

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 6TH DECEMBER, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 6TH DECEMBER, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.35 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Attorney-Genera; the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources; the honourable Minister for Justice; the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management; the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry; the honourable S. Nand, the honourable A. Bia, the honourable H. Chand; and the honourable R.R. Sharma.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 5th December 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Visitors - Vusokinawaqa Women's Club

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the Vusokinawaqa Women's Club from Nalawa, Ra. Thank you for joining us today and, indeed, welcome to your Parliament. It is my hope that in the near future, some of you will be encouraged to stand for elections so you can represent the people in this august body.

Access to Business Funding Bill 2024

For the information of all honourable Members, I have received a request from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for the Standing Committee to report back to Parliament on the Access to Business Funding Bill 2024 at a later sitting of Parliament. The Standing Committee wishes to undertake further public consultations on the Bill. In that respect I seek your indulgence to allow the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs to report back at a later sitting of Parliament. Is there any opposition? As there being no opposition, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs has the approval to report back to Parliament on the Access to Business Funding

Bill 2024 at a later sitting.

Upgrade - ICT Infrastructure

Finally, on the issue of the ICT glitches experienced in the course of this sitting week, I am to advise, honourable Members, that the ICT infrastructure is currently undergoing its final phase of the setup of the multi-language caption and translation project.

In order to test the system and which had to be on a sitting week, there were four platforms operating at the same time that affected the video and audio feed in Chambers. These four platforms are:

- (1) Real time caption on Audio to Speech Recognition;
- (2) Testing of the four audio channels and upgrade of parliamentary TV Channel;
- (3) Streaming of Parliament Sitting on a new internet platform; and
- (4) Video-on-demand and accessibility through the Parliament website.

In light of the implementation of this final phase, my team and I seek your understanding, honourable Members, as we strive to complete this \$4.4 million project, which will ensure that our Parliament is more inclusive and transparent for the people of Fiji.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

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

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Parliament of the Republic of Fiji Annual Report 2020-2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 189/2024*)
- (2) Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Annual Reports from 2018-2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 196/2024*)
- (3) Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Annual Report 2019-2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 197/2024*)
- (4) Republic of Fiji Military Forces 2019-2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 199/2024*)
- (5) Republic of Fiji Military Forces 2020-2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 200/2024*)
- (6) Republic of Fiji Military Forces Annual Report from 2021-2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 201/2024*)

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

- (1) Reserve Bank of Fiji Annual Report August 2023 to July 2024 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 8/2024*)
- (2) Fiji National Provident Fund Annual Report 2024 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 172/2024*)
- (3) Investment Fiji Annual Report 2020 to 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 111/2021*)
- (4) Fiji Sugar Corporation Annual Report 2024 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 158/2024*)

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

- (1) Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report 2022-2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 3/2024*)

Honourable Members, please, take note that the Fourth Quarter Appropriation Statement Actual Expenditure from 1st May, 2024 to 31st July, 2024 is for information only and will not be referred to any Standing Committee.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Standing Order 32(3) - Official Report of Proceedings (*Hansard*). Mr. Speaker, on Wednesday, 4th December 2024, (unfortunately the Member is not here), during a response to honourable Jone Usamate, the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry stated that the total amount of 8,000 sugarcane that are left on the farm accumulates to only \$80,000. Whether this was deliberate or a mistake, if we calculate 8,000 tonnes by \$100, it comes to \$800,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member lied to Parliament by trying to portray that only \$80,000 was denied, unfortunately, it should be \$800,000. I request if the *Daily Hansard* could be corrected to reflect \$800,000. If we read the *Daily Hansard*, he is asking a question, and I quote: "...8,000 if you multiply by \$100, it comes to \$80,000, right?" I am correcting him, it is not \$80,000, it should be \$800,000.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I take your Point of Order. We will refer the matter to the honourable Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I also raise a Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, I recognise him now, please.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In Standing Order 62(1), it states and I quote: "When speaking, a member must not impute improper motives ..." The Member used the word "lied". Using the word 'lied', the way he used it, is imputing that he actually lied when the issue is just to correct the *Daily Hansard*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member. The use of the word is inappropriate in this Chamber. It is inappropriate in this Chamber, and I would like you to withdraw that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I withdraw the word "lied".

MR. SPEAKER.- In respect of the Point of Order which I have accepted, I have referred the matter for the honourable Minister to come back to Parliament and respond to your Point of Order.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Restoration Payment – FNPf Pensioners (Question No. 305/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the restoration payment from FNPf to pensioners as announced in the 2024–2025 National Budget?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Naupoto for his question. Very quickly in 2011, as we all know, the military regime unilaterally reduced the pension rates for

FNPF pensioners, in a way broke the trust between the Fund and the pensioners. To deny justice, the government at that time also enacted a law to restrict these pensioners from challenging this unfair treatment in the court of law. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is history. When we came into Government, we responded for a quick temporary solution by allowing affected pensioners to access Government social pension of \$125 if they were above the age of 70 or \$115 if they were between 60 years to 69 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Members would recall that in the recent budget, we brought some kind of permanent closure to this gross injustice. All pensioners who reluctantly opted for reduced pensions rate or had their pension payments restored to same levels to the new rate which was decided in 2011. However, effective from 1st August 2024 and moving forward, we have restored the full pension that they were receiving at that point in time and for this, we did not go to FNPF because the FNPF is still looking at the whole issue. We provided a funding of \$4 million in the Budget for the reinstatement which is estimated to be around \$57 million over the next two decades based on the actuarial estimates and analysis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has been done.

To facilitate the process, the Ministry of Finance had entered into an arrangement with FNPF to facilitate the top up payment to the affected pensioners and so far from 1st August, 2024, Government has disbursed around \$1.3 million to 1,300 pensioners from August to November, 2024. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the payments are made according to the pension payment cycle on the 14th and 28th of each month.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you did mention that the Military regime unilaterally made this decision way back in 2011. But I want to tell you honourable Deputy Prime Minister that, that decision was based on a presentation that was made by the board and the management for the long-term sustainability of the Funds. So, my question, and I want you again to confirm this decision that you have taken, was it as a result of a presentation again, a request from the board or the management, or is it just a unilateral decision taken by the Government?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Leader of the Opposition was listening to me carefully, I said very clearly that what happened in 2011 was a unilateral decision by the Government; whether it was based on actuarial advise or whether it was about sustainability, the fact that it was made by a Government without consultation with the pensioners, it was a unilateral decision so that stays there.

What I have said very clearly is that the Government recognised the pain of these pensioners and as soon as we came in, we voluntarily (in a temporary solution) we provided the social pension. In the last Budget, we tried to restore the pension from 1st August, and we have taken the responsibility as a Government to provide funding. I said very clearly that we have \$4 million in the Budget for this year and so far, \$1.3 million has been dispatched, so that was very clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The issue about sustainability actuarial decision, that is another matter; that the FNPF Board in consultation with the Government if they are going to relook at that. That is another matter.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The honourable Minister is known for goosestepping, he has just one. My question is from a pensioner who withdrew partially. Partial withdrawal was made for their pension in 2011 during the reform period because they felt maybe they will not get any money et cetera. They wanted to take this matter to court, so my question to the honourable Minister is, in free Fiji when will the Government repeal the 2011 FNPF Transition Act to allow pensioners to take their grievance to the court?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is very clear Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the confusion that the honourable Leader of the Opposition and his member sitting on the other side. One is saying, when are you going to bring a legislation in Parliament to revoke that? The honourable Leader of the Opposition is talking about the justification for that and the sustainability, and they accuse us, so they are confused! She is confused!

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want them to answer this, is she agreeing with the honourable Leader of the Opposition that his point of view is that, they did the right thing?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I take your Point of Order, honourable Minister. Can you go on right away?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am answering the question.

MR. SPEAKER.-I am just clarifying, will you continue honourable Minister? But answer directly the question that is posed to you. Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am answering the question directly, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As I have said earlier, this decision that the Government has made to include \$4 million in the budget is to restore the pension of those who chose to go on a lower pension that was decided in 2011.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- All the other matters that honourable Kumar is raising, whether we repeal the law that was there in 2011, that is the matter for the Government. As a government, we will make the decision in consultation with FNPF, if it is appropriate.

Right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have done as a government is a compassionate thing, we have done justice to all those pensioners and that is where the matter rests at the moment. The honourable Member can ask for an opinion or whatever which is irrelevant.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. I consider the question as answered. Honourable Maharaj, were you going to ask the last question on this?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this reform, there was also suggestions that a member could actually get pension, is \$100. Now we have actually moved 12 years ahead, even the minimum wage rate...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I am coming to the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, please, pose your question now.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Minimum Wage rate has actually increased by this Government to around \$5.50. Has Government plans to increase the \$100 pension to, at least, 50 percent, considering that the new Minimum Wage rate with \$5 comes to \$250? Even the Social Welfare pensioners are receiving \$115 to \$125. So, this segment of members who have been receiving \$100 for the past, at least, 10 to 12 years have been missed out. Is there any consideration to increase their pension to bring it up to par with what the Social Welfare pensioners are getting, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, the mess that we inherited in terms of how this pension rates were changed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have in the last two budgets, carefully considered, we increase social welfare allowances in the 2023-2024 Budget. We have provided this additional support to FNPF pensioners and going forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Government, we would be reviewing in consultation with the Ministry of Social Protection, how and where we need to increase amounts and I think that is a legitimate question and that is something that the Government will constantly look at.

