and also the urban economy, and we now have started recalibrating the grant a bit because you know in the urban economy there are pockets of areas particularly the housing areas, that do not have much economic activity, so we are placing some focus on there, as well as encouraging co-operative type of ventures and then trying to see how we can assist them as well.

I toured Western Division recently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it is wonderful to see some of the developments that are happening in the Division. One particular company called Mick's Fiji Tours & Transfers, a young man from Nadroga is doing a tour business. He actually came to Fiji after the change of the Government and set up his business in Fiji. He is now running with about 50 employees across the Coral Coast and into Nadi, and servicing customers, doing tours. We assisted him with a new boat just recently, on a one-third, two-third basis, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Another interesting co-operative, I just thought I would share to the Parliament, just to sort of motivate us, so that the money that we are giving is actually going to some really good projects. I talk about Matababani Co-operative, deep in the middle of Viti Levu in the village of Nakaro in Navosa. They are based about two hours to three hours out of Sigatoka. In the previous Government, they were given a solar farm. Through the advice from the Ministry, they decided to turn that into a co-operative business.

Because of what they saw and how that co-operative venture was working, and because it was working well and because they are big planters of *kava*, they decided to form a co-operative for *kava* and invest in a packing house for their *kava*, together with the pounding machine and implements, it was about \$20,000 plus on the investment. If you go up to the middle of Viti Levu now, they are pounding their own *kava* and bringing it down to the market for purchase. Their ambition is to eventually move into export, and we will try and assist them in that. So, these are the types of transformative things that are happening around the country.

I am sure the honourable Minister for Agriculture can relate a few more. I would also like to just talk about Wailevu Cane Farmers' Co-operative, which I met in the North just recently. Through the co-operative movement, they purchased, and they are cane farmers. This side of the Parliament is looking for a solution for cane, and we hope to bring some clarity to that issue soon.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the farmers already know what the solution is. For the Wailevu Co-operative farmers, they have invested in a rice harvesting machine, so the farmers are already diversifying on the ground. They are saying that they are getting good money from the rice in the North, and they use that machine. I think it was about \$150,000 that was the total contribution from our side. But for the rice harvester, it will improve their yields and production, and, of course, increase their returns.

Then in the North also is the Tavoro Forest Park Cooperative, which was supported through IHRDP. This is in Bouma Village and my prediction with this co-operative is that they will eventually become a hotel property owner from Bouma. The reason for that is because it is such a special location, and it is an opportunity to see all the waterfalls around that area. You can actually go up and see Tagimoucia from that area. It is such a special opportunity, and they have managed to generate a good business from all the tourism in that area. We are now talking about some plans to scale up with them, and that is what is happening in Bouma, at the moment, in the Tavoro Co-operatives.

I guess, in a nutshell, the short answer is that IHRDP funding is doing well. The Government will continue to support this programme. From the benefits of that programme, we have now moved to a cooperative grant as well under the same sort of structure. So, this is the keenness to continue to stimulate the rural economy and I am pretty confident that we will resolve some of the challenges that we have in the rural economy through this particular grant and the other grants that the Ministry of Agriculture and some of the other Ministries are delving in as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister. Currently, Fiji is facing a shortage of *kava*, there are farmers who are not interested. So, based on this particular programme - IHRDP, is there any assistance or uptake to go and develop this particular sector, a little bit more at an enhanced level?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Kumar for that question. The short answer is 'yes', we are very keen to try and drive the *kava* assistance through IHRDP and also the cooperative grant. We find that the actual cooperative model is quite suited for a lot of our farming areas.

We have been assisting quite a few farmers of late, there is one that I did not mention here, but there is a young man called Sowane, up in Lovoni, in Levuka. A couple of hundred farmers come through him and there are some good opportunities there. He has his own solar plant and doing the same thing as the people in Navosa are doing. So, yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are some great opportunities to mobilise the cooperative movement, and I will make a statement later on my visit to India.

However, just as a prelude, India's success in terms of agriculture was built off co-operatives and there is a big message in there for Fiji. One of their most successful brands – Amul, which produces dairy milk, is a 100 percent co-operative. It is now earning revenue, not in the millions but in the billions, so the point raised by honourable Premila Kumar is quite valid.

There is a massive opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to unlock our rural economy using cooperatives and you will find, on this side of the House, a great enthusiasm and commitment towards

encouraging the co-operative movement and trying to use it to boost our agricultural sector.

As a final note, credit to the co-operative movement. One of the co-operatives that we assisted from Natadola, the leader of the co-operative said to me, "I should have gotten into co-operatives a lot faster," because through co-operatives you can share capital expenditure, and the commitment for one farmer becomes less of a burden when you share the capital expenditure across a couple of farmers. In the case of Natadola co-operative, you got 10 of them. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that answers honourable Premila Kumar's question.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I have a supplementary question, honourable Minister, in terms of IHRDP. Has the Ministry looked at targeted assistance, especially in light of the fact that you spoke about diversification in areas, for example, organic farming, where that can benefit co-operatives or small groups? Are we looking at or getting the data for targeted assistance so we can actually grow these areas?

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- To be honest, at the moment, we allow everyone to apply, for example, at the moment, the honourable Minister for Agriculture and I are basically working in sync on the Kava Bill because that will then create a good opportunity for us to really tap into the opportunities in *kava* and because of that, then of course, the assistance going to *kava* co-operatives will have to be elevated as well. That is probably one of the areas that we would be looking at a lot closer.

By default, I think quite a few of those type of co-operatives are coming. It is certainly something that once as some of the regulatory frameworks that we need before we push support in a certain area come into play, then we can really go hard on the targeted project. So once the Kava Bill is out, there are few other things that will come with it. The push to really maximise on *kava* will be harder, I will take that on board as something that I can talk to the Ministry of Finance and also the Ministry of Agriculture about in terms of just pushing certain things that the Government wants to do.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, unfortunately not every project in the past succeeded for obvious reasons, some mismanagement, some capacity. There are two parts to my question, if you can, please, respond to it.

One is, any consideration for follow-ups to those that failed because we have spent money on these projects? Secondly, the monitoring and hand-holding process and this is probably why the Northern Development Programme was so successful because of the programme. So, under the IHRDP projects because I know they come under an ILO Framework, what are the plans in the Ministry to address such issues?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I had ran out of time, I fail to sort of share some of the statistics regarding monitoring. I will just perhaps share them to answer to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's question.

Based on the recent visitations, there is about a 90 percent success rate in terms of recorded for IHRDP. Monitoring and evaluation tells us that for every MSME we support through IHRDP, it has created about nine jobs and the effective benefit is about 36 livelihoods. That is the assessment and on average, one recipient can earn up to about \$200,000 annually dependent on sectors and particularly in the agricultural sector.

One of the probably most impressive things that happened recently with the co-operatives is the development of more green technology opportunities. For example, because of the lack of access

to electricity, some of the co-operatives are now moving to solar-powered solutions and that is something that we started to see a lot more of, for example, the Lovu Co-operative in Gau which hopefully will be visiting early next year. They had got solar-powered equipment like freezers and dryers for their enterprise.

There is a monitoring arm of the cooperative division and also the MSMEs, and they do track the success of the projects, if there are issues, try and help with the remediation and those kinds of things. You are correct that there has been a lot of governance issues in the past with co-operatives, particularly. What we try and challenge or encourage our farmers, particularly to look at the co-operative model using good examples where there has been success. We do monitor, we do training as well.

One of the things that we also try and do is, training is very important before a co-operative is set up, so everyone understands the governance framework. Hopefully, that is probably a way we can educate and inculcate the disciplines around, not only managing a business but the whole process around running businesses and those kind of things which are very important once the grant is provided.

Salary Differences – Radiologists and Sonographers
(Question No. 275/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the salary differences between Radiologists, Sonographers and those performing doppler scans in the public health sector?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Ravunawa for his question. Just for the purpose of clarification on the different cadres of health care workers referred to in this question, radiologists are medical officers who have gained their Degrees in Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery have gone through internship programme, gone through rural appointment before joining the Radiology Department as part of their request for joining a specialised field. They are responsible for the interpretation of radiological imaging such as x-ray, CT, ultrasound, MRI reports and they do the reporting. They are pegged at, starting on Band H, Step 5.

As for sonographers or medical imaging technologist who perform doppler scans like ultrasound modalities, they have completed their Bachelor Degree in Medical Imaging Technology and have joined the workforce as Medical Imaging Technologist (MIT). Through in-house trainings, MIT gain additional skills to perform the procedures for specialised tests such as ultrasound, computerised tomography or CT scan or MRI scanning and ultra-sonography as well. Salaries for MIT start at Step 2 on Band F and MIT perform general radiography are paid at the same level as those performing ultrasound scans, CT scans, mammography and MRI scans in both hospital settings and the subdivision hospitals.

In April this year, Mr. Speaker, I had stated in this august House that in the last decade, Fiji has also seen a share of radiological imaging development, with the introduction of high-quality ultrasound technology, CT scan, MRI testing and other advanced testing technologies. These developments have meant the need to increase the workforce and enhance their capabilities to operate these new advanced technologies for a better disease diagnosis and treatment. Unfortunately, this did not happen concurrently with the introduction of new and advanced technologies over the years. Sir, this is an exercise that the Ministry is currently undertaking with the support of our partners to

address the workforce needs now and, in the future, including the appropriate remuneration for our staff and the Ministry is committed to complete this task.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister inform the House, is there any qualified sonographer in the country? The reason I am asking this, Sir, because no university in Fiji is offering courses in this field.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- In general, they graduate with a Medical Imaging Technology Degree, and as I had mentioned, once they come on Board the workforce, then they are trained in the various other parts of medical imaging modalities that are available. At the moment, as part of the review, we are trying to ensure that training to be accredited is also included in the review. As it is, they are just learning on the job and some of the local accreditation from various hospital settings overseas, they have been seconded too to work there, learn and then come back and perform the duties that they do perform. But at the moment, the ones that we have, they are locally trained, and they are doing the work as it is.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. There are specialised fields in this particular scope of work, especially if we are looking at CT scans and MRI. We have radiologists reading the scans and doing the report, who are paid close to around \$143,000, et cetera. Now, we have technicians who are carrying out this work and are only paid around \$22,000 to \$23,000. Why this huge disparity in salaries because within the images, the radiologist will not be able to read the reports. Even the honourable Minister explained in his answer previously that these people are trained, but they are not accredited. This is just a band-aid solution to train our technicians to work in Fiji, but if they go abroad, it is not recognised. What is the honourable Minister doing in terms of bridging the gap of the salary difference?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I guess my colleague was not listening, I have just mentioned in my reply that as part of the review of their workforce, that we will include accredited training to be part of, especially the MITs, together with that then we can also remunerate them accordingly based on the skills that they have attained. That is included in our review and that will happen. It did not happen in the last four, eight or 16 years ago.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move the suspension motion for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times.

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 the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have five Oral Questions, three Written Questions and also the three motions in Schedule 2 related to the debate on the annual reports.

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

any.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- I have no further comments,
Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will suspend the proceedings for a break.
Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.00 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.35 p.m.

New Town Developments in Nabouwalu and Keiyasi
(Question No. 276/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the status of the work undertaken by the Ministry on the new town developments in Nabouwalu and Keiyasi?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question asked by the honourable Member this afternoon, that is, to provide an update on the work that currently is being undertaken in those two centres - one at Nabouwalu and the other at Keiyasi in Navosa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of the two project sites is part of the Ministry's as well as this Government's plan - Urban Action Plan to identify some of the growth centres around the country. The Ministry's objective is to come up with a Pro-active Plan and also develop some of these centres into fully developed and fully fledged townships in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Nabouwalu New Town is a landmark project for the Province of Bua. I am certain that the people of Cakaunitabua in the Province of Bua as well as neighbouring areas are looking forward for the completion of this development. It is specifically designed to transform Nabouwalu into a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive growth centre that will serve as a hub for economic growth and activity innovation.

Mr. Speaker, this Government recognises the importance of developing these new townships in rural areas to diversify the economy and improve the standard of living for residents. These initiatives aim to uplift these regions by creating employment opportunities and stimulating economic growth in these satellite towns, thereby enhancing and improving the quality of life for its residents. And central to this is the development of the Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal which is a critical facility that will enhance connectivity and also boost trade and create more comfortable experience for the public that commute through the Nabouwalu Terminal.

Currently 50 percent of the terminal construction is completed, and we are on track to deliver this facility by March 2025. This facility will provide very basic amenities, including 150 seating spaces for passengers, some kiosks, operational offices for agencies and recreation spaces ensuring convenience and comfort for all users. The total project is around \$2 million of which \$915,000 has been paid out.

Mr. Speaker, there will also be offices established in the Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal for essential services, including Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF), Maritime Safety Authority, ticketing booths for boats operating companies and upgrading of both companies, kiosks, as well as coffee shops. There will also be parking spaces for cars and buses embarking from the boat to avoid waiting at the jetty and also some playing spaces for children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also to maintain law and order in the town centre, there will also be a police post for the Fiji Police Force within the building. We are also in the process of advertising and obtaining a foreshore lease. Preparation with the Ministry of Lands to secure that area from storm surges with coastal protection structures with an allocated budget of \$500,000 for the 2024-2025 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in parallel to this development, the town subdivision development of approximately 5.5 hectares is progressing with 23 commercial lots, four civic lots and four industrial lots planned to support businesses and essential services. The project cost is around \$8.9 million, out of which \$3.2 million has been paid up.

Phase 1 focuses on establishing several commercial lots along the Nabouwalu Highway, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2025. To facilitate this development, the Ministry has allocated \$500,000 in its annual programme for the current fiscal year to continue essential civil works on the site.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that Nabouwalu becomes a model for sustainability, we are mandating the use of solar panels and water harvesting systems and other green infrastructure in the new development. Only some challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, such as land leases and creating diversions that are yet to be finalised. They are actively engaging with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Lands, iTaukei Land Trust Board, and consultants to resolve them swiftly and ensure steady progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Keiyasi new town development in the Sigatoka Valley is another transformative project covering 9.4 hectares. This development will provide essential services and infrastructure for the people of Keiyasi and the province of Navosa, as well as all the surrounding communities. Estimated civil works for the project is \$10.8 million. The project includes 27 commercial lots, three open spaces, reserves, a market, bus station, service station and a space for National Fire Authority, as well as industrial sites, to meet and support the needed services and residents alike.

Construction of civil works, Mr. Speaker, Sir, began earlier this year, and we aim to complete this by 2026, focussing on six commercial sites, open spaces and a service station.

To support the town, improvements to the town, improvements to Valley Road, including road widening, footpaths are underway, ensuring safe and efficient access for residents and visitors. In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are collaborating with Water Authority of Fiji to upgrade the water supply system, meeting the needs of this growing community.

One of the very interesting feature about the development of Keiyasi, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is this place is becoming an economic centre for people around the area and every Thursday, we have been told that we have been reliably advised that there is a sop in Keiyasi at the moment where people always converge and do their trading on that particular day and we see the potential of growing that and also developing Keiyasi to become a growth centre and later will become a satellite town where we will be able to stimulate economic activities within the area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project demonstrates our Coalition Government's vision to bring growth and development to all regions in Fiji. Not only are these two sites, but the team also identified some other possible sites within the country to ensure that we are able to produce these growth centres into a fully fully-fledged township in the future.

With careful planning and sustainable practices. We are not just building towns, it is building hope, opportunity and pride for future generations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Insured Boxers - Boxing Commission of Fiji
(Question No. 277/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports inform Parliament whether the Boxing Commission of Fiji failed to ensure that boxers were insured for the bouts held at King Charles Park on 26th October, 2024?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for his question. The question, Sir, is related to the terrible incident that happened at Nadi's King Charles Park concerning the late Mr. Heida. I wish to update Parliament that the Board of Inquiry have not completed their investigations. They are still left with interviews to be done with people from overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once the investigation is completed, the report will be tabled for the public. Further to that, I will also be making a ministerial statement at the appropriate time. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am asking that the oral question be ruled out of order for the time being.

HON. H. CHAND.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir; Fiji has just lost a young talented professional boxer, Heida, also known as Nathan Singh. He was a champion boxer in Fiji, regarded as Fiji's most promising boxers.

Nathan Singh could have been alive today if the boxing event on 26th October at King Charles Park was sanctioned properly. One of the most important requirements for any boxing event is the availability of an ambulance and a qualified doctor at the venue.

The Boxing Commission of Fiji should have ensured that all necessary...

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER. – Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order, Standing Order 74(1) which states, and I quote:

“Any member may only raise a point of order if –

(a) there is an alleged breach of Standing Orders or practices of Parliament.”

MR. SPEAKER. – Yes, one moment, honourable Members.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA. – The practice is when you stand up to raise a question, you stand up to raise that question, you do not go into a lengthy diatribe and take political advantage of what the honourable Minister is doing.

The honourable Minister has just mentioned that there is a Board of Inquiry, and he is asking for us to wait for the Board of Inquiry. Stop making a political statement! Wait for the Board of Inquiry.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Thank you, honourable Minister.

Honourable Chand, can you specifically ask the question directed to the Minister in respect of its a follow up question to your question that is being tabled?

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is, Boxing Commission of Fiji should have ensured that all necessary requirements were met by the promoter before giving approval for the boxing event.

MR. SPEAKER.-Honourable Member, please, follow what I have just directed you to do and that is ask the question and not make a statement. They are totally different.

HON. H. CHAND.- Thank you, Sir. What necessary steps will the Ministry take so that thorough investigation is carried out and those responsible are taken to task?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already mentioned that the Board of Inquiry is still doing their investigation and we should be respecting the investigation to continue and the report will be tabled publicly. At the same time, since he has mentioned it, I attended the farewell service for the deceased. I do not know whether you attended, honourable Member, but I was there.

In respect of what this young lad has done to boxing in Fiji and we should respect what is being done at the moment until we get to the bottom of the problems that happened that night. Until then, I am not in a position to divulge any information right now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Minister is mistaken, thinking that if something is under investigation, according to the Standing Order, it should not be answered. That is wrong. It is only if something is before the courts.

My question is, can the honourable Minister confirm, if true, that this particular promoter that promoted this fight was actually stopped from promoting or had his licence withdrawn under the Chairmanship of the former Chairperson, Mr. Subhas Apna, and whether this has now returned...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Usamate, let me clear your issue and that is, you are asking questions that will invariably be dealt with by the Board of Inquiry. The Commission, may I remind you is, in fact, a couch in a legal frame that, in fact, would stop any questions being asked of Parliament from the proceedings until it is completed.

I think we have exhausted the supplementary questions in respect of honourable Chand's question. We will now move on the next question for today.

Review of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2014
(Question No. 278/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on the status of the review of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2014?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question regarding the review of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by stating that there have been unprecedented changes made to the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2014 since 2023, and the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2014 has been progressively amended over the last two years through the Parliamentary process with the aim to:

- (a) strengthen this legislation and governance structure;
- (b) provide clarity and additional powers to administer scholarship investments and
- (c) the implementation of these legislative amendments was made possible through direct leadership of the Board and Management of the TSLS.

Perhaps, I will take this time to share a few of some of the amendments that was made. First, is the write-off of students' loan amounting to \$650 million. That cancellation of the loan repayment of student debts has led to the relief of about 53,725 students that were indebted with this loan debt.

Second, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Hardship Assistance Scheme for students who were studying privately and are eligible to be sponsored, so they are now studying under TSLS and currently, there are about 348 students in their respective cadre or studies.

Third, is the Micro Qualification Scheme Assistance that is paid to students regarding those who are studying TVET courses.

The areas that are mostly covered during the review is the:

- (a) functions of the Service;
- (b) powers of the Service;
- (c) delegation to CEO and instruments of delegation;
- (d) meeting process;
- (e) disclosure of interest;
- (f) student's employment record for scholarship information;
- (g) report on 'at risk' students; and
- (h) additional criteria on new programmes for funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, provisions in the Act are serving the purpose of the Government's ambitions, then review needs to be reconsidered. There are provisions which need to be reviewed for amendments, and the same shall be carried out through the usual legislative process.

The current Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, stipulates the powers of the Minister for Education and also the Minister for Finance. The Minister for Finance is responsible for the appointment of the Board, while the overseeing of the regulations of all scholarship schemes, study loans and grants, and appointment of CEO through the Board are vested with the Minister for Education.

Some of the amendments also to the Service this year. The Coalition Government has allowed the repeaters on merit-based local scheme for degrees and vocational studies, the MBBS and pilot programmes. However, to be fair for the second attempt, the students need to meet higher cut off marks than the first attempt test. For example, the cut off marks for MBBS for first attempters is 350 out of 400 and for repeaters is 365. For pilot, it is 335 for repeaters and 310 out of 400 in Year 13 for first attempt, and compulsory pass in Fiji Airways psychometric and aptitude assessments. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, supplementary question on the academic achievements for students in rural areas and those in urban areas. Usually, those in urban areas are high achievers academically than those in rural areas. Will the review take into consideration the range of marks or give some preference to students in rural areas so that they can also come up with the same privilege as those in the urban areas? That is my supplementary question.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, honourable Member, for the very important question. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have taken note of the concerns that have been raised regarding marked

differences in the rural and maritime areas, and this is something that we will discuss also with the Ministry of Finance, considering the financial implications to expand the criteria for entry into the TSLS scholarship to also take into account those in the rural areas.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a question to the honourable Minister, we know that the TELS under the previous Government had its conditions as well. One of the problems that most of our youths are facing now is, when they intend to travel abroad, they are held back at Immigration in Nadi. What is the process that they need to go through and what is your advice to most of them, as they may be listening as well, because this is a common issue that they keep referring to us Members of Parliament?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendments that were undertaken during the Budget session that needed the operations of the student employment record and travel clearance and bond that used to be with Fiji Revenue & Custom Services (FRCS) have now been transferred to TSLS and they have an office in Nadi where they can have a process to clear their names before they travel abroad.

Projections and Expectations for Global Tourism
(Question No. 279/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the Ministry's projection and expectations for Global Tourism as articulated by the World Travel and Tourism Council?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Tunabuna for the question. As we all know, the Travel and Tourism Sector is growing. It is growing everyday, every year and every decade. The recent World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the Global Leaders Dialogue, held in Perth in September, provided a crucial platform for global leaders to engage in strategic discussions on the future of tourism.

The WTTC's Annual Global Summit is one of the most influential international events. The 2024 Summit brought over 800 participants from over 25 countries representing both public and private sector, including Heads of States, government ministers, Chairs, chief executives and global media. It was headlined by the 68th United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, and Environmentalist, Robert Irwin. It was quite a high-profile Summit. Some of the top profile speakers came from TripAdvisor, Trip.com, American Express and Intrepid Travel, who shared reliable ideas in the Summit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, projections for WTTC estimates that the travel industry will account for \$1 out of every \$10 spent globally in 2024. Of course, they are using the US currency here. The sector's contribution to global GDP will increase to 12.1 percent on year to a record US\$11.1 trillion in 2024. This means travel is responsible for 10 percent of global GDP, a 7.5 percent increase from 2019.

Looking ahead, 10 years from now by 2034, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sector will supercharge the global economy with a staggering \$16 trillion, making up 11.4 percent of the entire economic landscape. It will provide 449 million jobs, nearly 12.2 percent of the workforce. More than three quarters of countries analysed are expected to exceed the high point of 2019, in terms of GDP contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a report unlocking opportunities for travel and tourism in Ocean shows that

in 2019, the sector contributed about \$192 billion to Oceania's GDP, supporting over 2.2 million jobs. If we invest in infrastructure, the labour market quality and sustainability and improved visa facilitation, there are projections over \$29 billion increase in contribution to GDP by 2034.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Oceania's travel and tourism sector could inject an additional \$112 billion to the region by 2034, bringing the total contribution to a record-breaking US\$336 billion. This boost could also support an extra 1.1 million jobs, raising the total employment in the global region, supported by travel and tourism, to 3.5 million by 2024. Now, all these, Sir, what does it mean for Fiji?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the Fijian tourism sector, from January to October 2024, we have received a record of 822,253 visitors. That is 6.5 percent higher than the same period last year. With 180,000 more visitors over November and December this year, we will be at 1 million visitors. Sir, these numbers are not always organic. Destinations around the world are investing heavily in their tourism sector. Connectivity is increasing, destinations are emerging, and visitor demographics are evolving, so we cannot take for granted Fiji's position in the global market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aligned with these priorities, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation remains committed to leveraging the principles outlined in Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework. This Framework, as we all know, underscores our dedication to fostering sustainable practices, advancing infrastructure development and strengthening our air connectivity. Through such initiatives, we aim to amplify Fiji's appeal as a destination and paradise environmental stewardship while delivering exceptional visitor experiences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this approach is not only vital for ensuring long term economic growth, but also maintaining Fiji's position as a leader in sustainable tourism in the Pacific. The Coalition Government is resolute in its vision to make tourism a cornerstone of our national development agenda, creating opportunities that benefit all Fijians. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Nothing thorny, honourable Minister, do not worry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a quick question to the honourable Minister, I know that WTTC reports are actually important, but if you align it with the reports that come out of the World Bank, have we fallen behind Samoa and the Solomon Islands in terms of our growth in that particular sector? I think the World Bank Report might differ with respect to the figures that we may be getting, and I am actually talking about the percentage growth in estimated aviation passenger arrivals. So, it would seem that we are slightly below even Samoa at the moment, subject to you telling me that I am wrong.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, honourable Koya. The growth from our neighbouring countries are showing higher percentages, but they are from a low base. In terms of the whole Pacific, 50 percent of arrivals are from Fiji and the other 50 percent comes from the other countries. They may be showing those numbers, but from a low base.

Commensurate Salary for Teachers with Upgraded Qualification
(Question No. 280/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on why teachers who have upgraded their qualifications have not received their commensurate salaries?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the

question. In the last financial year, the Ministry of Education has processed salary upgrades of around 250 teachers, the total potential financial implications of around \$4.1 million. Along with this, there were two critical policy-based exercise completed with the Civil Service. Firstly, was the policy direction of the Coalition Government for the regularisation and step up of eligible office in the Civil Service in February 2024.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir; the honourable Minister is trying to duck the question. The question is rather clear. The thing is that the teachers have not been paid. They graduated last year, and they have not been paid because there was no budget allocated for this payment. Can the honourable Minister confirm whether budgetary allocation was made for this or not?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- I have replied to the question on the payment of the salary upgrade, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I had said 250 teachers with the financial implication of \$4.1 million. Are you talking about this year?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I just wanted to clarify, if you look at the 2024-2025 Budget, there is no allocation for salary upgrade when you compare it with 2023-2024 Budget where there was an allocation for which you have made the payment, and I agree. But this one here, there is no allocation at all. So, those teachers who graduated in December and they are still working now, no payment has been made to them. They have sent the questions to us, so that we can ask you.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for acknowledging that we have made the payments for this financial year. We have identified 395 teachers who are eligible for qualification upgrade and salary realignment, which will cost an additional \$4.1 million, and we are currently in discussion in making submissions to make this payment sometimes next year.

Written Questions

Statistics on Teacher Absenteeism (Question No. 281/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) yearly data on teacher absenteeism in schools from 2022 to 2024 including a breakdown by urban, peri-urban, rural and outer Islands as well as the total number of teachers in each category; and
- (b) explain what measures the Ministry has implemented to address teacher absenteeism and ensure minimal disruption to student learning.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in accordance with the Standing Orders, I¹ hereby table my written response.

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 281/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.

Data on Postpartum Depression
(Question No. 282/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) data available on the number of women who experience Postpartum Depression;
- (b) are there specific statistics available regarding the demographics of these women (age and socioeconomic status); and
- (c) what services or programmes are currently offered to support women dealing with Postpartum Depression?

² HON. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to table my response.

Stop Departure Order
(Question No. 283/2024)

HON. K.K. LAL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Justice inform Parliament on the Stop Departure Order in particular:

- (a) the specific section of Fijian laws under which a Stop Departure Order may be issued; and
- (b) the agency or agencies authorised to issue Stop Departure Orders.

³ HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I table my written response.

AQUACULTURE BILL 2024

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Aquaculture Bill 2024 (Bill No. 21/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 5th December, 2024, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen. I rise to table the proposed Aquaculture

² Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 282/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure II.

³ Reply to Written Question No. 283/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Justice under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure III.