2024 China International Import Expo
(Question No. 306/2024)

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 Fiji's participation at the 2024 China International Import Expo?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the China International Import Expo (CIIE) is actually one of the premier events in China, in terms of the global calendar. I actually attended last year, however, this year the exhibition was attended by the Permanent Secretary for Trade and his team and it took place from 5th November, 2024 to 10th November, 2024.

Just to give a sense of the size of this event, Mr. Speaker, about 152 countries attended from across the globe, plus regional organisations. The exhibition spaces is around 420,000 square metres and it does actually provide an opportunity for Fiji, we normally have a booth that profiles our trade and investment in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the booth actually was endeavoured to highlight some of our key exports, mineral water, noni, beverages, turmeric, kava products alongside tourism, agribusiness and manufacturing. This year's expo, of course, reinforced our broader strategy or the strategy of the People's Coalition Government to boost exports and investment and solidify Fiji's position as the hub for trade and transportation in the Pacific. With China has one of Fiji's key trading partners, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our engagement at CIIE is very important in fostering connections of course, and creating new opportunities.

Just very briefly, Mr. Speaker, before I sit down some of the discussions that were held while the team was there included a discussion with Modern Star Silk. It is a company that manufactures silk production and there is some discussion around silk production in Fiji and they will be visiting our shores soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, CHINT Group Co. Ltd, a smart energy company that focuses on energy

and digital infrastructure is a mega multinational in China and are keen to see whether they can participate in our green transition. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in keeping with the Aquaculture Bill that was passed into law yesterday, part of the visit also was to continue discussions with the Chinese Government on fisheries and aquaculture.

So, the team actually visited the South China Agricultural University Fisheries Research Institute in Nansha, Guangzhou, exploring opportunities for collaboration in aquaculture and sustainable fisheries. Potential projects, such as crab and prawn farming, which would obviously support the rural community, food security and economic diversification was explored, and of course we have invited the institute to visit Fiji, and hope that either of the major universities, whether it is FNU or USP may be able to collaborate with the South China Agricultural University.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, we are looking forward to a delegation from China in the next few weeks. There are also some cultural tourism projects being discussed during the visit and again the emergence of cultural tourism is starting to gain momentum, and our delegation from Shanghai is most likely to visit Fiji next year to look at exploring opportunities in that particular area, and I am sure it will be a welcome development from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you can see the China International Import Expo (CIIE) event is normally quite an important event for the country. It was funded by the Chinese Government. So, our visitation was quite targeted and there are some very good opportunities that have emerged, and we shall be following them through in the next few months.

HON. LT.COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, China is a key development partner and a friend. We import a lot from China, but we are interested in how we can also increase our export levels to China.

Way back in 2013, we had some discussions, we sent our *dalo* to China and we have talked about aquaculture and fisheries products. There is a problem in China, where now products land, particularly agriculture and fisheries products, there is a 16 percent tariff on our products because of our World Trade Organisation (WTO) standing as a middle income country. What has progressed in terms of getting our products into China, that negotiations started way back in 2013.

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, it is a continuing discussion at the moment with China in terms of the trade arrangements. We are talking about a Free Trade Agreement, which has some implications on our economy. So, we are sort of handling it strategically. Certainly, if the Government does something it will be done on Fiji's terms so that we do not jeopardise our industries in Fiji.

There are some discussions in trade and we will continue them next year, but certainly a Free Trade Agreement as we all know, will decimate our industry in Fiji, so we have to be very careful in terms of that negotiation. There are other ways to sort out tariff barriers or tariff reductions, and that too is in discussion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, I agree with you, this is one of the most premier destinations in terms of export. Just a quick question on the private sector participation. The question is twofold. Was there a delegation including the private sector from Fiji or did they go out privately? If so, do we have a dollar value to some of the deals that were done with respect to other exports out or imports in?

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pretty sure there were some private

sector participants in the expo because of the exhibitions that happened there. I will check for sure, but I cannot remember at this stage. But certainly, some of these discussions are at the very early stages, so it would probably be premature to estimate a figure.

Interestingly last year, when I went to the expo, we ended up signing two MOUs that were worth around US\$60 million - one to do with *noni*, which was about \$40 million and the other \$20 million was someone wanting to set up forestry here. I am pleased to say that the *noni* production is now happening in Tailevu, so we look forward to seeing that explode, because as we all know, *noni* is quite popular in parts of China. We will certainly work on that. I will try and get some more information on the potential quantum, but last year was a bit easier to quantify because we had the MOUs, we had done a press release. But point taken and I will report back on that.

Measures to Address Illegal Immigrants
(Question No. 307/2024)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises, Immigration and Fiji Police Force inform Parliament of measures the Ministry is taking to address this issue, given that there are currently more than 8,000 illegal immigrants in the country?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Virendra Lal for his question. Perhaps, a background to the question, but before that, I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your first week in the Chair and it has not been an easy week - not a normal Parliamentary week, and thank you for your endurance.

Today is also a very important day in my life, not my birthday, but on 6th December, 1987, I gave away all the powers I had to the late Sir Ratu Penaia Ganilau, and made him President, and I went back slowly to the Camp. Also, in 2006, this room was configured rather differently at the time. I sat in a box in the middle there, and a gentleman sitting here with a red gown, and he used the same sort of gavel, and he said to me “not guilty, you are now a free man, go and join your family.” So, it is a very important day in my life, and I would like to thank the honourable Virendra Lal for bringing up this question.

I would like to just go very quickly over the background of the question that points back to Government. I would have asked the Immigration Investigators to wait for you, honourable Lal, after this break to ask you where these people are. But you have got the figures from the former Minister for Home Affairs who made a statement that there are presently more than 8,000 illegal immigrants in Fiji, says honourable Pio Tikoduadua. This number had doubled from one year, as reports from 2023 shows they were 4,709 illegal immigrants in Fiji in January 2023. The number had increased and the Minister then, was very concerned.

So, the answer to your question is also the response to the question he had, of the concerns that he had. What is the Immigration Department or Government doing at this time? I would like to go over those. They were started by honourable Tikoduadua, while he was holding the portfolio of the Minister for Immigration.

The Office had implemented a comprehensive strategy to address the issues effectively. Key measures in place, intelligence structure, the Fiji Immigration Department has enhanced border management capabilities through the following actions. An intelligence and assessment structure that coordinates information proactively in drawing out the trend of illegal migrants who may intend to

reside illegally in Fiji. This assessment will point out emerging trends and issues of border security to identify irregular migration movements and provide a border security landscape to avoid an increase in numbers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember my first visit to Australia as Prime Minister, where there was a welcoming service by the Fijian community in Sydney, and I had a big police entourage looking after me and I noted that there were no prayers right through the service and even the benediction at the end of the sermon when the *Talatala* pronounced benediction, no one closed their eyes and I said, why did you not pray? There was no prayer right through the service and during benediction no one closed their eyes. When they came out from the grog session after, they told me, “*O ira na tevoru era lako tu mai qori.*” You had demons and devils accompany you, who were they? Those people who were with you. Who were they? They are my police security. “*Oi*, we thought they were Immigration Officials. So many of our own who are out there in other countries are also worried about being nabbed by Immigration Officials. Perhaps, we should have our own *tevoru* around looking for illegal immigrants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, integrating all immigration systems with Migration Information Data Analysis System will centralise traveller data, including biometrics and travel history, to enhance border security and streamline operations. Using advanced analytics and real-time verification, the system will detect illegal immigration, fraud and security threats through automated assessments. This unified approach strengthens security, improves efficiency, supports data driven decision and ensure it is compliant with privacy standards.

Strengthening compliance and enforcement operation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has expanded the Compliance Unit resources to explicitly focus on surveillance process for geographic locations of prohibited immigrants. It also entails enforcement, operational plans involving security apparatus to facilitate and feed intelligence to execute operation activities without violating any human rights and also reducing the number of illegal immigrants. As we enforce the law, we have to be mindful of the various rights that we enjoy as citizens and also those that are in our country.

Developing networks and partnerships with local and international law enforcement agencies to encourage effective collaboration and coordinated immigrants. This approach involves leveraging advanced surveillance processes, data analytics, and intelligence-sharing to track and address unauthorised movements efficiently. Collaboration with other law enforcement agencies ensures a coordinated response to potential breaches while fostering transparency and accountability.

This morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the Caucus I asked the honourable Pio Tikoduadua whether we had been too passive in our enforcement, perhaps we should take a more proactive role with our investigators and our police, actually asking people on the street if they look suspicious - excuse, Sir or excuse Ma'am, do you have an ID; excuse me young girl, do you have an ID and find out whether she should be in school or she should be on the street. Those are some of the things we need to tighten up.

Voluntary departure and removal mechanisms – the department is intensifying consultation efforts through stakeholder engagements to facilitate voluntary departures for those seeking to leave the country. This includes fostering open dialogue with community groups, NGOs, and other relevant entities to promote compliance and provide pathways for resolving immigration issues amicably.

Public awareness campaigns – the Department adopts a whole-of-government approach to deliver comprehensive information through coordinated public awareness initiatives. By engaging multiple government agencies and stakeholders, these campaigns aim to educate the public, employers and migrants about immigration laws, workers' rights and the importance of compliance.

Legislative reforms and police updates – the department is undertaking a comprehensive review of the Immigration Act to enhance the independence of the institution and address critical areas such as intelligence gathering, emerging immigration pathways, infringement notices and penalties, removal processes and responses to non-traditional threats.

We also have multi-stakeholder collaboration through the department and other international and local agencies, like Interpol. Those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are some of the measures put in place to try and encounter the rising numbers of illegal immigrants.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope you notice from the Chair, that this tie that I am wearing, sort of, energises me, and I want to fly this morning.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am noticing it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- My simple question to the honourable Prime Minister is, I did not serve in the immigration portfolio but convening boarder agency meetings and national security meetings. One of the key issues, Sir, that is usually related to these illegal immigrants, is the issue of detention centres - a proper detention centre for illegal immigrants. There have been discussions about purchasing a land, and I just want to know if there has been progress on this key issue. You have a responsibility for this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment, there is none, and we have had a recent example, a bad example, of someone who was held up for immigration, non-compliance, being housed with convicted criminals. There is none yet, but it is also something that we must really look into, but better than that would be to just avoid or prevent immigrants staying longer than they should be.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for the answers that he has given to the questions. I am interested in the analysis, if there has been any analysis done to the breakdown or where the illegal immigrants come and in particular the proportion of Pacific Islanders vis-à-vis others from other countries. If there is any information on that generally, and the reasons in particular for Pacific Islanders remaining in country.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe there is a data available, they have been analysed and the main reason for Pacific Islanders overstaying their permit or their allowed time, is kinship, not many are illegally employed, mostly the kinsman will just stay on and on. The Fiji citizens are asking for more sympathetic considerations. The analysis that have been taken, and it is not flattering, it is quite embarrassing if we openly mention the countries of origin. But they will have to be brought out in the right media.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, in light of the fact that 8,000 is almost 1 percent of our population being a substantial number, but I know there is a lot being done at immigration. There are likelihood that we will also be looking at strengthening our immigration laws especially because we have also had quite a huge influx of foreign workers coming into the country, because a lot of ours have actually migrated or gone across to other parts of the world to work. So, would we be looking at strengthening our immigration laws which I certainly feel that we can do? On the other side of the coin, honourable Prime Minister, is there a chance that the Coalition Government may look at an amnesty of sorts to see if we can actually reduce the numbers and those that may genuinely qualify to actually stay in Fiji, Sir.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the former Minister for Immigration just whispered to me that it is already now with the Office of the Solicitor-General being vetted so that we can

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the former Minister for Immigration just whispered to me that it is already now with the Office of the Solicitor-General being vetted so that we can implement those measures.

However, most of those who came in to work, they illegal stamped it because they have changed from the conditions issued to them with their work permit. The work permit could have contained where they were going to be working and for whom, but when they change that, they become illegal immigrants.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is the appropriate time to have recess, so we will now suspend proceedings for our morning break. Parliament will resume in half an hour. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed further I would like if you please join in welcoming the Nalawa Sunday School and Mothers Club from Nalawa, Ra. Thank you for joining us today and indeed welcome to your Parliament.

Benefits to Rural Communities - Tourism Development
(Question No. 308/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on how the Ministry is ensuring that local communities in the rural areas benefit directly from tourism development?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we also say hello to my *tauvu* from Ra. As you all know Nadroga and Ra are very closely related. They generally know that we are superior to them.

I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management for the question. I welcome the opportunity to address this important question, regarding how the Ministry is ensuring that local communities especially those in the rural areas benefit from tourism development.

The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, is deeply committed to promoting inclusive and sustainable tourism growth, guided by the principles outlined in Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework (NSTF) 2024 to 2034. This Framework, Mr. Speaker, Sir, guides us to ensure that tourism development is equitable, community-centric and aligned with Fiji's broader socio-economic goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Strategy is built on four goals:

- (1) Prosperous visitor economy;
- (2) Thriving and inclusive communities;
- (3) Visible and valued cultures; and
- (4) Healthy islands and oceans.

Each goal carries strongly the participation and empowerment of communities in tourism.

Goal 1: Prosperous visitor economy; we want to create laws that suit indigenous-owned businesses and investments. I briefed Parliament over the last few days, Mr. Speaker, about the Summit I had attended in Perth, the World Tourism Travel (WTTC) Summit, and the future of tourism. As projected by WTTC, a significant growth that is expected from indigenous tourism. They believe that without this tourism, we will not achieve what it sets out to do in terms of uplifting the lives of communities across the globe.

Goal 2: Thriving and inclusive communities; encourages initiatives like mentoring and training to ensure indigenous participation.

Goal 3: Visible and value cultures; while we promote our culture and tradition, we want to ensure we will safeguard it.

A significant factor about tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is how it helps revive cultures and traditions. I have shared in this Parliament about the opening of the Muanivatu Trail in Vuadomo Village, in Wailevu, Cakaudrove. That day, they performed ceremonies, some of which were last performed 50 years ago, we were fortunate that there was still an old person there who remembered this particular part of the ceremony. Through the opening of the Muanivatu Trail, the young people of Vuadomo were able to revive their tradition. That is what tourism does, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Goal 4: Healthy islands and oceans; we want no disparity in our fight against climate change and explore nature and traditional knowledge-based solutions. In order to ensure communities and rural areas benefit, promoting inclusiveness over the last two years, we held two major sport events Spartan Fiji and Fiji Pro. In both of these events, we ensure that local communities and rural areas benefit. For example, at the Fiji Pro event, the organisers rebuilt the cloud break surf tower and gifted it to the people of Tabanivono-i-wai of Nadroga as a legacy asset to monetise the use of their surfing reefs. Of course, there was cash contributions made to Nabila and Momi Villages.

Through our Farm to Fork initiative, we are working directly with farmers, fisher folks and the middlemen around the country to strengthen their ability to supply to the tourism industry.

Na Vualiku, Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this week, I spoke about Vanua Levu Tourism Development Framework. This entire programme is centred on empowering a significant part of our country, our second largest island grouping and its people, who right now, only see about 4 percent of visitors in Fiji. On tourism awareness, the Ministry, under the leadership of *Roko Tui Saravanua* is also undertaking community awareness. The team visits communities wanting to venture into tourism and provide them with guidance.

Based on these sessions, we are looking to partner with organisations to deliver training, specific to their needs. On laws, very critical way of ensuring the benefits of tourism, we are setting up laws to ensure that tourism benefits are equitable by creating all the regulations to safeguard that. There are a number of tourism legislations that we are now reviewing to ensure that we have a conducive environment for businesses of all types and sizes to grow. One, is access to funding the resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a cornerstone of this strategy to support rural communities and tourism development lies in ensuring equitable access to financial resources. As I shared earlier in the Parliament, the Ministry's Pilot Tourism Micro and Small Fund empowers individuals and small enterprises in rural areas by providing much needed financial assistance. I announced this about two days ago and the interest it has created has been phenomenal across the country.

This programme enables eligible applicants to secure the resources required to either establish or expand their tourism ventures. It focuses on fostering inclusivity by bridging gaps in accessing capital, especially for those operating in remote regions. By offering targeted support, we are enabling rural communities to create sustainable tourism enterprises that directly benefit the local economies and livelihoods.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is steadfast in its commitments to fostering our tourism sector that uplifts rural communities. By embedding inclusivity, sustainability and resilience into our policies, we are creating pathways for rural Fijians to thrive alongside the growth of Fiji's tourism industry.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have talked about indigenous tourism. Given the resources that our local communities have and the various segments and activities,

forgive me, there are two parts to the question, one is just our local cuisine in the rural areas. Of course, opportunities for activities like, abseiling, mountain climbing, cross country cycling and mountain biking, these are opportunities that can help shape us in bringing the tourists into the local areas. What is the Ministry doing about local cuisine and such activities?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the question from the honourable Leader of Opposition. Indeed, when you talk about food, food is also culture. And this is an area we are developing our tourism. There are a number of renowned chefs who have now produced some publications on the local cuisines which we are supporting. These are a part of the tourism industry which they accept to use in their outlets. It is in their interest because of the cost factor. There is a lot of dialogue on that, and we are seeing many changes. If you go to many eateries now across the country, you will see a high content of local dishes in their outlets, even in the five star resorts, so that is happening.