Bill 2024. On 25th April, 2023, Cabinet approved the review of the fisheries legislation through Cabinet Decision No. 171 of 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Aquaculture Bill 2024 is the continued work from Bill No. 9 of 2016, tabled in Parliament on 9th February, 2016 for its first reading under Standing Order 84(2). It was then tabled for second reading on 26th April, 2016 and referred to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for deliberation and consultation. The Bill lapsed when Parliament prorogued in 2018 and was not returned to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tabling of the Aquaculture Bill 2024 is based on the need to account for new and emerging issues that the current fisheries laws are inadequate to address. Also, there is a need to develop a fit to purpose legislation to support growth in the fisheries sector, ensure food security and livelihoods, protect biodiversity and resource sustainability that benefits current and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aquaculture was introduced to Fiji in 1940 with the culturing and introduction of freshwater species. Recently, the Ministry of Fisheries launched its 5-Year Aquaculture Development Plan that looks at transforming the industry. This Aquaculture Bill seeks to bring about the legal framework. Since its drafting, the Aquaculture Bill has been consulted with all aquaculture and fishery stakeholders, and the general public, including relevant Government agencies and CSOs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Aquaculture Bill 2024 provides a structured framework for sustainable aquaculture, ensuring resource conservation, managing aquaculture zones, regulating trade in aquaculture products and imposing licensing requirements. The aim of the Bill is to enhance food security, economic growth and employment in accordance with national and international environmental obligations.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now open the floor for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this Bill is a very important one, as has been expressed by the honourable Minister. It was raised in 2016 and then it lapsed. There has been a considerable amount of time from 2016 till to-date, I think about eight years, and I think the Bill has been refined in that particular point in time. But this is a completely new Bill; a complete Bill on its own.

The honourable Minister said that they have had consultations, she actually said the Bill was consulted, I do not know what that actually means. There had been consultations by the technical staff in the Ministry with stakeholders all around the country. That is good. That is the role of the Ministry before it brings the Bill to the House to make sure that the consultations take place, consult the stakeholders to make sure that when they put the Bill together, everything is coherent, everything is congruent, everything meets the intent for which the Bill was supposed to. But then, when you have a completely new Bill, to then rush it to Standing Order 51, without giving the opportunities of the representatives of the people in this House to do that, why?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- This has not gone to the Committees! What Committee is the honourable Deputy Prime Minister talking about? Is he, once again, trying to mislead this House? Is he, once again, trying to mislead the people of this country? He needs to be able to check before he makes such a statement.

Cabinet is not the Legislature; it is an arm of the Executive. This is the Legislature; this is the People's House! The Committees that are established by this House, they represent the voters of this country.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you as members of the Executive, you are subject to the dictates of this House and it is important that when a substantive Bill of this nature is brought to be passed in Parliament, that the representatives of the people as seen in the Committees of this House should have the opportunity to make their own consultations, to make sure that any Bill passed is, as the Minister has said, fit and proper.

I agree with the importance of this Bill and everything that is being said here about aquaculture. We know it is very important, and we need to be able to do it. These aquaculture activities, programmes and strategies are being done, as we speak today, but I do not see what the urgency is to rush it immediately through Standing Order 51. Is there a fire behind this that we are trying to escape from? No such thing!

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not agree that this should be debated upon this week, just to pass this Bill. It is a substantive Bill, it needs to go through the full process to ensure scrutiny, to make sure that we, the representatives of the voters of this country, the democratic House of this country, have the opportunity to screen it to our satisfaction, make the changes and bring it back to the House. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Is there any other intervention on the Bill?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my simple question is, what is the urgency? I will refer to a particular Bill before us that we are meant to debate. That is the Fiji World Heritage Bill. This is another Bill that this Government tried to push through Standing Order 51 and have it debated in a single sitting. We sent this particular Bill to Committees and just see the number of changes almost on every page.

When we informed the former Attorney-General that the Bill could not be presented in that manner, he was adamant to bring it under Standing Order 51. If the Bill is given to Committees, how many changes will be brought to the Bill itself? What is the urgency to have it debated in two days? It is a substantive Bill. There is no urgency to do it under one single sitting. We need to send this particular Bill to Committees.

We know what is happening in the Office of the Attorney-General - there are no legal drafters, no senior legal drafters. For the Audit Bill, we had to change the table of contents. It is a shame on the Office of the Attorney-General. We do not have the drafters. We are trying to push this Bill, we have the Fiji World Heritage Bill, we already have changed on the first page. Why are we doing this? A common example, send this Bill to Committees so that it can scrutinise, make specific changes, bring it back to Parliament and then debate it. We have pushed the experienced and senior legal drafters out of the workforce, and this is the result we get, the Fiji World Heritage Bill. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the Government to send it to Committees so that it can be scrutinised.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the floor. This is a contribution from Bloc Nine. If you look at Standing Order 51, it does not have any requirement on urgency. This has been raised in two previous terms of Parliament, but the Standing Order allows and permits that the mover of the motion, whoever is moving the Bill to expedite the Bill through the shortcut provision, not following Standing Order 84(2).

It was unfortunate when this Bill came up in 2016, it was listed for first reading and second reading and did not make it up to third reading given that it lapsed. That showed the lack of political will maybe at that particular time, but again, as the honourable Minister has rightly said that there are growing issues now in the aquaculture sector that needs this Bill and the urgency of this Bill to go through Standing Order 51.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just take you through some statistics. Back in 2016, there were a total of 53 Bills introduced in the House; 15 Bills were Consequential Bills through budget, there were only two Bills out of the 53 that was referred to the Committee. So, 16 went through a single sitting of Parliament. During that time, Standing Order 51 was overused (not abused) but it was used. It shows the prerogative, and discretion remains with the Government. If policies needs to be implemented, a certain framework that has been part of the Minister's justification for tabling these Bills through Standing Order 51 that needs implementation, then Standing Order 51 is the procedure that is there.

I will take you to another year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2022, there were 49 Bills that were introduced and tabled in Parliament, 11 were Consequential Bills, only one went through the scrutiny of Committees, 11 went through a single sitting of Parliament, like the ones this week, that is, tabled today and debated on Thursday.

Let me come to 2023 to give a comparison. In 2023, there were 29 Bills tabled in Parliament, 12 were Consequential Bills, four went through a single sitting of Parliament like what we doing now and one went to Committees.

In 2024, there were 19 Bills, this will be the 20th Bill and nine were Consequential Bills, three are going through a single sitting of Parliament, that will be the Bills to amend the Presidential Act 2024 and the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Bill 2024 that was tabled yesterday and the Aquaculture Bill 2024 that is being tabled now.

However, there are five that were referred to Committees in 2024, two have been tabled back in Parliament, that is, Anti-Doping Bill 2024 and National Disaster Risk Management Bill 2024 which are now being enacted into Acts. Three will be debated on Thursday, that will be the Child Justice Bill 2024, Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 and Heritage Bill 2023, and then they will be enacted after that.

If you see the statistics, comparing to previous terms of Parliament, I think now, it will be fair to say that Standing Order 51 should be the right procedure that the Aquaculture Bill should come through and be given tonight and tomorrow to study the Bill till Thursday. There is ample time to go through Standing Order 51. Mr. Speaker, I can see the urgency and we should all support this motion.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Bill went through second reading in 2016, but who were in the Committee? The Members here, probably were not there, even I was not in Parliament at that time and there may be more Members sitting here who were not in Parliament at that time. This is a substantial Bill, I heard honourable Bulitavu, he is in Opposition but we know he should be given a Ministerial post so that he can speak openly from the other side.

He is occupying a seat on this side, but he should be sitting on the other side. I remember what the honourable Minister for Tourism used to say, “please give him a ticket”, so I understand that. Two points that I would like to make here is, first, this is the Government that kept on saying, “we will not use Standing Order 51”.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Shame!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We will only use it sparingly for minor changes. This is not a minor change, this is a substantial Bill. Sir, just to point out mistakes. I just glanced through the pages, page 10, it says here and I quote: “The Minister, Permanent Secretary, Director or any Fisheries Officer must to the “extend” possible, it should be extent - simple error. That is why the Bill should be referred to the Standing Committee, it will make the Government look good, it will help the magistrates, judges and the lawyers to do their work, if that is what we want. It cannot be just rushed through for the sake of it. I will ask the honourable Prime Minister to intervene because he made the right decision when it came to the Heritage Bill. That is why the Heritage Bill has been scrutinised by the Committee and we can see that the Bill is in a form that can be agreed to in this Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Bulitavu for putting out very clearly the statistics but that should give them some food for thought, reflect on their own past and see what was happening.

Let me just come back to the subject matter and the points that honourable Maharaj, honourable Kumar and honourable Usamate made. The Standing Order is very clear. The requirement is up to the Government, up to the Executive to use Standing Order 51 whenever it deems necessary ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Elections promise.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and we are doing it. Honourable Kumar is always very irritating, Mr. Speaker.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- His a gentleman.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- When the debate happens, what they are doing now is actually talking about the Bill. As you said, Mr. Speaker, the other day, we are talking about whether the Bill should be debated under Standing Order 51 or not. They are going and saying, “this subject matter, this error”; they will have an opportunity on Thursday to move an amendment, to propose a change, that is part of the Parliamentary process.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Ten minutes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You can do that in 10 minutes, you can do that in five minutes, you have two or three days to read through this.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As honourable Bulitavu said very clearly with statistics, this Government is open and transparent.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This Bill was there in 2016, it went through Committees, and Mr. Speaker, Sir, I sat in the Opposition for eight years and the rate at which they were using Standing Order 51 to run legislation ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and sometimes corrupt legislation and they were doing this using Standing Order 51. There might be a typing error somewhere that she pointed out, but the fact is that the Government has the right under Standing Order 51 to bring a Bill to Parliament. We are not doing this, we are not doing this willy-nilly, we are doing this because the Minister who is the person who gets the advice from the relevant Ministry that this Bill is now urgent, it needs to be passed now and therefore the circumstances leading to this Bill coming into this Parliament under Standing Order 51 makes sense. As they admit, this Bill was supposed to be done in 2016, 2017 and they did not do it. We have been in Government for less than two years and we are bringing this Bill and making sure that it gets through, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

With those remarks, this is the right thing to do, and I support the honourable Minister and her motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- The honourable Kumar had requested the honourable Prime Minister to speak, if he so wishes.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I pushed this Bill back to Cabinet. I wanted them to assure me that consultation had been done. That came back to our Legislation Committee after further consultation, and I am satisfied that it can come forward at this time.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Sir, the debate this evening seems to hinge on Standing Order 51, it is not really. I thank the honourable Minister in bringing this legislation through. We have gone through consultation within the Ministry of Fisheries as this was a stumbling block to the development of aquaculture in Fiji. It had created a lot of discussions under the various Ministries that deal with aquaculture.

As you understand, Sir, aquaculture is the development of fisheries within the inshore and on land. There were issues that interact with other Ministries and other agencies, and that was the main cause of the delay in bringing it to Parliament. Now, it is coming under Standing Order 51, if it is correct and right that being a substantive Bill and it is in order, then it is alright. But if it is not in order, then I would ask the intervention that it be relooked at so that it is, in totality, fit to be passed as a Bill and it will cover the regulations with the various development of aquaculture.

This Bill is necessary, this Bill is urgent and it is needed but whatever is required to make it work and be able support the aquaculture industry in Fiji, that should be done.

MR. SPEAKER.- That concludes the debate on this item. I now call on the Minister of Fisheries to speak in reply.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all honourable Members who had contributed to the debate on the motion before Parliament. I also thank the former Minister, honourable Koroilavesau, for all your insights and your wisdom.

Mr. Speaker, like I had mentioned earlier, the Aquaculture Bill of 2024 is the continued work from Bill No. 9 of 2016 that was tabled in Parliament for first reading, second reading and was referred to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. The urgency of this Bill is to seek the prevention of disease outbreak, the prevention of the importation of exotic species into Fiji and the need to account for new and emerging issues that the current fisheries laws are inadequate to address.

Mr. Speaker, I trust my staff at the Ministry, and I thank them for doing the necessary groundwork of bringing this Bill back into Parliament. I thank them for the consultations and the work that they have done till today.

Mr. Speaker, in that regard, I commend the Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes Cast:

Ayes - 34

Nayes - 15

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members. At this juncture, we will suspend the proceedings for a short break and Parliament will resume in 15 minutes.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.45 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.59 p.m.

(Deputy Speaker assumes the Chair)

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT -
ACCIDENT COMPENSATION COMMISSION FIJI 2019-2021 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji 2019, 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 3rd October 2024.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I second the motion.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF) was established by the Fijian Government through the introduction of the Accident Compensation Act 2017, to pay no fault compensation to Fijians as of 1st January, 2018, who suffer personal injury or death as a result of the accidents in Fiji from 1st January 2019.

The ACCF has been providing compensation for injuries and deaths as a result of accidents, in the course of employment, as well in school premises during school hours. The Act provides for the scheme which the victims of accidents can be compensated without having to prove fault or negligence subject to meeting the Act's requirements. Coverage of the no fault scheme is broader than the previous law, as it extends beyond third parties.

The Committee, upon being referred with the ACCF 2019, 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports, received submission from ACCF to gather information on its operational dynamics as part of the Committee's scrutiny process. When the Committee scrutinised the Reports, it identified pertinent issues of concern such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were not included, making it difficult to thoroughly assess the performance of ACCF.

Secondly, the ACCF did not report on the mandatory SDGs. Thirdly, expenses exceeded revenue for both 2020 and 2021. Lastly, engaging of Veritas Pte Ltd to produce and process applications for schools and employment accidents duplicated the role of the Ministry of Labour, resulting in resource wastage.

Furthermore, the Review Report articulated six findings with recommendations. The Committee noted that there are some good initiatives being undertaken relating to no fault compensation and public awareness. However, Committee has identified several key areas to further improve its performance, in particular, duplication of roles or processing of applications for schools and employment accidents that require an urgent review.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, is now open for the debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers, as follows:

- (a) Honourable S. Nand;
- (b) Honourable F.S. Koya;
- (c) Honourable N.T. Tuinaceva;

- (d) Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations; and
- (e) Honourable Minister for Justice.

HON. S. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, there a few statistics that I would like to start off. The Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF) has paid over \$42 million since its inception - \$29.2 million is for motor vehicle accidents, \$12.5 million is for employment related accidents and close to \$1 million is for school premises. My concern here is school premises. Are our schools safe for our students? A payment of \$1 million as compensation for school accidents is high. I believe there should be nothing.

It is evident from the Annual Report that ACCF is not performing to its optimum level. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it continues to be inadequately funded and in 2020 and 2021, the expenses were more than the revenue it received. Insufficient budgetary allocation impacts its ability to provide a service to the community.

Limited public awareness, there is lack of general awareness amongst the public on ACCF's service and its compensation processes. Many Fijians, especially in the rural areas, are unaware of their eligibility for compensation or how to file claims.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lack of communication affects the strategies and the outreach programme. Their *Facebook* page, which is supposed to a very modern tool, was last updated in September 2024. For an organisation as such, it should frequently update their *Facebook* page.

The outsourcing of processing to Veritas Pte Ltd is a concern. This organisation, Sir, is set up to look at processing compensation, however, processing should be done in-house, it should not be outsourced.