We also have the Farm to Fork programme, whereby the local farmers are aligned to the local operators, the hoteliers to ensure that they grow their produce on demand. They coordinate what they grow with the chefs, or with the food and beverage people in the hotel. So, in that way, you will see a lot of local produce being featured in the menus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, there is still a lot to do in that area, as I have said food is also culture. On the overall activities, the phenomena or the challenge that we are seeing right now for Fiji is to create more activities for our visitors. As I keep saying, it is not just about staying in the resort now, they want to go out. Indeed, it is something that we need to address because we can become a boring destination if we do not factor this into the equation. It is part of the dialogue now with the leadership in tourism, to create more activities, hiking, mountaineering and all these activities. The support is there, and if anyone wants to start, we are there to help and our development partners are also there to help us develop that. We want them out there in the country and in the communities. As a way forward, we cannot do without it and we are committed to it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Gavoka. I apologise, honourable Koya, but you are out of the periphery of my vision as I look down. I think you may need to have a light cough or something to draw my attention.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. On a lighter note, the honourable Leader of Opposition mentioned “mountain biking” twice and members of the Parliament may not remember, but I think that everyone should be told that he used to be a 100 metres sprinter. Athletics was his game but when he went to COP21, they turned him into a mountain biker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to COVID, this is to do with our rural areas, there was an exploratory market being looked at, and I believe there was some work done on it and this is the student tourism market and it is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. This was and is a great opportunity for connectivity to our rural areas.

When I say, student markets, if I may be permitted to explain a little bit. There are people with a great amount of wealth that wish to send their children to places like Fiji, where they can learn the old way of architecture, the old dances, the old way of doing things. This is where our rural communities could benefit quite substantially from it. This was looking at the Indian market where they spend hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in student tourism. Now, my question to the honourable Minister is, will you be looking at that or try and tap into that source, that our rural communities can engage with them and do extremely well out of it?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a segment we are also factoring into our

tourism offerings. Some villages are already welcoming students regularly from the UK. Indeed, as we speak, we are also talking to operators who are specialised in that, in Australia and New Zealand, to bring in students for that purpose. India is also a possibility.

Yes, it is a segment that we are encouraging and one that is community based driven, and that is the beauty about it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as it helps with the goals to develop community tourism. As highlighted by honourable Koya, these are parents who have done so well, and they are afraid that their children believe that that is the way life is, all the luxuries and all that they have at home, they just want to send them somewhere where they can experience the reality of life. And Fiji, is big in the map, for families like that. So, yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a segment that we know is there, and we are working towards tapping into that segment.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to Standing Order 45(6), Oral Question No. 309/2024 is deemed to have lapsed, so we will now move on to the next question.

(Question No. 309/2024 lapsed)

iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission Review
(Question No. 310/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the status of the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission review?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Vakalalabure for the question. In regard to the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission Review, the team started their review from September with the help of the Strategic Advisory Group, who guided the step during the review. They have already visited 14 Provinces, doing their consultations. They have also consulted some focus groups on their discussions and they also did virtual meetings, that included diaspora from overseas. Currently, they have also updated the GCC on its last meeting, and they are compiling their report now. On the 20th, they will discuss their report with the Strategic Advisory Group before they hand over their report to the Ministry.

Frequent Traffic Congestion - Suva-Nausori Corridor
(Question No. 311/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on how the Ministry will address the frequent traffic congestion in the Suva-Nausori corridor?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Shalen Kumar for the question. In line with Government's commitment to improving access to socio-economic opportunities, the Fiji Roads Authority's (FRA) is actively working towards addressing the frequent traffic congestion. This is part of the broader medium to long-term infrastructure development plan that aligns with the objective set out in the FRA's strategic plan.

With the continued growth in urban development and increasing number of vehicles on our roads, we do recognise the urgent need to find sustainable solutions to this congestion. As a result, in line with Government's vision we are working towards forward planning to implement a four-lane

widening of Ratu Dovi Road from Nadera to Laqere, Fletcher Road from Nanuku to Laucala Bay Road and Princess Road from Khalsa Road to Samabula. These are vital corridors that once upgraded will significantly reduce traffic congestion.

Sir, the Ministry is also currently working on the review of our transport system where assistance has been secured from the Government of New Zealand to develop the Transport Master Plan and Decarbonisation Implementation Strategy. In terms of reference, include a roadmap to deliver the final goal of the transport sector, provide a flexible and achievable guide for future planning and development and outline long-term growth and development for the transport sector. Including in that, as I mentioned, decarbonisation implementation strategy assessing Fiji's current transport emission, identifying areas for improvement and setting clear and achievable targets.

Sir, the master plan will also identify traffic congestion issues and come up with short and long-term solutions to address these problems. One of the pressings issues that we are facing is the supply of new and second vehicles, increasing supply of new and second-hand vehicles and number on our roads which put pressure on our road infrastructure. This plan will also identify the right quota in terms of number of vehicles on our roads. As most of you will agree, there seems to be a lot of vehicles on our roads as compared to the current capacity of our roads.

Sir, LTA is also actively currently actively working on a range of targeted initiatives to address the persistent traffic congestion including promoting public transport, review of public transport networks, also development of a sustainable urban mobility plan. A service targeted measure supported by strategic partnership and technical expertise reflects the Government's commitment to mitigating traffic congestion in the Suva-Nausori corridor. The aim is to create a modern, sustainable and efficient network modalities for all Fijians.

In addition, FRA and PWD are also exploring existing reserves for the construction of roads within this corridor. This includes the Suva-Nausori Regional Road. This is alternative road to King's Road and Princess Road. Their priority is to explore these link roads to the populated Nasinu corridor, residential and commercial areas to ease the movement of traffic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PWD is now cutting the Wainibuku to Princess Road, and from looking into the Davuilevu Housing to connect to that Wainibuku to Princess Road and also looking into the Koronivia/Naulu. It is also planning and designing the four-lane widening of the King's Road, from Tamavua-i-Wai Bridge as you see, that old bridge is being demolished, JICA has approved the new bridge which will make it a four-lane and that will be expanded towards Lami.

Sir, the FRA Strategic Plan prioritises the introduction of regular National Traffic Coms and Surveys. This will assist in having the research and data to assist us in forward planning. If you go to a lot of cities in Australia, for example, Brisbane and Sydney, there are about ten ways to get into the city and that is what we are working towards in terms of the various routes as already mentioned.

As I have already mentioned these includes the Coastal Road, in addition to what I have mentioned, Koronivia Roundabout to Nokonoko and Davuilevu/Khalsa Road link, Koronivia Roundabout to Adi Davila Road, Caubati Link Road, Nabua Bypass Link, Namadi-Vunakece Link, Valelevu Link, Princess Road to Tamavua-i-Wai Road, Wairua Road to Tamavua-i-Wai Bridge, Cement Factory Lami Link Road, Novotel Access Link Road, Wailoku to Delainavesi.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Minister for his answers. He has mentioned the Princess Road and I do remember during our days when we were in government, there was no road hump in Tamavua and a traffic light and speed camera was there. I have seen a traffic

hump there and because of that, you will find the movement of traffic has increased by half an hour. I am a frequent user of that road. Why would he change from the latest technology to the old one?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is a good question. There were a few incidents there including the death of a child, I think. So that was done in liaison with the Tamavua Village community in terms of their specific needs. We will still review that and also in consultation with them in terms of what you had mentioned. You are correct, I believe there would be traffic speed cameras but as you know sometimes speed cameras do not deter speeding vehicles these days, so we might make a double jeopardy there to stop people. I take what you have brought up and we will continue to assess the situation.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, another supplementary question to the answer the honourable Minister has given. A simple solution, can take away the hump from there and re-adjust the traffic camera by 30 and that will be income generating too.

Also, Mr. Speaker, he mentioned of ten ways of getting to towns and cities in Sydney, but going to Nadi Airport, there are only two ways. It takes an hour to cross from one end of Nadi to the other. Why would you have changed from one way to two ways now?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Nath, you could easily have rephrased your statement into a question by just adding “can you do this and that” and that would have matched the requirement of the question. I think the honourable Minister has taken the essence of your question on board.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It is a breach of Standing Order 2, it is a new question. So, can you put that again to the Business Committee because that is to do with Nadi? Nadi is quite a complex area

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about tourism. Nadi Airport is an international airport.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Nath, the question is specific on the Suva-Nausori corridor, there is no other question for any part of the road in Fiji except for the Suva-Nausori corridor, so I will rule your question out of order.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, one of the methodologies used around the world to gather proper traffic information, for cameras and for the LTA to keep track of weight, et cetera, is the use of gantries. In terms of getting traffic flow and the police getting the right information, LTA, et cetera, would you be looking at the use of gantries all across, right through from Nausori to Suva, bearing in mind that we have a 300,000-plus population and you cannot stop people from buying vehicles, that is just a sign of prosperity. Are we looking at that as a new form of keeping track of traffic and controlling?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Definitely, we are looking at that and other means of monitoring and assessing and also formulating the appropriate responses moving forward and strategies.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his very good detailed response. Honourable Minister, you aware of the previous government’s initiative of having a shuttle service from Nakasi so that people who are living in Valelevu if they have to go to Princess Road through the shuttle service they could go, rather than catching a bus from Valelevu, going to

the Suva bus stand, then changing a bus and travelling down because that creates congestion. Honourable Minister, is that plan still there or the plan has been scrapped?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, that is also linked with the decarbonization of public transport. That project is still there and we also continue to discuss that with Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) as the facilitator in terms of funding for that, and all the ones as you mentioned that had been initiated from the previous government, it would be a pilot project in terms of electric buses which would cover that area. It is still there, and we are progressing with it.

Fiji Critical Bridges Resilience Project
(Question No. 312/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Fiji Critical Bridges Resilience Project?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for his question. This Critical Bridges Resilience Project is a major capital project which includes the replacement of four critical bridges - Lami Bridge at Suvavou, Medraukutu Bridge at Lami Cement Factory, Sabeto Bridge at Sabeto River and Viseisei Bridge between Nadi and Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project is co-financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank and there are four key components which include:

- (1) replacement of the four critical bridges with new resilience bridges;
- (2) capacity enhancement of the Fiji Roads Authority;
- (3) identification and preparation of climate resilient solutions;
- (4) implementation of a gender policy and action plan for FRA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these four bridges are critical public assets as it connects our cities and towns along the Queen's Highway. It will improve domestic connectivity and ensure that the new bridges are climate and disaster resilient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is in light of the vulnerabilities induced by climate change, the bridge replacements are being designed to not only provide increased capacity but also designed to withstand climatic events and natural disasters and the new designs can include dedicated pedestrian pathways, thereby ensuring safety.

With the support of the ADB and the World Bank, a lot of preparatory works had already been undertaken and I want to thank the Fiji Roads Authority and the Acting CEO for being part of the preparatory works. The project is actually ready for implementation from first half of next year which will obviously create jobs and providing a major impetus for investment and economic activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total financing for the project is close to US\$200 million or approximately FJ\$458 million, US\$134.5 million or FJ\$307 million from ADB. Of this, US\$120 million, which is approximately FJ\$274.5 million, is concessional financing and US\$14.5 million, approximately FJ\$33.2 million, is full grant. Sir, US\$50 million is being provided by the World Bank which includes US\$25 million in concessional financing and US\$25 million which will be accessed

at normal market terms. Government financing of around US\$15 million, which is closed to about \$30 million, which includes tax duty exemption, land acquisition amongst other things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight that the overall financing package is highly concessional with a grant element of over 50 percent. While we have a direct grant component of around FJ\$33 million from ADB, the huge concessionality of the loan from ADB, 40-year term inclusive of 10-year grace period and 1 percent interest rate and World Bank International Development Association (IDA) access, if to the grant element in its present value terms. I want to take this opportunity to thank the ADB and the World Bank for their continuous support towards financing Fiji's development over the last many years and providing this cheaper source and increasingly building grant components into these climate resilient infrastructure projects.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ADB now has proclaimed itself as a climate bank and the World Bank is also focussing on climate financing, and with the operationalisation of the loss and damage fund which will be administered by the World Bank, the World Bank is going to be the financial intermediary. We, Small Island States, in particular are expected to benefit particularly the grant component from the World Bank and ADB.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project also aligns with the National Development Plan 2025 to 2029 which places emphasis on connectivity and accessibility and more importantly getting the basics right which means investment in bridges, roads, water supply, et cetera, is going to meet the basic needs of our people.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my simple question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, is this part of the current financial year's commitments as we have already endorsed in this Parliament or is this is going to be for the next financial year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are elements as part of the preparatory works. As I said, a lot of the preparatory works had already been done. The Government component, Sir, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition would know would include that, but as I said, the project is expected to be implemented in the second half of next year which means that the additional component of the project will be part of the 2025-2026 budget.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. I am glad to see that the funding is coming through. During our time we built or repaired 80 bridges, so a lot of work for the current Minister to be able to do that and I thank ADB for what they are doing. As you can see now, with the kind of money that you are talking about, US\$200 million for the four bridges. That is the kind of cost that we incurred to make bridges resilient in this type of environment that we face and that will become worse in the future.

In terms of crossings, is there also a focus on getting funding for critical crossings? Because a lot of people in the rural areas are focused on those crossings like the one the honourable Joseph Nand talked about the other day, the crossings in the rural areas. Is there a focus also on those for the rural areas and is there concessional funding and grant elements to deal with those areas?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is a very good question. As I said, as part of the National Development Plan and as part of the implementation plan is being worked out in consultation with the different Ministries, we are hoping that we can put together bankable projects so that we are project-ready to be able to access some of these funding, particularly the Loss and Damage Fund and the other most important fund is the Pacific Resilience Fund which, as I have said the other day in my Statement, that Australia and New Zealand have already contributed to the Pacific Resilience Fund, and we are looking at a total of about \$250 million by the end of this year.

The Finance Ministers are meeting in March to set out the legal and financial framework, and we are hoping that funding would be available close to end of 2025 or early 2026. A lot of those funding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would be localised financing and we are hoping that not only seawalls. For example, we have identified about sea walls, we have identified about 40 communities, and we are identifying crossings, as you have said quite rightly, which is going to be necessary as a result of constant impact of climate change, flooding, excessive rain, et cetera.

I think that is a very important aspect that we are focused on and hopefully, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2025, especially when the Loss and Damage Fund is operationalised, honourable Leader of the Opposition. The decision at COP had been made to operationalise, the Board has been formed, the World Bank has already prepared itself as a financial intermediary, and I think Fiji is in a very strong position with ADB and the World Bank, in accessing some of those finances, particularly the grant component that should come to Fiji and many of the other Pacific Island countries.

Irregular Bus Services - Viseisei, Vuda and Vaivai
(Question No. 313/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament as to the reasons why bus services to Viseisei, Vuda, and Vaivai operate irregularly, despite concerns raised by the residents?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this area has a population of around 500 residents. There is an approved service timetable for Vuda and Vaivai, and licensed carrier operating from Vuda. Unfortunately, the irregular bus services can be attributed to road conditions, and we are looking into that.

There is an Irish Crossing and the rise near that which needs major cuts in terms of access, especially for large vehicles. The other issue is the issuance of route authority letters. This is normally issued by municipal councils which limits the scope of services to be extended.

We are looking at licensed carriers in order to assist with that, I suppose, given the number of passengers at the moment, whom from the bus operators' view, cannot sustain the bus operations. So, in consultation with the communities, we are looking at licensed carriers which can operate more adaptable vehicles for these communities, and also the municipal council regarding the issues with the route licences and working closely with FRA in terms of the upgrade of that road.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask my question, I just wish to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Apisai Ketenalagi. I saw in the news that he has recently been appointed as Acting CEO of FRA. It is not an easy job but probably he will need the support of all of us here in his role as Acting CEO.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, road conditions is under the Works and Rural Development but the transportation is under LTA which is a regulated industry. If the bus has to be there at 7 o'clock, it must be there at 7 o'clock. This issue was brought to us in Delaisaweni, I was in that meeting, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My question to the honourable Minister, how can LTA ensure that the services that the people require are provided as mandated?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes back to the conditions of issuance of licences and they are required to provide the services. It is something that I will need to follow-up with LTA in terms of the compliance with the conditions of those licences.

Yes, I admit that some have not adhered or have not provided the services as required. That is something that we need to monitor and ensure that those who are issued the relevant public service licence carry out their services.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, irregular bus services is mostly because of poor road conditions, as agreed by the honourable Minister also. It is also not only in those areas that I have mentioned but other rural areas also. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament as to why periodic road maintenance works are not done on rural roads?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for the question. When I heard that question, it is sort of a generalised question, but for that road, definitely we are looking into that and I will be following up with the FRA Regional Manager West.

I admit, sometimes as a Minister, we have to come down hard on the people at operational level. That is something which is an ongoing challenge, especially, the monitoring, because some things are obvious, but it has been left there for some time. So, that is something that I am addressing within the Ministry and with the operational entities - WAF, FRA, LTA and also MSAF.