There is delays in compensation payouts and in some instances, victims had to wait over 18 months to receive compensation. This is outrageous. Why is there such a delay in getting this compensation out to the people?

One of the concerns is that we are paying a lot in terms of compensation but the number of road accidents in Fiji is ever increasing. What are we doing about it? Are our roads so unsafe that we get people injured or killed now and then? This should be a concern and should be jointly addressed by all parties concerned, not only ACCF.

In terms of an organisation, the concept is that if you can measure it, you can manage it. In ACCF's case, there is a clear absence of performance matrix. So, are we measuring their performance? If we are not measuring it, how are we managing their performance?

On timelines of claim processing, what is the average time taken to process compensation claims? These are not evident in their Reports. What are the satisfaction rates of its customers? Were they serviced within the timeframe? How satisfied were they with their performance? It is not there.

On the claims resolution rate, how effectively were the claims resolved? It is not there.

We do not have any information where there were any fraudulent claims lodged. All this information is missing.

On financial efficiency, at what ratio were they able to pay the compensation? Without these types of performance in matrix, we will have very little insight on how the institution is doing.

The ACCF's Annual Reports, for instance, could provide stakeholders with an overview of the Commission's operational efficiency and its ability to respond to public needs. It could, but it did not. These measurable data was missing, and it becomes impossible to hold the Commission accountable for delays in claim processing, its inefficiencies or under performance in any aspect of their work because we are unable to measure it.

Absence of these data also makes it difficult to identify areas for improvement. Therefore, the composition of the Annual Reports must be enhanced to include all these relevant information.

Lack of Key Performance Indicators in ACCF's Annual Reports is a significant shortfall that limits its ability to measure and demonstrate performance. Without this, they will never be able to improve their performance or improve their service delivery or identify their shortfalls. Without clear measurable indicators, it becomes very difficult to assess the Commission's operational efficiency or make them accountable or responsible to the needs of the accident victims.

The Annual Report falls short of stating what the real operational aspects of the Commission was, and this is a concern. The Commission is entrusted with a very important responsibility and their work should demonstrate how they are managing this responsibility and how they are providing these services to our consumers. I hope all these areas that have been identified is taken into consideration and we hope to see the Annual Reports, and not only the Annual Reports, the performance uplifted and our citizens provided with a better and efficient services and compensation paid to our people on time. Thank you.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I could not agree more with honourable Sachida Nand on the concerns that he has raised and we also had similar concerns and that is why we had reviewed the whole thing and let me present to you my response, likewise.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to contribute to the 2019-2021 Annual Report for the ACCF. The role of the ACCF was expanded to cover for employment and school accident compensations, effective from 1st January, 2019. Prior to that, it was a 'fault-based arrangement' whereby employers themselves had to get insurance against any accident or fatality, which should then be claimed through that process. And that could be challenged by the insurance company or the employer and it would take quite long for the victim to finally get justice. Once it become the 'no fault-based arrangement', thereby the ACCF can proceed, as long as the evidence is there, that yes it was based on the accident or was workplace-related or the fatality was workplace-related or the death was related to work, it would be paid.

Madam Deputy Speaker, my Ministry was used as the enforcement arm of the ACCF and also assisted ACCF with the investigations of employment accidents, occupational diseases, cases, as well as process payment of the two-third weekly wages of injured workers while they were on leave. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, most of this work was done by the Ministry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on 31st March, 2024, the honourable Minister for Justice, in consultation with the Honourable Prime Minister, appointed an interim ACCF Board, chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Employment. The composition of the Board had Permanent Secretaries and representatives from within the responsible Ministries.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Board was tasked to:

- (1) conduct an independent review of the ACCF in consultation with the major stakeholders;
- and

- (2) to assist in the assessment of the current and pending applications for payment of accident compensation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the interim ACCF Board had its first meeting on 19th April, 2024, and made the following decisions:

- (1) non-renewal of the contract of the CEO of the ACCF;
- (2) non-renewal of the agreement between ACCF and Veritas Pte Ltd., which was outsourced to process or do the administration, part of the compensations; and
- (3) transfer of employment and school accident compensation cases from Veritas Pte Ltd to the Ministry of Employment from 1st June, 2024;
- (4) the Permanent Secretary for Employment to manage the processing of pending accident compensation cases; and
- (5) ACCF Accountant to act as the officer in charge and administrator of the operations of ACCF in the interim.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in June 2024, the Ministry inherited some 1,101 cases ACCF. The Ministry has settled 421 cases comprising of 372 employment cases and 49 school accidents. The pending cases to date are 680, comprising of 648 employment cases and 32 school accidents.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the total cases paid out to date is 204, that is 177 employment accidents and 27 school accident cases. And the total amount that has been paid out is \$2.77 million, which is 46 percent of the total annual budget allocation of \$6 million in the 2024-2025 Budget.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you should note that out of the 421,204 cases where actually paid and the rest depending on the reports from the doctors, would have been assessed as those that do not deserve payment. The Ministry also inherited, Madam Deputy Speaker, on 21st June, 2024, from a ACCF, a total of 12,000 accident cases from the period 2019 to 2024. These cases are currently being sorted and also being prioritised for processing. Madam Deputy Speaker, ACCF from 2019 to 2021, that is three years, settled 253 employment and school accident cases. That is in the Annual Report, Madam Deputy Speaker.

While the Ministry settled 242 cases in four months, the ACCF from 2019 to 2021, that is 36 months, paid out \$3.5 million compared to the \$3.3 million paid by the Ministry in a span of four months.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Veritas Ltd was engaged as a claims agent for ACCF from 2019 and charging an annual fee of \$900,000 per year to carry out administrative work. A total of \$4.5 million was paid out to Veritas Ltd by ACCF from 2019 to 2023. So, and the savings also will include the salary and benefits that was paid to the CEO and mind you, it was a handsome sum.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in terms of financial implications, my Ministry has restructured the Worker's Compensation Unit and 16 staff are currently engaged to process employment and school accident cases effectively. The Ministry is processing cases expeditiously, efficiently and cost effectively.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are saving over \$1.3 million annually, by now, processing all these claims through our Ministry and taking over the whole. Madam Deputy Speaker, a Cabinet Paper will soon be presented to the Cabinet whereby we will propose that we have a tripartite board that is going to oversee the work of the ACCF, and the Ministry will continue to work out the process and expedite all the pending cases. There is a big backlog, Madam Deputy Speaker, we really want

to expedite all those, so that those victims who have been denied all these long are actually paid what is justifiably due to them.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be as brief as possible, just to correct something Madam Deputy Speaker, I think my friend honourable Sachida Nand was referring to the current status of the ACCF, that is 2024. This particular Report is relative to 2019, 2020 and 2021, I do not think any part of his speech he was actually referring to this particular Report. So, there are issues that he raised that is referenced to the ACCF of today.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I think the current Report before us, and I want to thank the Standing Committee for the Report. The current Report before us is fairly innocuous and there are several recommendations, administrative things that needs to be done. Nothing unto word has actually come out of that particular Report with respect to ACCF. I want to just correct some issues that has been raised by the honourable Minister just now.

First of all, let me just point out Madam Deputy Speaker, the Commission can delegate its powers to its officers, employees, agents or consultants but it does not have the power to transfer the Ministry responsible for ACCF which is the Ministry of Justice. That requires some legislative change, so the current processing by the Ministry of Employment could be considered unlawful, something that the Ministry, Attorney-General's Chambers and Ministry of Justice would have to look at.

I understand what he is talking about in terms of a Cabinet paper coming through and processing applications, so until that Cabinet paper comes through the processing of any applications, without Cabinet approval would make for some fairly questionable things that the Auditor-General may find in this Bill. This would be a matter of some serious housekeeping that would need to be done.

As he pointed out rightfully, there is a Cabinet paper proposing the transfer to the Ministry of Employment and Land Transport Authority (LTA) whether there is independence on all of these, I am not sure and from what I am informed of, and I am aware of Madam Deputy Speaker, is saying that most of the work the Ministry is doing, three quarters of the work for ACCF, is absolutely incorrect.

Previously there was no processing under the No Fault Scheme and that would be a case of misleading Parliament, and for a fact, he has raised the issue of it being an enforcement arm of the ACCF. There is no enforcement provision under the Accident Compensation Act, so how can you be an enforcement arm? So, these are the things that are important when we come here and stand and raise issues, we must make sure that we say it correctly. If his Ministry is still settling cases from 2018 when I was there, what has actually been happening for all this time, nobody knows.

The ACCF was actually established in some 2019, and the Act was passed in 2017, and the scheme actually came into effect in January 2018. The workers are quite happy with the scheme and those that are recipients are quite happy with the scheme. Of course, yes, there are some teething problems but now we are starting to face some problems in 2014.

But as I have said, this particular Report is relative to the years 2019, 2020 and 2021. It is a fairly innocuous Report. I think some of the things that are pointed out are administrative matters that needs to be looked at and can be fixed. I think the duplication of roles, et cetera, the review of processes relating to specificity of locations and comparison of compensations for similar losses, very administrative in its nature, Madam Deputy Speaker, and, of course, including SDGs in its every

Report. That is a line that I think is used in most of the reports that we actually see before the Parliament.

However, I thank the Standing Committee for the Report and the recommendations that have been put in there. If the issues that have been spoken about, especially by the honourable Minister exist, they ought to have and they should have been, and they would have been picked up by the Standing Committee that has put the Report before us. It has not, as I said, it is a very innocuous Report.

Madam Deputy Speaker, and I commend the Standing Committee for coming up with these particular findings and the issues that need to be resolved. But just as a matter of correction, all of those things that I pointed out are factually correct.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, yes, confirming with honourable Koya, it falls under the Ministry of Justice. Just before I dwell on that, let me just enlighten Parliament that a sum of \$2.2 million was allocated to ACCF in this year's budget to fund motor vehicle claims and other operational costs. From 2017-2018 to 2024-2025 financial years, Government has brought a total grant of \$16.7 million to ACCF to carry out its operations. In the 2024-2025 financial year ACCF has four staff to handle the Motor Vehicle Accidental Claims and other operational cost.

One of the issues raised by the honourable Sanjay is the issue of delay, is also the issue of less staff. One of the problems I found out last year is that the only office that processes the application is only in Valelevu. No, that does not make sense. There has been some discussion from last year, Cabinet has been informed, paper in terms of the reform has been held back, it has gone through the Cabinet Sub-Committee on legislation. What is going on now in the next two or three months they will socialise these issues, the reforms, the way forward with the respective ministries before they come back to Government.

The members of the Interim Committees, the Chairman is the Permanent Secretary for Ministry of Employment is Mr. Maritino Nemani, why he is the Chairman because the Ministry deals with those line of work. The other member is the CEO of LTA because they deal with vehicle accidents. The Deputy Chairman is George Tavo from the Ministry of Transport. Ms. Vitilia Chand, Principal Officer in the Office of the Prime Minister and Dr. Darcy. Their skill sets empowers the Interim Committee to work. The Interim Committee their term will expire in March of next year. We hope that before March, Parliament will see a Bill on how this should move forward. I endorse the complaints and the other issues that has been raised regarding the expenses.

One of the issues that was very clear to the Coalition Government when they came in, it has to go away with the ACCF. First, the issue of paying other agencies and also the issue of wages of the CEO. There are certain CEOs which the Coalition Government found objectionable to take a chance with, and it did.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe there is a sum of \$400,000 which was paid to the CEO. Now, the Permanent Secretary for Labour is doing it on pro-bono basis. That is a huge saving for the Government, and it has been witnessed through evidence in terms of processing that it is now much faster and efficient with the Ministry then it was with ACCF. It had only four staff. They have this history of knowing the industry and the work and they are better equipped. Yes, when it was initially discussed, from the very beginning there was some questions raised from within Government, whether the Ministry of Labour was suitable and I think over the passage of time, now it is pretty clear that is the way it is going to go forward with the Ministry of Labour taking a key role.

The ACCF and the Ministry of Employment previously shared responsibilities for investigating persistent workplace and school accident claims. Under the new Interim Chairman as I have said, the Minister's enhance its procedures by implementing strict standard operating procedures, only investigating seven claims. Yes, any legislation over time in this case, obviously it needs reform. Yesterday we were talking about FIU, ACCF, it is time to change and that is what we intend to do. Doing so through consultation, through the other agencies, particularly now, or in the next three months or so. I applaud the previous Government for bringing the No Fault Scheme.

I thank the previous Administrators of ACCF for their contribution, but I want to share this, that now the immense risk and danger that faces the Ministry of Labour when they do not prepare well in terms of action claims and here the beneficiaries lose out. I witnessed this in previous cases, that problem has been taken out.

What we want to do is try to simplify and separate it so that all the stakeholders are satisfied. I note the work that the Standing Committee has done and also note the findings and the recommendations. The Coalition Government is committed to ensure that SDG 5 and 8 is complied with and it is not only with ACCF, but it also goes for other agencies.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I support the Adoption Accrual Report of the ACCF 2019 and 2021.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, on Item 2.6 of the Report, the Standing Committee acknowledged the work done to raise awareness and education on road accidents. Madam Deputy Speaker, there has been an alarming spike in road accidents over the last six months. That part of the Report, I mentioned about, confirms what many of us have feared, our roads once a symbol of development, have tragically become a killing field.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the devastating incident on the Tacirua Road in Suva, where a father held his 13-year-old son, as the child died in his arms as the runaway vehicle struck them two weeks ago, is a stark reminder of the human cost behind these statistics. Just this past Thursday, another eight-year-old child died whilst crossing the road with her father. Yesterday, a man in his 20s died in a horrific accident in Sigatoka. These heartbreaking images, some viral on social media is not just a tragedy, it is call for action!

Madam Deputy Speaker, no amount of compensation can bring back that young life or undo the trauma suffered by families. The true challenges lie in preventing such accidents from happening in the first place. We must move beyond compensation and begin addressing the root causes of this epidemic. The question before us is not just how we help victims, but how can we prevent for the victims?

Madam Deputy Speaker, we do not deny that the compensation provided to victims of road accidents serves as an important safety net. The work of the Accident Compensation Committee is valuable, and it has provided much needed support for families in the wake of these accidents.

However, it is clear that compensation is not the solution to this crisis. The current system, as we can say is failing us and we must acknowledge that accidents caused by speeding are not accidents in the true sense of the word. They are instances of intentional negligence.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when a driver chooses to speed recklessly, ignoring speed limits and endangering the lives of others, they are consciously putting lives at risk. These are not accidents waiting to happen. They are disasters in the making. The young 21-year-old driver speeding on our roads at 100 kilometres per hour in a 50 kilometre per hour zone, is simply not making a mistake.