I do not know but maybe, it is something to do with the attitude or culture, but it is an ongoing process - monitoring and action. The other part is the Programme Maintenance in terms of not only roads but also building, et cetera. So, that whole culture of planning, programming and budgeting needs to come together.

As a Coalition Government, that is something we are taking seriously. We have been here for two years, but we are moving towards that. I am sure that after we win the elections, everything will be perfect.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister; all governments do all those things that we need to do to provide for people. But what I am interested in, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things that the honourable Minister has pointed out is the condition of the roads, especially in the rural areas. I am just wondering to my mind that we have around 4,000 kilometres of gravel roads and the cost of maintenance is quite high.

Would there be then a long term plan or mid-term plan by the Government to have say, half of these roads tarsealed, or at least the worst parts, traction sealed, that is, you seal the hills to make sure that the buses can go, so that we can address this because at the end of the day, the major problem is the condition of the roads. Would there be some sort of a target to say, half of our gravel roads, tarseal them over a period of time, and that will address that particular situation, at least, to a large extent? Is that something that the honourable Minister is considering?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is a very valid question. I am not an engineer or anything, but the focus is on the maintenance but we need to move a step up – new roads and tarsealed roads.

So, in the formulation of the FRA Strategic Plan which has just been approved, the KPI included there is the number of new or tarsealed roads, extending the number of tarsealed roads. So, that is definitely part of what is currently being done. and moving forward.

The tarsealing of roads, some are happening right now, for example, we have budgeted for the tarsealing of the frontage of villages and public facilities, like health centres and schools. So, that is currently happening now, and more will be done in the second half of the year. The honourable

Minister for Finance has also indicated that he will be providing more, in addition to climate financing, to continue to expand that, in addition to the new roads.

Public Rental Board Lagilagi Housing Estate
(Question No. 314/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on plans for further expansion of the Public Rental Board Lagilagi Housing Estate in addressing housing needs of low-income families, following the opening of its 36 housing flats?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I deliver the response to the question, I just want to give a short brief of the Lagilagi Housing Project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was a project that started way back in 2009 by the previous Government, in conjunction with the Pacific Community Network Charitable Trust, commonly known as PCN, together with the German Catholic Organisation. So far, the Government has contributed an investment of close to \$16 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of the project was for PCN to assist in the construction of low-cost units to provide accommodation to those low-income earners who reside within Jittu Estate informal settlement. When that project started, 117 units were completed, and 36 units were constructed but were incomplete. So, on 17th January, 2024, Cabinet approved for the Public Rental Board (PRB) to manage and also complete the incomplete 36 units at Lagilagi Housing Estate. I am pleased to inform the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the 36 incomplete units was completed by the PRB with a budget of close to \$3 million, but they managed to complete within the cost of \$1.6 million and is the units are about to be opened soon.

I am also thankful to the Ministry of Youth and Sports for coming on board and assisting the Ministry, as well as the PRB, in providing recreational space for those residents who are going to occupy those additional 36 units, as well as the existing 117 families who are currently residing at the Lagilagi Housing Estate. If you happen to drive through that road, you will see that PRB is still constructing the gabion wall, just to retain the side that is fronting the main road, as well as the side of the multipurpose court.

If you look at the area itself, close to 160 are on that side of Lagilagi Housing, that is, leaving aside close to another 1,400 families who are residing on the other side of Jittu Estate. The challenge for the Ministry, as well as for the Board, is to construct additional units on the space that is currently available. So, the PRB has come on board, and they were thinking of constructing two-bedroom units but due to space, they are going to only provide a few units. So, we requested them to redesign the model so, at least, we can accommodate more families to occupy those flats. So, that is phase 2 of what PRB is going to do whilst the 36 families will be given their offer for them to actually occupy 36 units that have been completed.

There is also another space in that area, but we are still liaising with the Ministry of Lands to also try and transfer that parcel of land to the PRB so that they can construct some more units at the completion of the 36 units. The idea here is to move those people who are currently residing in Jittu. What we have noted is that, in the phase 2, those who were given the flats are those who are not residing at Jittu.

There are some families that are there, who have been paying the charitable trust with the PCN, and now we have changed their consent, we are going to only include those residents who live within Jittu. The reason is that we just want to get people out of that situation, so once we start absorbing those people from Jittu, then PRB can expand further and build some more blocks to accommodate those who are living there, as well as those on the other side of Jittu Estate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is just the progress and update of what the Ministry is doing, as well as what the PRB has done as far as the completion of the 36 units and also plans that we have in mind to assist those other families who reside there, especially low income families.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, through you, honourable Minister, I know that I have brought this to your attention outside Parliament when a few people came to see us. As you are aware, honourable Minister, and I think for transparency sake and for the benefit and satisfaction of those who were aggrieved, (I know the investigations) can you, please, give some assurance on what will happen to those who were aggrieved and what actions are you also taking to address it and, of course, for the future of the aggrieved parties as well because of the unfortunate incident that happened from those who were handling this project?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the unfortunate part about this project was that there were some genuine families who were looking for affordable shelter who came on board and also joined the PCN with the hope that they will be given a flat or shelter. What has happened is that those that have actually not been given, there are systems in place, it is like a co-operative system where they go, register and start paying their subscriptions. Some go towards education. They were told, if you want to pay something, you have to mention whether its towards education, accommodation or shelter.

The unfortunate part is when they were given a refund, when the impasse happened, that is, most of the families encountered with PCN, the Ministry had gone ahead to refund the money to those who had receipts with either shelter or accommodation. However, there were others who paid for education. What we have done is, if the receipts are from PCN, we have also started processing those that have paid for other means. That was also part of the preparation in the last as well as this current financial year.

There were those that were still receiving who were there and we have also received some enquiries on how they could be, especially those who live within Jittu Estate. The focus now is for those who live within Jittu Estate. I think this defeats the purpose of getting some people outside Jittu and not living in informal settlements but living in other formal settlements. That is something that we are also taking on board. Sir, PRB is also in the process, we have done a social survey on those existing tenants that have been offered flats by PCN. They had told the board and also the Ministry that they had paid this much with a copy of their receipts, but these were the ones who were not considered by PCN but were starting to get subscriptions and memberships from those who live within the settlement. That is something that the Ministry, together with PRB, will also do for further reviews to assist those who were affected by PCN.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is that the Special Investigations Report also revealed that there were people who were not meant to be in those flats were there. A foreign person is owning a flat, a 10-year old child is owning a flat and it was all thanks to PCN, the way they were involved and it was their project. Will you be taking any action against those cases because the report has been out from 2020? Because of COVID, et cetera, we could not proceed with that, and of course, it was referred to FICAC. So, FICAC was undertaking the investigation to further confirm those cases.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue raised by the former Minister is a factual one because there are families living there who are not supposed to be living there. That was the arrangement done by the organisation but something that the Ministry will pursue further and that is something that we are going to do after we have completed, given the offer for those 36 families who will be occupying the newly completed three blocks.

MR. SPEAKER.- We have exhausted our list of Oral Questions for today. There are two Written Questions that have been tabled.

Written Questions

Breakdown of National Revenue – 2019 to 2024 (Question No. 315/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics provide the breakdown of revenue generated for the following in each of the years from 2019 to 2024 –

- (a) Import duty;
- (b) VAT on imports; and
- (c) VAT refunds for resale of imports?

HON. PROF. B.C PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had the answers to the question. These answers are publicly available, but we have done the research for honourable Usamate and I am¹ pleased to give him the answers.

Official Overseas Trips by Special Administrators (Question No. 316/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on the details of official overseas trips taken by the Special Administrators from January 2023 to November 2024, specifically -

- (a) a year-wise breakdown of the total number of overseas trips undertaken by the Special Administrators in each Municipality;
- (b) the amount funded by each Council; and
- (c) the purpose and accomplishments of each trip?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the response to the question and I am² tabling it now.

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 315/2024 tabled by the honourable Deputy Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.

² Reply to Written Question No. 316/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure II.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have allowed for the reshuffling of the order for the four Statements today, as follows:

- (1) Honourable P.K. Bala;
- (2) Honourable Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
- (3) Honourable Assistant Minister for Defence; and
- (4) Honourable V. Naupoto.