They are making a deliberate choice to disregard the law, and their choice has deadly consequences.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we must ask ourselves, what kind of society are we, if we allow this to continue? A society that tolerates reckless driving where lives are treated as expendable? It is a society that has lost its moral compass. The figures we are seeing are deeply concerning and most of the accidents involve young drivers, public services vehicles and heavy commercial vehicles speeding without a doubt is the leading cause of this crisis. This is no longer just a matter of driver error, it is a systematic failure to respect human life and uphold the law. We are failing to teach young drivers the value of life, the responsibility they bear behind the wheels, and the consequences of their actions. We cannot continue to allow this disregard for life fester in our society.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the solution to this crisis is not just about imposing harsher penalties for reckless driving. Though that is certainly part of it, the solution lies in a broader shift in our approach to driver education and road safety. I propose we move beyond simply teaching people how to operate a vehicle and begin educating them on value-based driving.

If I may repeat that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I propose that we move beyond simply teaching young people on how to operate and drive a vehicle and begin teaching them on value-based driving. It is not enough for drivers to know the rules of the road. They must understand the importance of those rules. They must understand that speeding is not just an infraction, it is an act of irresponsibility that can cost lives. Every time a driver chooses to speed, they are choosing to endanger others.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we must emphasise responsibility, respect and sanctity of life in our driving education programmes. These principles must be taught from the earlier stages of driver training. We need to ensure that all drivers, especially young drivers understand the profound impact in their actions. A driver who speeds through a residential area or tailgates another vehicle is not just violating the law, they are disrespecting the lives of others.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is time for us to scale up our prevention effort. Speeding kills. This is not a theory, it is a reality that we must confront, act and we must act now. Government has taken steps in the right direction by regulating the licensing and defensive driving, but the truth is, we are not doing enough. We need stricter enforcement of road safety laws.

We must send a clear message that reckless driving will not be tolerated and those who endanger lives must face severe consequences. The penalties for dangerous driving, especially excessive speeding must commensurate with the seriousness of the offence. Fines, suspensions and even jail time should be on the table for those who put others at risk. We cannot afford to treat reckless driving as a mere inconvenience. It is a criminal act, and we must treat it as such.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, in addition to stronger penalties, we must ensure that drivers of Public Service Vehicles and commercial vehicles undergo additional training. The behaviour of these drivers often reflects the lack of responsibility and safety awareness. We must ensure that they understand, not only how to operate the vehicles, but also the ethical responsibility they bear towards their passengers and the general public.

Let us be clear, we are not simply talking about compensation for the families of the dead and injured, we are talking about the right to life. Every 13-year old, every six-year old and every child and adult using our roads has the right to feel safe and protected. No amount of compensation can replace the life lost. Our focus must be on prevention or taking the steps necessary to keep our roads safe and protect the lives before accidents happen.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is not a challenge we can afford to ignore. We cannot allow the pain and the suffering we see on our screens and the face of grieving families to become our legacy. Let us rise to the occasion, let us prevent further deaths, and let us make our roads safer for all. With that being said, I support the motion before the House.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to thank the honourable Members for their comments. I would like to thank honourable Tuinaceva for what he has just raised. I think it is very important and very pertinent to the issue that we are discussing today. The more we create education and awareness and try not to move away from compensation and looking at the values that we want to inculcate in the lives of drivers of this country.

On the other issues raised by honourable Koya on the legality of the transfer, that is not for this Committee to look at. We had the report for 2019, 2020 and 2021, so we just looked at the issues described in the report and during that time. We ask you not to ask the Committee to do that. Maybe when we are looking at the 2024 Report, then we can look at the transfer, the legal of it being done and perhaps some recommendations on that.

Honourable Sachida Nand had raised some very important issues with regards to communications, and of course, that is a very important part of this. Communication to our people there, as you are aware, when we are trying to communicate, there are a lot of mediums, but how effective are they in trying not to change human behaviour? That is one of the challenges that we face when we are coming in and trying to push legislation, trying to push projects.

The people are just the same out there. They are just there, there is no impact on them. So, we have to come up with more innovative ideas in trying to change the behavioural pattern of the people. I think the honourable Leader of Opposition always discusses this issue with me about how he wants to change people, plant more when he was at agriculture, how he wants to do certain things to change behavioural patterns. It is not a very easy thing. We need to be coming up with more innovative ways of trying to address this problem.

Honourable Sachida Nand has raised an important issue on performance indicators. That is what we had told ACCF, the lack of performance indicators. How can we gauge when you do not have any performance indicators? I think that is all from my side, Madam Deputy Speaker and I would like to thank all those who had contributed. I do support the motion.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the contents of the Report made by the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Almost there, honourable Members.

I now call upon the Chair of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT – SUGAR CANE GROWERS FUND 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd October, 2024.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the Sugar Cane Growers Fund (SCGF) is a statutory body providing affordable loans to sugar cane growers in Fiji, with the aim to increase the production of sugar cane, improve efficiency in planting, growing, harvesting and transportation of sugar cane, rehabilitate farms, buildings and other installations damaged, destroyed or affected by floods, cyclones and natural disasters and the establishment of sugar cane farms and other installations on the farms.

Our Committee upon being referred to with the SCGF 2021 Annual Report received public hearing for the Fund to gather information on its operational dynamics as part of the Committee's scrutiny process. At the end of the review, the Committee made recommendations based on the discussions with SCGF and the Annual Report's content. While the Committee scrutinised the Report, it identified pertinent issues such as the:

- absence of key performance indicators.
- lack of established targets.
- rate of returns were very poor during the review period.
- audit did not focus on issues pertinent to the reporting year instead emphasising elements from the previous years. The largest group of borrowers produced less than 100 tonnes accounting for 47 percent while the majority, 90 percent of the borrowers are those producing under 400 tonnes.
- issues with FSC's long term debt to South Pacific Fertilizers Limited were highlighted.

The Annual Report lacked details on how loans are monitored once issued to the groups and was also deficient in information on loan portfolios. There was insufficient information regarding the new farmers assistance programme which was launched in 2018. Furthermore, the Committee in its review report articulated 20 findings with recommendations.

The Committee is looking forward to Ministry implementing the recommendations put forward by the Standing Committee and hoping to see changes in the Sugar Cane Growers Fund's future annual reports. However, we note that there are areas that can be improved through more enhanced coordination, commitment and accountability of all sugar stakeholders.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report. I also would like to extend my gratitude to the Committee Members for their comprehensive report.

Madam Deputy Speaker, under the Chairman's Foreword, it is noted that the Committee identified several challenges faced by the SCGF such as the uncertainty of lease renewal. For many farmers, Madam Deputy Speaker, their leases are on the verge of expiry. For instance, there are numerous farmers who receive their 30-year lease in 2000 which are set to expire in 2030.

The current policy of the Fund does not allow the Sugar Cane Growers Fund to provide loans to those in that category because the policy states that five years before the lease expires, the loan

must be paid off. This raises a critical question and I ask, how will these growers increase their production of sugar cane under such constraints?

Madam Deputy Speaker, they are also not aware whether the leases will be renewed or not. In addition, farmers have been complaining about the delay in delivery of fertilizers. These delays will definitely affect farmers and their ability to increase production. This is very simple that less fertilizer will definitely reduce productivity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in terms of recommendations, I support Recommendation 3.1 which calls for the Sugar Cane Growers Fund to review the outdated Act of 1984. This review is important to enhance the structure of the Fund in line with the current business standards. For example, the existing policy does not allow the Fund to support Small and Medium Enterprises. This limitation is a significant problem to the growth and innovation within the sugar industry.

Updating the Act to include provision for supporting MSMEs will enable the Fund to serve the needs of our growers better and contribute to the overall development of the industry. As far as the industry goes, in recent weeks, we have heard the Chairman of Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) making a statement that FSC will not bill the Rakiraki Mill.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the people of Rakiraki and the entire sugar industry have been let down by the Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- It all connects.

Considering all these difficulties and challenges, Madam Deputy Speaker, I had submitted a motion regarding the sugar industry which was refused by the Tables Office. However, let me say this, the sector is in crisis.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- With thousands of livelihoods dependent on it, the Ministry of Sugar's current approach has failed to address the escalating challenges. The sugar industry is vital to our economy and the welfare of the countless Fijians, thus Madam Deputy Speaker, the Committee must work urgently to develop recommendations that will address the industry's current issues and secure its future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while I support the Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report and commend the efforts of the Committee, it is clear that more needs to be done.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- The challenges faced by our cane farmers are significant and require immediate action by addressing the issues of lease renewal, fertiliser delivery and the review of the SCGF Act. We can create a more supportive and effective framework for our cane farmers.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to support the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs' Report on the Consolidated Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report. I thank the Chairman and the Members of the Economic Affairs Committee for the Report and findings.

The recommendation on the Annual Report structure in the contents such as the Key Performance Indicators and the Sustainable Development Goals' matrix are noted. The Sugar Cane Growth Fund will have it incorporated in the Annual Report of 2023. The Sugar Cane Growers Fund (in short, the Fund), and the Ministry of Sugar Industry acknowledge and agrees to the challenges of the Sugar Industry as highlighted in the Report.

The Government in 2023 - 2024 Financial Year approved \$2 million for the new farmer and lease renewal programme, whereas 30 percent of the cost or a maximum amount of \$7,500 was paid. In 2023 - 2024, the Government, with the support of the Fund, as project implementing agency assisted 325 growers with a sum of \$1.65 million. About 70 applications from the last financial year are being assessed now and the decision is expected to be made within this month.

The Fund has been in the forefront of this, with key stakeholders like, iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB), the Sugar Industry Tribunal. The Fund has signed an MOU with iTLTB for the administration of the process of lease renewal and both CEOs are working closely for the betterment of the industry and landowners.

In the current budget, the Government has allocated \$1 million as well. Application forms are now available at all the Sugar Cane Growers Fund offices and can also be downloaded on the website - scgf.com.fj. The Ministry is encouraging applications to be submitted to the Ministry before the closing date of 30th April, 2025. The aging farmers are no exception to the sugar industry and are common across the agriculture sector. However, mechanisation and commercial farming are the way forward.

The Government, in this year's Budget, has allocated a total of \$7 million under the Sugarcane Development Assistance Programme for the cane planting, which is \$0.5 million and is for the farm mechanisation, which is \$3 million. For manual labour programmes and support to cover part of the labour cost, the farmers are encouraged to access this grant as well. On the fertiliser and weedicide cost, we agree that the price was high during the reporting period of this Annual Report of 2021. However, there was minimal impact on the growers since the Government subsidised the cost, growers are still paying \$20 a bag for 50 kilogrammes of fertiliser.

In 2020-2021, the total price of 50 kilogramme fertiliser was \$80.90. Well, you see it now, it is declined to \$65.25 per bag. The reduced price is beneficial especially for Government, whereby it is now required to only pay \$45.25 as subsidy as compared to \$60.90 per bag last year. In the 2024-2025 Budget, a total of \$20 million is allocated for the fertiliser subsidy program and \$1 million for weedicide have been allocated. I must commend the Board, Management and the staff on the transformation journey of the Fund.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to also highlight some activities taken by the Fund during this year. Introduction of a new cane farmer lone package with an interest of 2.99 percent per annum for 12 months or 6 percent per annum after that. Policy changes is that the reduce farm purchase equity from 33 percent to 20 percent, reduce the farm machinery purchase equity from 10 percent to 5 percent and increase on medical expenses loan cap from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Introduce banking and rehabilitation package for the growers who normally lose cane during off season burnings. Farmers will get repayment holidays and an interest rate reduction from 6 percent per annum to 3.1 percent per annum for the next 12 months.

Introduce green cane incentives. Under this incentive Madam Deputy Speaker, farmers harvesting over 75 percent or more green cane can receive 2 percent reduction in the interest rates and 6 percent per annum to 4 percent per annum respectively. Based on 2024 harvest data, 791 accounts with a loan value of \$7.46 billion will get a 2 percent interest reduction. This reduction is

paid to \$0.149 million for 12 months from January to December 2025. Under this environmental, social and governance framework and SDG and its Sugarcane Growers Fund is all without any donor funding, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Fund devised a house repair termite loan product to complement the Government funding to the cane growers. This loan is expected to be launched this month and has an interest rate of 2.99 percent per annum and 6 percent thereafter, with a maximum loan limit of \$50,000. Furthermore, there is an early Christmas for the growers, as the Fund is introducing the SCGF Growers Wealthy Programme. The Fund has gone out to some service providers like hardware merchants, pharmacies and dealers for the farms, tractors or machines and negotiated discount for growers. Every product grower for a start whether they have an account or not, the SCGF Wealthy Card will enable them to get a discount with participating merchants. This is expected to be launched before Christmas, and I must once again commend the great work and innovation by the Fund.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Fund continues to reposition itself both within and outside the sugar industry. It is evident in the Fiji Human Resources Institute (FHRI) Awards in September of this year. The fund is also intending to diversify its balance sheet to absorb unexpected shocks, such as natural disasters and to generate returns for the benefit of the sugar sector is noted and encouraged. On this, the Fund is looking at its investment portfolio including the performance of its subsidiary, South Pacific Fertiliser Limited which is 90 percent owned by the Fund.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Fund does not have legislative challenges in extending credit services to both the sugar and non-sugar sectors. It is the strategic intent to diversify and expand its functions for greater sustainability is commendable. In this context, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) was engaged to conduct a gap analysis. The ADB has developed a roadmap for the Fund to potentially become a licensed financial institution. However, this requires review of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund Act.

The Ministry is also waiting for the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Report on the sugar sector study which is expected to be received in the next three weeks. Along with this sector analysis, this study also looked at the institutions operations. The report shall be helpful in designing the strategic path for all institutions. I want to put on record, my sincere appreciation to honourable Sakiusa Tubuna for facilitating our request with FAO to conduct this at no cost to the Government.

The sugar industry has been and will continue to be significant contributor to economic growth and nation building. The Fund and South Pacific Fertiliser, both have significant roles within and beyond the industry as economic drivers, especially with the ongoing reforms of the Fund. Once again, I extend my gratitude to the Committee Members for their contribution and deliberation. Based on these remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker, I support the motion.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to address the Review Report of the Sugarcane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report with a full sense of responsibility. I am well aware of the various problems faced and overcome by our cane farmers. I, therefore, have no other choice than to air their grievances and aspirations through this august Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Sugar Cane Growers Fund has been a pillar of support to our farmers since its inception in 1984. The fund has been mandated to provide loans for increasing sugar cane production, improving efficiency and aiding farmers in times of distress is commendable. But the Report brings to light several critical issues that need immediate attention. The most critical now is the uncertainty of lease renewals and the ageing farmers.

Honourable Bala has spoken about this, and you can see the number of sugar cane farmers have strictly reduced and there are many other reasons apart from lack of labourers and in the case of Rakiraki, the closing down of the sugar mill. But the lease renewals is a major issue. Why are a lot of farmers moving away from sugarcane farming?

This morning, we heard from the Deputy Prime Minister that some cane farmers in the North are now turning to rice farming. Madam Deputy Speaker, yet our farmers remain very much as the backbone of the industry. They face the bleak prospect of an insecure future, rising fertiliser prices and destruction of farm infrastructure by various forces of nature add to the challenges of rural urban drift. How does the Government hope to help address these issues that stand in the way of a sustainable cane farming industry?

The Report also highlights that there are no established key performance indicators and targets for the Sugar Cane Growers Fund. Without such goals it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the Fund and make appropriate recommendations. What steps will the Government take to ensure that the SCGF sets and meets its specific measurable target to enhance its performance?

Furthermore, the archaic Act of 1984 urgently needs revision. The agricultural landscape has changed a great deal over the past decade and our policies are required to reflect the emerging reality. What is the timeline by the Government to review and update this very important piece of legislation?

The Report also highlights the impact of external factors such as the Russia-Ukraine war on fertiliser prices and the devastating effects of tropical cyclones. These events have severely affected our farmer's livelihoods. What measures are being implemented to provide immediate and long-term relief to those impacted by such crisis?

Madam Deputy Speaker, however, the fund has been resilient and adaptable to these challenges, more so in adopting modern technology. The mySCGF App, the online portal and the SMS alert services have been a step in the right direction. At the same time, we will ensure that such tools are accessible to the majority of farmers, even those in remote areas.

The Report also indicates that smaller growers, those producing under 300 tonnes, are borrowing more than larger growers. What this does is, the point to the fact, that our smaller farmers are in a greater need of financial support. How does the Government plan to provide targeted assistance to these smaller growers to ensure they can thrive and contribute to the industry?

The Standing Committee also noted that the largest category of borrowers produce less than 100 tonnes and they make up to 47 percent of the total borrowers. It is thus important that their support is assured. What specific programmes or initiatives are being developed to support the farmers and help them become more productive?

Second, the most important focus of this audit report seems to be more on the past problems than the current year. That is of utmost importance. So our audits will give a precise representation of the present. How does Government make the auditing exercise more relevant and focussed towards present challenges and opportunities in future?

The lack of detailed information on how loans are monitored once issued to growers, is also troubling. Effective loan monitoring is essential to ensure that funds are used appropriately and that growers can repay their loans. What measures will be put in place to improve loan monitoring and ensure transparency and accountability?

Madam Deputy Speaker, this financial result, evidenced by the net surplus of \$3.06 million during 2021, pays homage to our farmers and a reflection of hard work and the management of the Fund. Local term deposits fell from \$15 million to \$14 million during this period. A drop due to general economic circumstances and outcomes linked with COVID-19. How does the Government plan to support the SCGF in maintaining its financial stability to be able to continue this vital support to our farmers?

The recommendations are very clear and well entrenched in the Standing Committee's recommendations:

- (1) A review of the organisational structure of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund;
- (2) Comprehensive information to be included in future reports; and
- (3) Establishment of KPIs to justify budgetary allocations.

These recommendations are key to making the Fund more effective and able to meet the needs of our farmers. The Report also stresses the importance of the activities of the Fund in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment should demonstrate our commitment to the achievement of international goals as well as sustainability and inclusivity in agriculture. How does the Government intend to support the Fund in aligning its operations and reporting on the SDGs?

Madam Deputy Speaker, while I support the Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2021, I call on the Government for decisive action in addressing the concerns of our cane farmers. By doing so, we can secure the future of our sugarcane industry and the livelihood of hardworking farmers who sustain it. Thank you.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a short contribution on this particular debate, the Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, 2021. They were in the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs when I was in the Opposition, and one of the organisations which was under that Committee is the SCGF.

When we went there, we were very impressed with the organisation. How it was organised, the structure and also the services. I was wondering whether this could be replicated, I suppose with other farmers. For example, *yaqona* and *dalo* farmers. It would probably be a good analysis, but I think some of the responses from the Opposition is misleading because this is the only Government which is taking a serious look at the Sugar industry. So, when the honourable Minister explained what we were doing with the uncertainty in lease renewals, and Government had allocated in 2023-2024, \$2 million and as already stated, \$1.1 million in the 2024-2025 Budget. So, honourable Praveen Bala, this alleviates your concerns.

The other thing was the close liaison between the honourable Minister of Sugar and Minister of iTaukei Affairs, in terms of the renewal of leases, which has been progressing really well. The other issue that was mentioned on the fertilisers and weedicides, again the Minister has clearly mentioned the reduction in the price, so clearly contradicting what you are saying.

The last point, to the honourable Vijendra Lal, regarding the organisation itself and what it needs to do to be reformed or move forward, to respond to the farmers. This has been clearly articulated by the honourable Minister, and as a caring Government, we are addressing all those. The honourable Minister mentioned eight initiatives; new loan packages, policy changes, green cane initiative, house termite repair loan, grow a loyalty programme to obviously create sustainability with the ADB, and the current Report which is upcoming from the FAO regarding the analysis on the sugar industry to charter a way forward.

So, all in all, the Coalition Government is taking the right steps, the strategic steps which will take our sugar industry forward in terms of what needs to be done, whether it is to diversify, sustain or increase sugar production et cetera. I support the Report and thank the Standing Committee.

HON. RATU. J.B. NIUDAMU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise today with a deep sense of duty and commitment as I address the reviewed Report of the Sugarcane Growers Fund 2021 Annual Report. Being from Ra Province, one of the provinces that benefited mostly from the sugarcane industry for many years, I am deeply connected to our cane farmers and their enduring legacy. The sugar industry has been the life blood of our communities in the Ra province and has provided not only economic sustenance but also a sense of purpose and pride for generations of farmers.

The Sugar Cane Growers Fund which was established in 1984, has been instrumental in supporting our farmers through loans for increased production, efficiency and during times of distress. However, the challenges highlighted in this Report reminds us that we need to do more to ensure the sustainability and prosperity of this vital industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our cane farmers are facing numerous challenges that threaten their livelihoods and the future of the sugar industry. The uncertainty of lease renewals, the aging farmer population and the rising cost of fertilisers are just a few of the issues that need urgent attention. I thank the honourable Minister for Sugar, that he had indicated about the sugar fertiliser subsidy. I believe I am going through this 2021 Annual Report, and I will continue with my submission.

Natural disasters, like TC Winston, have caused huge damage to farm infrastructure. These are big challenges that call for equally big solutions. It is time that we make sure that these are solved properly so that our farmers can survive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Report also points out the lack of established Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and targets for the Sugarcane Growers Fund. Without clear goals, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the fund and make informed decisions. I urge the Government to work closely with the Sugarcane Growers Fund and set specific measurable targets that will enhance its performance and provide better support to our farmers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Sugarcane Growers Act of 1984 has become outdated, and it needs revision to meet present realities in the agricultural sector. We must have our policies changed with the time to answer the needs of our farmers and the industry in general.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I call on the Government to make the review and updating of this important law a priority with the aim of aligning it with contemporary standards and best practices in business. External factors such as the Russian and Ukraine War which increased fertilizer prices and economic consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic, has stretched our farmers to the breaking point. These events have pointed out the ills of our agricultural sector. We need to develop strategies that reduce the risk and give our farmers the ability to withstand such storms.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite these challenges, I am heartened by the level of resilience and adaptability shown by the Sugar Cane Growers Fund and our farmers. For instance, the introduction of the MySCGF app online portal and SMS alert services and SMS instance. For instance, Madam Deputy Speaker, the introduction of the MySCGF app online portal and SMS alert services is commendable in modernising the Fund's operations and increasing farmers' access to the Fund services. We must ensure, however, that these digital tools are user friendly and accessible to all farmers especially those farmers in the rural areas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it emerges from this report that small growers with less than 300 tonnes are borrowing more than large growers. In other words, the report shows us that small scale farmers have bigger financial needs compared to their large-scale counterparts. Basically, it becomes important that we offer better support to these small growers. Programmes and initiatives specifically designed to support small scale farmers need to be created with a focus on helping these farmers improve their production.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Sugar Cane Growers Fund's financial performance of 2021 with a net surplus of \$3.6million is a testimony to the hard work and commitment by our farmers and management of the Fund.

The Report also highlighted that the local term deposits decreased from \$15 million to \$14 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic that negatively affected economies around the world. It is for this reason, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we need to support the Sugar Cane Growers Fund in maintaining its financial stability so that it can continue to provide the much-needed support to our farmers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the recommendations made by the Committee are quite clear and actionable. This ranges from a review of the organisational structure of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, to the inclusion of comprehensive information in future reports, establishment of the key performance indicators with the view to justify budgetary allocations. Such recommendations will go a long way in ensuring that the Sugar Cane Growers fund is efficient and able to respond to the need of our farmers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Report also emphasized the importance of aligning the Sugar Cane Growers Fund activities with the SDGs. This alignment is essential for demonstrating our commitment to international goals and ensuring that our agricultural practices are sustainable and inclusive. I urge the Government to support the Sugar Cane Growers Fund in integrating the SDGs into its operation and reporting.

Some of the urgent support that are coming from the farmers which I would like to bring to the attention of this House are firstly, if the Government should consider providing interest subsidy to the Sugarcane Growers Fund so that they can reduce interest rate from 6 percent to around 3.99 percent like the Fiji Development Bank. There is a special package, Madam Deputy Speaker, given to resource owners with complete interest subsidy through Merchant Finance and FDB. I request if this can also be given to the Sugar Cane Growers Fund. I also request if the climate finance programme should be channelled also to the Sugar Cane Growers Fund.

Lastly, Madam Deputy Speaker, I recommend as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Sugar, for the Sugar Cane Growers Fund to come up with a green cane interest rate reduction for those that harvested 25 percent green cane with the interest rate reduced from 6 percent to 4 percent.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while I support the Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund Annual Report, I call all of us as Members of Parliament to take drastic measures and not politicize the sugar industry. We have to take drastic measures to try and curb this issue faced by our cane farmers. By doing so, we can ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for our sugarcane industry and the hardworking farmers who sustain it. Let us work together to revive the sugar industry and help our farmers thrive once again.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, of course, I would like to thank the honourable Members for their comments. All the comments that have been raised, we have partly included that into the Report but I think one of the major issues affecting the Sugar Cane Growers Council is part

of the huge problem that is affecting the whole industry.

I totally agree with what honourable Bala has just raised – it is all interconnected. All the issues are connected but what we need to do is to look at the big picture, what is the right structure that the industry has to have to meet a certain market that we need to supply to?

Of course, I would like to thank the honourable Minister, there is a current study undertaken by FAO, the Report will be delivered to him in a few days' time. I think that will be the Report that will show what needs to be done in the industry. The issue of land leases as being alluded to by some of the honourable Members, when we went around in our public consultations with the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, we noted the substantial amount of land vacant all over the place. Honourable Koroilavesau and I went to Lomawai, Nadroga - a big area of land.

People are saying that the problem is with land leases, but I think people have just abandoned the land and moved on to other areas. The issue here, we are subsidising an industry which is no longer efficient, and we need to find the solution because we are forfeiting other industries that needs support. Why we are supporting sugar cane farmers with subsidised fertilizer, because we are forfeiting the Government resources that can go into other economical commodities. I think all the issues that have been raised, of course, short term but I think we need to look at the long-term strategic solution to address the future of the industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I support the motion before the House.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put

Motion agreed to

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you for your forbearance, honourable Members. Now, we have our final motion for debate tonight. I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF WATERWAYS 2017-2018 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Ministry of Waterways 2017-2018 Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd October, 2024.

HON. S. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to second the motion.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, on behalf of the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion in regards to the Committee's Review Report on the Ministry of Waterways Annual Report 2017-2018 which was tabled in Parliament on 3rd October, 2024.

I acknowledge the effort of the Ministry of Waterways in safeguarding our environment and enhancing flood resilience through its key initiatives. The Ministry's work is fundamental to the safety and well-being of our communities, particularly in context of Fiji's vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change. Water is the fundamental resource of life. With the efficient management of waterways is integral to sustain development. The Ministry of Waterways under its

mandate has been at the forefront of ensuring that the country's water system are resilient, equitable and productive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the obvious successes of the Ministry's 2017-2018 initiative was the significant investment in the flood control infrastructure. Projects such as river dredging and construction of flood walls that have reduced the devastating impact of flood on our communities, particularly in the most flood prone areas of the country. These initiatives are key to protecting lives, property and ensuring that our infrastructure remains functional during prolonged extreme weather events.

Despite these achievements Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has faced significant challenges particularly with the growing impact of climate change on our waterways and flood control systems. While the Ministry has made commendable progress, more work is needed to ensure that all waterways especially in coastal areas are resilient to the effect climate change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is crucial that the Ministry revises its plan for adaptation of climate change and explores more innovative climate resilient infrastructure solutions. Another issue that the Ministry faced during the review period was the limitation of resources both in terms of financial support and manpower. The scale of flood mitigation and waterways restoration required to safeguard all vulnerable communities cannot be achieved with current resources.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as we look at the future of the Ministry of Waterways remains steadfast in its mission to protect the management of our waterways in a sustainable and resilient manner. Together we continue to create a safer, more prosperous Fiji for generations to come. I urge the honourable Members of this august House to acknowledge the hard work done by the Ministry while continuing to offer support for the necessary investment and policy adjustments required to address the challenges ahead.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list with me, and I want to thank you in advance for sticking under your 10-minute time limit, as I am sure many of you just want to go home right now, maybe have a nice dinner and spend some time with your family. This is my list:

- (1) Honourable Leader of the Opposition;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways;
- (3) Honourable Sachida Nand
- (4) Honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport
- (5) Honourable P.K. Ravunawa; and
- (6) Honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways (Right of Reply)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I will try my best to be very brief as I will speak on probably four issues from the Committee deliberations and analysis, findings and recommendations, but before doing so, let me acknowledge the Committee for the good work and the Ministry as well.

I know that the Ministry was established in 2017, had teething issues to go through and there were unfortunate incidences that was beyond our control - previous disasters and *TC Josie* and *TC Keni* in 2017 and there were some re-deployments. Of course, I know the issues in terms of capacities and capabilities as well.

Very quickly, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will just speak on a few things from the Report. One is on their Committee's findings, I just want to speak on the issue of the low utilisation of the

budget funds. This is not only in Waterways, but also a recurring issue and a common one in most government departments. I would urge the Government, Madam Deputy Speaker, perhaps it is time for us to review Government's Financial Management Systems and the procurement processes as well.