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

Regularisation of Informal Settlements

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for your understanding on the matter, and also to my colleague, honourable Naupoto. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise today to speak on a critical need to regularise informal settlements, a challenge that has profound implications for our nation's social and economic development, security and human dignity. Housing is a fundamental human right and as leaders, we are compelled to ensure that every Fijian has access to safe, secure and affordable housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the urgency of addressing informal settlements is underscored by the scale of the issues. According to estimates, over 200,000 Fijians, roughly 20 percent of our population, live in informal settlements. These communities are open, overcrowded, lack access to clean water, reliable sanitation and basic utilities, and are exposed to high risk of flooding and environmental issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this insecure living environment contributes significantly to poverty levels, which remain at 29.9 percent nationally. With urban poverty, since its rising, informal settlements are also linked to increased rates of crime, drug abuse and social violence. In recent years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, incidences of domestic violence and abuse against women and children have escalated within these communities fuelled by stress, insecurity and lack of basic requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not merely a housing issue, it is a national development issue. Informal settlements presents an opportunity to rethink our housing plans and implement innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions that improve lives and contribute to long term social and economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the journey towards regularising informal settlements is long and full of challenges. Initiatives like the 2014 MOU between the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board and the Ministry of Local Government, and again renewed in 2019 with the Ministry of Housing, were intended to facilitate development leases, providing 99-year leases and upgrading the settlements with crucial infrastructure.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, progress has been a bit slow. I remember there were 38 development leases issued to the Ministry at that point in time and I believe it has gone up to 40-plus. Many development leases have not been renewed and that leaves the tenants in legal limbo. Funding allocation for infrastructure upgrades are not fully utilised and results on the ground do not reflect the reported progress. Moreover, rising rental costs in some settlements add to hardship for tenants

and unresolved disputes between landowners and tenants under the *vakavanua* system which continues and creates more instability. Sir, in recent weeks and months, we have been meeting the tenants in some of the informal settlements and this is where all these things have come up. That is why I thought that I will raise this in this House for the Minister responsible to look into.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had mentioned earlier on, that after the consultations with the landowning units, development leases were issued after the payment of fare premium for each development lease to the landowning units. The Government allocated funds to carry out the land subdivision with basic infrastructure like sewerage, water, electricity, roads, driveways, footpaths and kerbs and channels. The good thing about this partnership was that the Government will spend funding to develop the landowners' land and because of that, the landowners will benefit more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the country's top valuer is sitting next to me and he will understand when lands are subdivided to according to the standard, definitely the landlords will benefit. This was the understanding at that point in time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also had various housing initiatives, like first home buyers grant, town wide informal settlement upgrade programme, squatter settlement upgrade programme, city wide informal settlement upgrade programme, sustainable housing and income generation programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to ask the honourable Minister if he could update us on all of these programmes that I have just mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was also noted, that many *iTaukei* landowners tend to earn more if they lease their land for residential purposes rather than giving it out under the traditional *vakavanua* way. The *vakavanua* system is really a messy affair, Sir, and tenants are usually at the mercy of the landowners. These are usually desperate and landless people who have no choice but to accept whatever conditions they are given.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to ask the honourable Minister, what is the level of work being done in the informal settlements with active developments in terms of survey plans, topography, survey approvals, approved schemes, EIA, geo-tech, engineering plans, tender stages and the awaiting of contracts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another concern raised by the tenants is whether they will have to pay for the development, and if so, what percentage of the development cost will they need to pay. These are some things coming from the tenants, and I think it is high time we should at least give some hope to these poor Fijians.

The Government's failure to renew expired development leases is a serious issue. I have already raised in this House a case in Ba where the development lease has not been renewed. Tenants have paid iTLTB the premium without having any infrastructure development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite assurance by the honourable Minister for Finance through the tenants that there will be a solution to this matter, the tenants are still waiting, waiting and waiting and have heard nothing from the Government.

The way forward requires a comprehensive approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address the informal settlement. The Government should work closely with the civil society, landowners and the private sector to generate an innovative housing solution, that not only provides shelter but also creates further sustainable communities. Immediate policy action fast track the renewal of expired development lease to provide tenants with security, implement transparent process to allocate 99 years of lease and conduct audit to determine the status of the infrastructure project in settlements to ensure timely completion. In the 2024-2025 Budget, around \$10 million was allocated for the

informal settlement upgrade.

The question is, how much of this allocation had been utilised and what measurable outcomes had been achieved. In August, the honourable Minister gave a statement that three developments namely Cuvu, Ledrusasa and Waidamudamu had been completed. We would like to know, Mr. Speaker Sir, and the tenants also want to know when the proper 99-year lease will be issued. This is bigger than politics, it demands a united effort to fulfil our shared responsibility, to provide dignified housing for all Fijians.

Let us take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to turn a crisis into a programme and ensure that no Fijian is left behind. We started this week by congratulating you on your appointment, and today as we are on the verge of finishing this session as this is the last sitting of this year. I take this opportunity to wish you, Sir, a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Likewise, I would also like to wish all the honourable Members a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I give the floor to the Minister responsible, given the hour, we will proceed to the necessary suspension motion. For the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, 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 12.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, we have Schedule 3 with Statements 1, 2 and 4 to be completed.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government to deliver his response.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide my response to the Statement that was presented by honourable Bala and I thank him for bringing this issue to this august House because it is an important issue because it affects economic development and our economic growth. I was expecting honourable Bala to provide to Parliament some of the informal settlements that he

has completed. However, he gave us some ideas, even some complaints and some of the leases that have expired and have not been renewed to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 48 development leases were acquired by the previous Government. There was no proper planning done on how they were going to formalise these settlements. So, far only three have been completed to-date.

I remember during the launching of the Waidamudamu Informal Settlement Upgrade, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that was in 2015. Now, that project is completed. He asked as to when we are going to offer the leases, that is something that we are arranging with iTLTB, making sure that we have all the conditions by iTLTB before we can start giving out the leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have done before we get the leases for all these settlements, we are also going to follow the process on how the allocation will be done. The Cabinet has approved the new allocation policy for those settlers who reside in these informal settlements on how they are going to get their land.

I want to remind honourable Bala about one of his promises in 2015. He said that the development of Cuvu Informal Settlement should be completed by the year 2016. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has completed the evaluation of all the tenders from these settlements and is also in the process of allocating the lots to these informal settlements.

HON. P.K. BALA.- God is watching!

(Laughter)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, informal settlement is not really a simple task, it is really a difficult challenge which should be a community effort. It is not only by the Government but NGOs should be involved and also the landlords on which these informal settlements are located.

With the current Government, I have already said that there is a 12-year plan, with the support of the Ministry of Finance, if you are going to work on four projects in a year, you should be able to complete all these 48 informal settlements. You should be able to formalise them in the 12-year period, so this is the type of planning that we have. When you acquire a lease, you must make sure that you tell the people when you are going to start the project and when you are going to complete the project, something that was missed out when these announcements were made in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to mention about the expired land leases. It comes back to planning, Sir. The land that he mentioned in Ba, a proper planning was done, and that development should have been completed by now. The issue is that because there was no plan in place, that is why the development lease had expired, and the Ministry is faced with a mammoth task. Now, the landowners are coming up with more demands, so we are having some difficulty in re-negotiating with iTLTB to renew these development leases.

(Honourable P.K. Bala interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Government is working very, very hard to ensure that we are going to complete whatever targets that we have decided and also agreed to complete while formalising these settlements. We are not a government that just tell the people,

“We want to do this, we are going to acquire leases, we are going to just put red paint to number the houses that they have been suggesting in these informal settlements.

We are hopeful, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that with support of the Ministry of Finance, as well as the funding from other development partners, we will be able to come up with a solution that is going to, not only resolve issues with informal settlements now, but also going to resolve issues of informal settlements in the future.

Role of Society in Addressing HIV in Fiji

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august House to deliver an End of Week Statement, highlighting the role of society in addressing the critical issue of HIV in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the HIV epidemic poses a significant health challenge globally, especially in the Pacific region, with Fiji experiencing a concerning trend in new infections and existing vulnerabilities.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services has recorded a staggering 552 new cases of HIV, just from January to June 2024, a figure that highlights the urgent need for collective actions. Cases were identified across the four Divisions with the Central Division shockingly recording 380 cases, followed by the Western Division with 151 cases, Northern Division with 19 cases and the Eastern Division with two cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while sexual transmission continues to be a primary mode of HIV transmission in Fiji, it is important to note that 85 of the 552 cases (15 percent), were transmitted through injectable drug use, with individuals voluntarily identifying themselves as such. This relatively new factor in our national data is an indication of evolving social challenges, such as drug use and risky behaviour, that require our attention and a concerted effort to curb.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to understand the scale of the challenge we are facing. The 552 cases recorded in the first half of 2024, already reflect a 33 percent increase, compared to the total cases reported in 2023. However, it is crucial that we do not view this increase as a failure. Instead, it is a direct result of the Ministry’s efforts to ramp up testing and early treatment, which is a key component in HIV management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for implementing new strategies to improve national testing, enrolment into the care of HIV positive individuals, and public health communications to reduce stigma and raise awareness. Further increases are anticipated as testing expands nationwide.