I say this because during my term, Madam Deputy Speaker, as Commissioner, I was part of the, was just into the end of the previous system that used to exist, particularly with the key ministries. Previously, we used to have what we call "Agency Tender Boards". The Agency Tender Boards are especially given to big Ministries with bit allocations, such as Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Works, Ministry of Health, and the list goes on. There is a certain limit given to them so that they can expedite the processes of tender and, of course, procurement processes as well.

Then we have what we call the "Divisional Tender Boards". Above the Agency Tender Boards, we have the Divisional Tender Boards. I am just giving some thoughts so that probably, because of the recurring issue, maybe something that needs to be reconsidered.

I, for one always say that we are not all crooks, we are not all thieves. Government's responsibility is to put the systems and processes in place and penalties for those that do contravene the process or act otherwise. Just because someone did this, it does not mean that we are all going to do it, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know in the last budget, I did raise this, and I walked across the floor as well, speaking to a few Ministers including the honourable Minister for Finance because it comes under his portfolio.

The procurement process and the financial management system which lays out the process, particularly when it comes to tender boards as well, because when it comes to tender boards, there even some small issues, it can be just issues on missing information. But coming all the way from Labasa to Suva and then goes back takes time, delays, delays and then something comes up and then money is diverted, money is used elsewhere, this is a major contributing factor.

Sometimes this is just acquittals because acquittals were not done in the previous quarter, this causes delay and then the correspondence and whatever, and most Ministries perhaps do not have follow up systems from the headquarters of the Ministry into the Ministry for Finance and back and forth. This is my suggestion, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this has been a problem for a long time, and I hope the Assistant Minister for Finance will perhaps bring it to the attention of his Minister or probably something that they are already considering.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the other issue that I want to speak on is just on Recommendation 2 – the Ministry strengthens its information management system. The reason why I am raising this, there are a lot of requests, and some are just lost along the process. In my visit to the North two weeks ago, thankful to the honourable Speaker's Office, I raised this with the Commissioner Northern when I paid a courtesy visit to his office.

Governments change but the priorities remain the same. The needs of the communities remain the same. It is your responsibility to ensure that, that continues. Bring it back into the process, bring it back to the attention of those that are in leadership because the communities need this and that is why the information system, the database is so important. Of course, it will be helpful as well when it comes to, we are going to submit our long-term strategy and nationally determined contributions next year when it comes to climate financing. When we have the information available, then we are in a better position to seek the funding because the resources that we have, unfortunately cannot meet all our requests.

Lastly, Madam Deputy Speaker, on recommendation five on capacity, on human resources, I wish to comment on this. The honourable Minister knows very well that LAWRM was just transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture into the Ministry of Waterways. One thing, capacity in terms of human resources, the honourable Minister knows that previously, we had Burmese engineers, a lot of foreign engineers, but you know, they have aged and most of them have returned. Unfortunately, for those from the Ministry that went to China, when they came back, they left to other organisations, so it is that capacity that we need and, of course, capability.

I know that they do not have a dredger. I read in the Report, that most that of the work is outsourced. Probably that is something that needs to be considered as well, given that Fiji has so many rivers and we have issues of flooding. I hope that, that capability can be looked into as well, because when the Ministry for Waterways was formed part of the capability from the Ministry of Rural Development was given to the Ministry for Waterways.

But that was package that, Ministry of Rural Development requested through JICA as a contingency, as a strategic reserve for the Ministry of Rural Development when disasters do strike, particularly in the rural areas where there was no Public Works Department (PWD). So, the capability as well, because that is what is keeping the Ministry running now, the trucks, the bulldozers and the heavy plant machinery. I hope that the Government will seriously look into not only the human resources aspect but the capability as well. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Annual Review Report of the Ministry of Waterways for the Year 2017-2018 that was tabled in this august Parliament on the 3rd of October 2024. Let me from the offset mention that the importance of the waterways to agriculture cannot be overemphasised and right now, there is an enormous amount of work that we need to do to fix; one, our infrastructure that has existed for almost three to four decades now and is falling to pieces.

I had already stated this in Parliament, and I had already stated also that it will be quite a costly exercise. The latest forecasts that I have discussed with my waterways engineers runs into almost a F\$1 billion. But we will see, how we can work around this figure. So, as to make it possible for us to fix waterways. When we say infrastructure in waterways, we are talking about the seawalls, flood gates and we are talking about the very structure that holds the flood gates together. So, these are the ones that are falling apart, the very foundation is starting to give up.

Madam Deputy Speaker, although the Report is an old one, many of the challenges highlighted by the Standing Committee regarding the Ministry of Waterway's administrations, structure, budgetary allocation, programmes, reporting activities are still relevant and the Ministry is actively striving to address these issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry acknowledges the findings presented in the Report that highlights the failure to identify the key physical targets of the Ministry for the review period, the inadequate utilisation of the allocated funds, the lack of comprehensive information provision and the ineffective succession planning regarding the retention of staff and assets within the Ministry.

I fully agree with the honourable Leader of the Opposition and what he has stated regarding the need to review the systems and processes in terms of the approval of funds so as to fasten big infrastructure projects, like the ones that are undertaken in the Ministry of Agriculture. I also agree that we need to up our manpower intake in terms of getting in our qualified agricultural engineers because they are the ones who know the type of job that is required because they are water engineers, as well as civil engineers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the six recommendations put forward by the Standing Committee are noted and will be used as a guide for the Ministry to align the development of its policies, and the implementation of programmes and activities. The Ministry assures this august Parliament that it actively engaged in enhancing its information management system to establish a comprehensive and standardised reporting process. This initiative aims to facilitate the dissemination of effective information and to provide accurate reports on programmes pertinent to the Sustainable Development Goals.

In addition, the Ministry is also committed to following all Government systems and processes, particularly the financial and operational procedures, and ensuring that all annual reports are submitted on time. But of course, with due consideration to what has been stated, that we need a review of the systems and processes to fast track the approval of funds.

Finally, the Ministry is committed to improving its Human Resource Development Plan, as this is vital for enhancing employee performance, attracting and retaining talent, ensuring legal compliance and fostering a positive organisational structure, all of which contribute to the overall success and growth of the organisation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources on the review of the 2017-2018 Annual Report of the Ministry of Waterways. On that note, I thank you for the opportunity and support the motion before the Parliament.

HON. S. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker. I stand to speak on the Ministry of Waterways Report or the motion before the Parliament. The Ministry of Waterways was established to manage the waterways in Fiji. This is much more than simply drains. One of the recommendations in the report by the Standing Committee is for the Ministry to improve its human resources.

I totally agree with this recommendation because, improving the human resources will enable the Ministry to deliver better services to the people. Not only in the human resources, it needs to invest in equipment and machinery, as alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Machineries and trained personnel will enable them to deliver better service to the people.

Having said that, Madam Deputy Speaker, the issues in relation to drainage and waterways still remains current. Arable land has become waterlogged and cannot be cultivated. Saltwater intrusions has become far too common in arable land, especially cane land closer to the rivers or sea.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the Labasa Sector in Vanua Levu, acres of land cannot be cultivated due to saltwater intrusions. In Walu Sector in Labasa, farmers are being pushed back because of saltwater intrusions on their farms and yet, Madam Deputy Speaker, we dream about increasing our cane production and improving efficiency.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in Rakiraki, the rivers and the drains are poorly managed. Rakiraki town and the surrounding areas get frequent floods. The floods have significant and far-reaching effects on the community. This cannot be simply classified as simple floods. In Rakiraki, flood waters damage roads and crossings making it inaccessible. First, isolating some communities from essential services.

Recently, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Standing Committee on Natural Resources visited the Rakiraki Water supply, concerns were raised on the disruptions to water supply during floods. Water intake gets affected or gets clogged and thus affecting the quality of water drawn for treatment and supply.

Madam Deputy Speaker, agriculture is the prime source of livelihood for people in Rakiraki. It is rather unfortunate that they do not have anything else to sustain their livelihoods. Even so much as the new sugar mill that was promised has failed to materialise. I just hope that the Minister for Sugar can look into the eyes of the people and say, I failed and I lied.

Floods damage their crops, it washes away their livestock and erodes their fertile land, and this has been happening, and it is a current situation. Slowly, day by day, the livelihoods of the people are squeezed even further. Social impacts of the floods cannot be quantified. Floods in small towns like Rakiraki can have devastating long-term effects on the economy, infrastructure, public health and overall, quality of life. This is due to poorly maintained waterways, and I hope the Government will look into this.

People expect better service from the Department or the Ministry of Waterways. Therefore, I request the Government to increase the financial resources and optimise budget uses to enhance service delivery. The Ministry needs to develop a skilled workforce that is capable of delivering the service. It needs to attract talent, and it needs to retain that talent.

As the previous speakers have said that people do move, but you should have mechanisms to retain those talents and equip your team with modern technology and tools to enable them to deliver proper service. The Ministry also needs to strengthen its inter-agency and inter-ministerial coordination.

The Ministry must improve collaborations with other relevant Government bodies including Ministry of Environment, local Government and iTaukei Affairs. They need improve accountability and transparency in order to deliver efficient services, empowering their officers and decentralising decision making is important.

In order to deliver better service, the Ministry needs to integrate its work with climate change adaption work. It should ensure that infrastructure and the people are prepared for the disaster. It should strengthen early warning systems and flood protocols and take its work and deliverables to the Green Climate Fund, so they are better funded and equipped to deliver the services. This will ensure that they are able to upgrade their aging infrastructure and ensure that whatever infrastructure is in place is well-planned for long-term usage. It is important, not only the Ministry staff, they need to have public awareness and engage the community on their responsibilities to help in the maintenance of waterways. Proper cultivation methods is important, therefore, it is the Ministry of Agriculture and other institutions that need to work with the team.

To round it off, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Waterways in Fiji must adopt to modern and holistic technologies. It should have an integrated approach to the management of waterways, this involves securing adequate funding, strengthening its governance and coordination, improving its human resources, leveraging on modern technologies and being future driven to provide better and efficient services to the people. This will enable the Ministry to perform and deliver what the people of Fiji expect from them.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I support the motion before the Parliament.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a short contribution on the Report before us on Waterways. I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Agriculture, one of the main initiatives or changes that has been re-establishment of the Drainage Board from the practical point of view it has included members of the community on that board. So, the appointment basically includes those with local knowledge of the waterways.

I am speaking as one of the inhabitants of the delta areas. One of the issues in the past have been the lack of local knowledge input into the work which has been done. So, some of the contractors came and just did it without close supervision which resulted in some of the work not being done properly or made the situation worse by the saltwater intrusion.

I believe that is a positive development and some of the inputs which has been made regarding the waterways, I do support, I really support that and the way forward. But as mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition with his experience, that is definitely the way to go moving forward, in terms of the revival of the whole functional areas of the waterways, and how best we can deal with this particular subject. Waterways is really affecting a huge portion of our population, not only the population but also their livelihoods.

The other issue was regarding the cooperation and coordination with our development partners, so that is ongoing too and close collaboration with our Ministry which deals with infrastructure. For example, waterways and also roads, so, we are closely collaborating on that and that was also one of the main subjects we discussed when we went to COP.

So, with our COP participants here, I know that there were various areas discussed but this was also one of the key areas discussed. I suppose the challenge is how to cascade that discussion at that level down to the practical projects. So, within the Ministry for example, how do we resource the Ministry to enable access or facility access. We as a Government are working within our individual Ministries to ensure that the right people are there, in terms of project initiation and project management and not only that, but also climate financing.

What are the modalities which are there? What is available? So, there is close coordination between the various Ministries and Ministry for Climate Change on that with the Permanent Secretary. So, we are looking forward to not only actual planning and budgeting from here, but also with the close collaboration with our development partners because this is closely related to climate change.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- We now have the final contributor before I hand over the floor to the Chair of the Standing Committee, and the final contributor is the honourable Penioni Ravunawa.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, a lot has been said about the Report presented by the Standing Committee of Natural Resources and in my 20 months in Parliament, I have been hearing the same story; late submission of report, unclear direction without KPI's, non-utilisation of funds, alignment to SDG's and the lack of transparency, and we thank the Government for the re-establishment of the Ministry of Waterways of the establishment of the Drainage Board to look after the drains and rivers that we have because it will help the agriculture sector.

It will help the communities that are living in the low-lying areas as well, and if I may share, Madam Deputy Speaker, in the Public Accounts Standing Committee, the last couple of days we were discussing about the Audit Bill to give independence to the Office of the Auditor-General. The honourable Leader of the Opposition mentioned about the delays in the reports and how can we deal with the issues to penalise chief accounting officers, responsible CEOs of ministries and departments.

So, this Audit Bill, we are looking at it, and as I was sharing my experience, the last 20 months, it was the common issues in all ministries and departments, and I believe it is time that we put some teeth in the Bills that we present in Parliament and hopefully we can close the loop properly in allocation of funds, grants given by Government and also those that look after the projects and initiatives can be held responsible at the end of the day.

I thank the Standing Committee for the Report. I believe all the speakers have talked very well on all the areas that need improvement, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in Reply.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I am honoured to thank the honourable Members for their contributions to the debate and I take note of their interests on the functions, operations and management of the Ministry of Waterways, which is now been transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture and how waterways could be improved, and I support the motion before the Parliament.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

Honourable Members, this brings us to the end of the sitting today, and I thank you all for your contributions and your patience, and we will adjourn now, and I will come back and see you tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. Thank you and good night and enjoy your dinner.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.59 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 281/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education (Ref. Page 2358)



MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
(Hon. A.M. Radrodro)

Reply to Question No. 281/2024 is as follows:

(a)

2022												
	ECE				PRIMARY				SECONDARY			
	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island
Total No. of leaves taken	3681	1628	2710	932	21709	8276	8657	12753	34704	7079	17736	10263
Total No. of teachers in each	423	182	505	223	2124	780	999	2168	2535	512	1291	1660
2023												
	ECE				PRIMARY				SECONDARY			
	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island
Total No. of leaves taken	3544	1604	2972	894	21680	7596	8380	12243	32600	6744	17010	9413
Total No. of teachers in each	457	195	537	233	2237	789	1056	2239	2619	528	1311	1043
2024												
	ECE				PRIMARY				SECONDARY			
	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island	Urban	Peri-Urban	Rural	Outer Island
Total No. of leaves taken	3831	1764	3060	915	23230	7931	9058	13078	33375	7241	17579	10177
Total No. of teachers in each	466	209	557	240	2310	805	1068	2276	2642	538	1363	1050

Note:

Breakdown of leaves: 3 bereavement leave, 15 Sick leave with Sick sheet, 6 Sick leave without Sick sheet, 3 days Personal leave, and 98 Maternity leave. Sporting Leave, Inpatient Leave and Leave without Pay are other leaves taken by teachers. The above data includes total number of

leaves taken by teachers under each category. For example, one teacher may take multiple sick leaves in a given year.

(b) **1.0 Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms**

- 1.1 Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS) is a means of monitoring and flagging teacher's chronic absenteeism. Staff attendance register is kept by all schools. All schools update and send in their Monthly Absence Return for staff.
- 1.2 Teacher's attendance is monitored at school, district and Headquarters and unauthorised leave is flagged to MOE.
- 1.3 HOSS conduct close monitoring of teachers for Performance Assessment. Continuous absence for seven consecutive days is considered deemed resignation.
- 1.4 Exercise Book Verification assists in monitoring the work coverage by teachers.

2.0 Policies and Legislations

- 2.1 2011 General Orders; PSC Code of Conduct.
- 2.2 Standard Operating Procedures for appointment of relieving teachers.

3.0 School-based Reorganisation, Teaching and Supervision of classes

- 3.1 Reorganisation of classes for students and teachers are in place. Apart from sick leaves all other leaves are applied prior to taking leaves and student activities are prepared. The teacher supervising the students ensures that the activities are provided to the students to complete.
- 3.2 Absent Teacher's Recovery Work Plan - To complete work coverage afternoon classes and Saturday classes are conducted.
- 3.3 Supervision of students
 - 3.3.1 Supervision roster is prepared and teachers on supervision are duly informed and asked to either teach or supervise the activities set by the teacher.
- 3.4 Team teaching in some schools are timetabled, hence, if a teacher is absent the other teacher takes the classes.
- 3.5 Heads of Schools are on lower loads and step in to supervise. In Primary Medium and Large schools HOSS do not have a full-time class allocated to them. However, they are required to teach certain hours per week, hence, they step in when teachers are absent.
- 3.6 Encouraging teachers to be slightly ahead of the Learning and Teaching Programme (LTP) to buffer the impact of lost teaching hours.
- 3.7 Use of ICT to teach students like sharing notes and activities through online platforms such as Moodle.
- 3.8 Continuous monitoring of the LTP by the HOS, VP, HOD and assistant Head Teacher on the LTP coverage.

4.0 Teacher Incentives

Teacher Recognition Awards or Certificates for attendance at School level, District level and National level.

5.0 Monthly Absence Returns (MAR) are verified on monthly basis.

6.0 Habitual absenteeism cases are also referred to Performance and Discipline Unit (PDU) for guidance and support to Heads of School in dealing with such cases in line with relevant guidelines.

Note:

- Leave entitlement for teachers is as per the 2011 General Orders.

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 282/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services (Ref. Page 2359)



MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES
(Hon. Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu)

Reply to Question No. 282/2024 is as follows:

- (a) Postpartum Depression is a significant mood disorder affecting one in seven women following childbirth. The postpartum phase has been defined broadly as within 12 months after childbirth, but the World Health Organisation (WHO) specifies that postpartum period to be within six weeks after childbirth. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), onset of postpartum major depression can occur prior to or after childbirth. The DSM-5 specifier “with peripartum onset” is used when onset of major depression occurs either during pregnancy or in the four weeks following delivery.

Postpartum depression can range from a mild depression which is usually self limiting, to a severe syndrome which when untreated can lead to serious consequences to the mother and her baby. Unfortunately, local data on postpartum depression is limited.

Globally, the prevalence is estimated to be about 14 percent, however the country’s economy status is a factor in its prevalence, where rates are higher in developing countries compared to developed countries.

Primary risk factors show previous depression prior to or during pregnancy to be the largest effect and mainly associated with postpartum depression while secondary risk factors such as stressful life events (intimate partner violence is one of them) and poor financial and social support during the post pregnancy period are contributors to postpartum depression.

- (b) Women who are most likely to develop postpartum depression are those in lower economic status, minimum education, unmarried and in the young and older spectrum of age. Given the limited data in Fiji, the statistics from other country and clinical settings reveal the aforementioned socio-economic issues as main contributors to postpartum depression in most country settings.

SUMMARY				
Year	Race		Gender	Total
	iTaukei	FOID	Female	
2024	2	1	3	3 (1 postpartum depression and 2 cases of postpartum psychosis)
2023	1		1	1 (this only case in 2023 was postpartum depression)
2022	2	1	3	3 (1 case of postpartum depression and rest psychosis)
2021	3	2	5	5 (all postpartum psychosis)
2020	2	2	4	4 (all postpartum psychosis)
2019	1		1	1 (all postpartum psychosis)
Total	11	6	17	17

Data from St Giles Hospital in the table above show that a total of 17 women were diagnosed to have Postpartum Depression from 2019-2024. Eleven of these women were of iTaukei descent while six were Fijians of Indian descent.

- (c) Women after childbirth exhibiting symptoms whilst admitted in the post-natal wards are referred to mental health specialists for further assessment and care together with counselling support and services within the respective medical divisions. Counselling services provided by the NGO Empower Pacific assist those who are referred through the current referral processes for women dealing with postpartum depression.

Given that postpartum depression can develop at anytime within the twelve months after childbirth, Maternal Child Health (MCH) services for mothers and babies at the Primary Care level provide the access to mothers for further health assessment. The Ministry is also currently reviewing its MCH Policy and SOPs where mental health screening component by trained health practitioners will be included for postpartum women with an appropriate referral and care pathway established for those requiring further care.

ANNEXURE III

Reply to Written Question No. 283/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Justice (Ref. Page 2359)



MINISTER FOR JUSTICE
(Hon. S.D. Turaga)

In short, Question No. 283/2024 is misconceived and best directed to the Attorney General and/or Minister for Finance who have ministerial oversight over the relevant agencies.

The Ministry of Justice does not deal with Stop Departure. Stop Departure Order (SDO) and Departure Prohibition Order (DPO) terms are used interchangeably in this response.

That is the prerogative of the CEO, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FCRS); CEO, Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF); Commissioner, Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC); and the Courts.

To assist the honourable Member, please, find supplementary responses below:

- (a) The specific section of Fijian laws under which a Stop Departure Order may be issued are as follows:
- (i) Fiji Revenue and Customs Service Act 1998 - Section 32G - Departure Prohibition Order
- (1) Where a person is subject to an amount due and the Chief Executive Officer believes on reasonable grounds that it is desirable to do so for the purposes of ensuring that the person does not depart from Fiji for a foreign country without-
 - a) wholly discharging the amount due; or
 - b) making arrangement satisfactory to the Chief Executive Officer for the liability to be wholly discharged, the Chief Executive Officer may, by order in accordance with the prescribed form, prohibit the recipient departing from Fiji for a foreign country.
 - (2) The Chief Executive Officer must state the following on the departure prohibition order –
 - a) the name and address of the recipient; and
 - b) the amount due that is or will become payable.
 - (3) A departure prohibition order has effect throughout Fiji, including aboard any vessel or aircraft within Fiji.
 - (4) A copy of a departure prohibition order issued in respect of a recipient must, as soon as practicable, be served on the recipient, and upon the Commissioner of Police and the Director of Immigration.
 - (5) If a departure prohibition order is issued in respect of a recipient, the Commissioner of Police and the Director of Immigration must exercise the powers that they lawfully possess, or cause an officer under their direction to exercise such powers, so far as is necessary to prevent the recipient from departing Fiji, including the removal

and retention of the recipient's passport, identity card, visa or other travel document authorising the recipient to leave Fiji.

- (6) A recipient the subject of a departure prohibition order must be refused customs or immigration clearance.
- (7) A departure prohibition order remains in force until revoked by the Chief Executive Officer or upon the expiration of 3 years from the date of the order being issued, whichever is the earlier.

(ii) Tax Administration Act 2009 - Section 31(1) - Departure Prohibition Order

- (1) Where -
 - (a) a person is subject to a tax liability;
 - (b) the CEO believes on reasonable grounds that it is desirable to do so for the purposes of ensuring that the person does not depart from Fiji for a foreign country without –
 - (i) wholly discharging the tax liability; or
 - (ii) making arrangement satisfactory to the CEO for the tax liability to be wholly discharged; and
 - (b) a person whose tax liability has been written off as bad debts and the Chief Executive Officer has reasonable grounds to reinstate the bad debts, the CEO may, by order in accordance with the prescribed form, co-signed by a board member of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, prohibit the taxpayer departing from Fiji.
- (2) The CEO must state the following on the departure prohibition order -
 - (a) the name and address of the taxpayer;
 - (b) the amount of tax that is or will become payable.
- (3) A departure prohibition order has effect throughout Fiji, including aboard any vessel or aircraft within the territory of Fiji.
- (4) A copy of a departure prohibition order issued in respect of a taxpayer must, as soon as practicable, be served on the taxpayer, and upon the Commissioner of Police and the Director of Immigration.
- (5) If a departure prohibition order is issued in respect of a taxpayer, the Commissioner of Police and the Director of Immigration must exercise the powers that they lawfully possess, or cause an officer under their direction to exercise such powers, so far as is necessary to prevent the taxpayer from departing Fiji, including the removal and retention of the taxpayer's passport, identity card, visa, or other travel document authorising the taxpayer to leave Fiji.
- (6) A taxpayer the subject of a departure prohibition order must be refused customs or immigration clearance.
- (7) A departure prohibition order remains in force until revoked by the CEO or upon the expiration of three years from the date the of the Order being issued, whichever is the earlier.

- (iii) Fiji National Provident Fund Act 2011 - Section 104(1) - Departure Prohibition Orders
- (1) If -
 - (a) a person is liable to pay an amount as, or on account of, mandated contributions or additional contributions required to be paid by section 38(3);
 - (b) the amount is due and payable but has not been paid; and (c) the Chief Executive Officer believes on reasonable grounds that it is desirable to prevent the person from departing from Fiji to another country without -
 - (i) fully satisfying the liability; or
 - (ii) making arrangements satisfactory to the Board for the liability to be fully satisfied;
 the Chief Executive Officer may, by written order, prohibit the departure of the person from Fiji.
 - (2) A departure prohibition order remains in force until revoked or set aside by a court.
 - (3) A departure prohibition order in respect of a person does not prevent the deportation of the person under the Immigration Act 2003. [subs (3) am Act 31 of 2016 s79, effective 1 December 2016]
 - (4) The Chief Executive Officer must, as soon as practicable after making a departure prohibition order in respect of a person –
 - (a) send a copy of the order to the person at the address of the person last known to the Board; and
 - (b) give a copy of the order, and such information as the Chief Executive Officer considers is likely to help facilitate the identification of the person, to the Permanent Secretary or the Director of the Department of Immigration.
 - (5) The Chief Executive Officer may give a copy of the order and information described in subsection (4)(b) to any other department of the civil service if, in the Chief Executive Officer's opinion, to do so will assist in giving effect to the order. [subs (5) am Act 2 of 2016 s20, effective 15 February 2016]
- iv) Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 2007 - Section 13(1)(e) - Powers of the Commissioner
- (1) For the purpose of the performance of his functions under this Promulgation the Commissioner through the Deputy Commissioner and/or through his officers, may -
 - (e) prohibit any person against whom an investigation in respect of an offence to which this Promulgation applies has commenced, from leaving the jurisdiction of the Republic of Fiji for a period of up to 30 days and may give the necessary instructions in writing to the Director of Immigration to enforce the order, provided that the power under this paragraph must only be exercised by the Commissioner and a copy of the order must be served on the suspect or at his or her last known residential address within 24 hours of the issuance of the order.

(v) Constitution of the Republic of Fiji - Section 21- Freedom of movement and residence [Section 21(6)(a) & (b)]

(6) A law, or anything done under the authority of a law, is not inconsistent with the rights granted by this section to the extent that the law –

(a) provides for the detention of the person or enables a restraint to be placed on the person's movements, whether –

(i) for the purpose of ensuring his or her appearance before a court for trial or other proceeding;.

(ii) in consequence of his or her conviction for an offence; or

(iii) for the purpose of protecting another person from apprehended violence;

(b) provides for a person who is a non-citizen to be detained or restrained as a consequence of his or her arrival in Fiji without the prescribed entry documentation.

(vi) Debtors Act 1886 - [DEB 6] – Section 6 - Absconding defendant may be arrested and detained until security given

If it is shown to the satisfaction of the court that the defendant in any action for the recovery of a sum exceeding \$10 is about to abscond, the court may, in its discretion, issue a warrant to arrest the defendant and commit him or her to prison, there to be kept until he or she shall have given bail or security in such sum, to be expressed in the warrant, as the court thinks fit, not exceeding the probable amount of debt or damages and costs, for his or her appearance at any time when called upon while the action is pending and until execution or satisfaction of any judgment that may be made against him or her in the action; and the surety or sureties shall undertake, in default of such appearance, to pay any sum of money that may be adjudged against him or her in the action with costs, provided that the court may at any time, upon reasonable cause being shown, release the defendant from such arrest.

** In relation to the Courts, the Courts have powers to issue Stop Departure Orders when a relevant application with supporting affidavit is made.

(b) The agency or agencies authorised to issue Stop Departure Orders -

(i) The Chief Executive Officers, of FRCS and FNPF alike, have legal powers, to enter the departure prohibition orders (DPO) to any taxpayer or person for that matter, for an amount owed by virtue of relevant provisions of the law.

(ii) The DPO in respect of a recipient must as soon as practicable, be served on the recipient and on the Commissioner of Police and the Director of Immigration by the CEO FRCS.

(iii) The Director of Immigration, Immigration authorities and or its officers are obliged to comply with the stop departure orders issued from the –

- Courts;
- CEO FNPF;

- CEO FRCS and
 - Commissioner of FICAC.
- (iv) Law enforcement and border control agencies collaborate or assist in implementing a Stop Departure Order.
- (v) Judicial Officers (Resident Magistrates or Judges) assess every application for SDO on its merits respectively -
- Criminal matters: One of the strict bail conditions the court may consider is for the Accused not to leave the jurisdiction of the court, pending determination of the case hence a SDO may be issued.
 - Family matters: Applicants may file Form 12 and 23, seeking the court to issue SDO if they have every reason to believe, with some evidence to show the court that the Respondent is planning or about to flee the Country, to avoid paying maintenance or maintenance arrears or avoid matrimonial property distributions, or to avoid rendering his/her responsibilities for the children when residence/contact application still pending in court, et cetera.
 - Civil: Application could be made by Plaintiffs for SDO through filing of Motion with supporting affidavits on the merits of every case.