According to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the current figures show that our younger individuals, particularly those under 39 years of age, account for 73 percent of the new cases which underlines the need to target our messaging and services to the younger demographic, as they are among the most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of injectable drug use is a growing concern in our fight against HIV. Out of the 552 cases reported, 85 have been linked to drug use through injections, representing 15 percent of all new cases in 2024. This emerging trend poses an additional layer of complexity in managing the HIV epidemic, as it introduces risk behaviours that go beyond sexual transmission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the practice of sharing needles and participating in high-risk activities, such as chemsex and bluetoothing (a dangerous practice where drugs are injected and shared between individuals using the same needle), has contributed to the rise in cases. It is important to highlight that addressing this issue requires a broader societal response that includes addressing drug addiction, providing harm-reduction services and offering education on safer practices to at-risk populations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, current statistics show that a significant portion of the newly diagnosed HIV cases in 2024 is from individuals between the ages 15 to 29. These numbers tell us that HIV is disproportionately affecting the younger population, many of whom may be engaging in unsafe sexual practices or using injectable drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a society, we must take responsibility for educating our young people. The information they receive about HIV prevention, safe sex and the dangers of drug use will shape their behaviour. Parents, schools, religious leaders and community groups must work together to ensure that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to make safer choices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rising HIV infections in Fiji signals a broader regional health crisis. In other words, this means that the fight against HIV cannot be left to the Government alone. Every Fijian has a role to play in addressing this critical issue. Community support is essential to providing care for those living with HIV and preventing the spread of the virus.

In addressing the increasing cases of HIV through injectable drug use, we must be proactive in tackling the root causes of drug addiction and providing harm-reduction services. Society must support initiatives such as rehabilitation services and community outreach to at-risk populations. We cannot turn a blind eye to the dangers posed by drug use in our communities, and it is now a major contributing factor to the spread of HIV.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am a firm believer that some of these societal ills all point back to our homes. I urge parents and heads of households to be diligent in your roles and responsibilities, having constant and honest conversations with your children and family members, having quality family times and being attentive to children's needs and behaviours are very crucial.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate the statement by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services that HIV is not a death sentence. With medical advancements available today, people living with HIV can live long, healthy and productive lives. The key is early diagnosis and timely access to treatment. We must do everything in our power to encourage individuals to get tested and if necessary, to seek treatment without delay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has confirmed that we have recorded 13 deaths from HIV-related illnesses so far this year, a sobering statistics that reminds us that while treatment is available, not everyone is accessing it in time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the biggest challenges we face in addressing the HIV is the stigma associated with the virus. Many people are still afraid to present themselves for testing because of the fear of being judged by their families and communities. This is where society must step in, and its role is critical. We must create a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable, seeking help and accessing services without fear of being discriminated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must challenge the myths and misconceptions surrounding HIV, including the outdated belief that it is a death sentence. However, public health campaigns, media

and community leaders have a responsibility to spread accurate information and promote compassion for those affected by HIV.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we move forward together, we must all take responsibility for the role we play in addressing the rising number of HIV cases in Fiji. The Government will continue to provide all the necessary services, but we need the support of every segment of society to effectively tackle this issue.

I urge all Fijians to get tested and know their status. I call upon parents, teachers and community leaders to educate our young people about the dangers of unsafe sex and drug use. I ask all of us to treat those living with HIV with the dignity and respect they each deserve, and to help reduce the stigma that prevents so many from seeking the necessary help they need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have withstood many challenges together, and I am still of the firm belief that together, we can turn the tide on HIV in Fiji. It only requires our collective effort, one that involves individuals, families, communities, healthcare professionals, policymakers and faith-based organisations and Civil Society Organisations. I urge all of us to work towards a future where HIV is no longer a threat to our society, and where those living with the virus can lead full healthy lives without fear or discrimination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government remains committed to improving our healthcare access, increase testing and provide life-saving treatment to all Fijians. However, success will depend on the active involvement of society in raising awareness, promoting safe practices and supporting those affected by HIV.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond and support the Statement delivered by the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, highlighting the role of society in addressing the increasing number of HIV cases in Fiji.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the healthcare workers, partners and stakeholders, who are commemorating World Aids Day with the theme 'Take the Rights Path' in Nadi today and helping to raise more awareness and build greater understanding in our communities of this major health threat that is facing us all. The chief celebrant is our former President, as well as former Speaker of this august Parliament, His Excellency Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, a fearless advocate and global ambassador for HIV.

At the celebration in Nadi today, 23-year-old Mark Shahil Khan has come out, for the first time, to share his challenges as a HIV positive patient, giving courage and hope to many. I admire Mark's courage, and I wish many more will come out and share their stories so that we can work together to educate our community and help each other to subdue HIV in Fiji. Although I am present here in Parliament today, my voice and spirit echo with them in solidarity and a shared purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is confronting an alarming and unprecedented surge in HIV cases. From January to June of 2024 alone, Fiji recorded 552 new HIV cases, an overwhelming indicator of the epidemic's growth.

The Ministry has reported at many forums and media platforms, including my response to an Oral Question in Parliament in October 2024, on the sharp rise in the number of new HIV cases since 2021. The Ministry will continue to highlight this at every opportunity it gets. The UNAIDS Global AIDS Monitoring Report 2022 noted that in 2010, the estimated number of new infections in Fiji has risen by 260 percent, the second fastest growing epidemic in the Asia Pacific region. Many

individuals are presenting to healthcare facilities with an advanced HIV related infections, and the rise in the number of new cases is also linked to the increasing in testing conducted in our health facilities.

My fear is that we are still missing a large group of untested people in our community. Last year, UNAIDS estimated a population of 2,000 people who were living with HIV in Fiji and this is believed to be under reported. Of this, only 1,049 people are on treatment while the remaining 951 remain undiagnosed or lost to follow up. Untreated HIV is not only life threatening, but a key driver of community transmission.

In this regard, the Ministry has engaged the assistance of our partners and international technical experts to conduct an assessment of the current number of HIV cases in the country. This report will be crucial in qualifying the magnitude of our response to HIV challenges before us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, staggering 82 AIDS related deaths were recorded in 2023 and this figure is expected to rise. This is an unacceptable loss of life. The Ministry is gravely concerned about untreated HIV cases and the delay in accessing care. Many of the undiagnosed or untreated cases involve youths who engage in risky activity behaviours, including intravenous drug use, chem-sex, further complicated our response for HIV in Fiji. It is essential to reiterate that HIV is not a death sentence. It is a treatable condition with a proper care. People living with HIV can live long, healthy lives. This is the message that we must never stop sharing with anyone and everyone.

E sega ni kena i balebale, ni sa tauvi iko ga na HIV, iko sa na mate sara. E rawa ni ko bulabula vinaka tikoga ka qarava vakavinaka tiko na nomu vuli, cakacaka, se i tavi e vale. Esa tiko ena noda vei valenibula e Viti na vuanikau kei na wainimate mo taura me vukei iko, kevaka sa kunei ni sa tiko vei iko na HIV. E nomu dodonu mo qara na bula vinaka. Kakua tale ni madua se vuni. E sa kena gauna meda dolava na noda vakasama kei na noda rai, ka da veivuketaka na sasaga ni kena tarovi na mate ca ogo na HIV e Viti.

Treatment also serves as a vital prevention tool, as treatment suppression eliminates the risk of transmission. This means, that those who are on treatment and their viral load is reduced, will not spread the virus to their spouse and sexual partners, their children when they are born and their babies when they breast feed.

With treatment, we can also stop the HIV transmission in our community. This is why we must urgently identify and start treatment for those who remain untreated. I call on all these individuals in our community who may have had a test previously and have not returned for their results to come forward and seek your results and engage in our free treatment programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, treatment for HIV in Fiji is free. So, patients do not have to pay for the cost of medicine, as they are provided free by the Government. In addition, the advancement in medication for HIV over the years means that the number of medicines that one has to take for the control of HIV, has reduced significantly from what used to be eight to nine different tablets and medications each day, to only two or one. This has made HIV antiretroviral therapy very friendly and encouraging for those on treatment to remain on the lifelong treatment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, only together as a community can we respond to this challenge of HIV. Our statistics at the Ministry has revealed that the number of new cases amongst illicit drug uses is increasing rapidly. The dual burden of injecting drugs use and HIV is a deadly combination for our people, in particular for our youth and children. Our strategy is to tackle these two scourges with hand in hand and I encourage that when we discuss about one in our communities, we also talk about the other, bringing more awareness and knowledge on how we can address these dual burdens in our midst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges that we need to develop new and innovative preventative approaches quickly, as our current prevention programme will not be adequate for our new HIV challenges. Our current HIV situation calls on all of us to think differently and open our hearts and minds to newer approaches that put our communities back in the driving seat of the HIV response.

We will look to the experience and expertise of countries that have gone through similar HIV outbreaks in their communities, and the international best-practice approaches that have brought success in their HIV responses. We are grateful that our partners and developing neighbouring countries who are supporting and assisting us in our response.

The World Health Organization, UNDP, the Australian Government and the New Zealand Government amongst others that have provided support thus far and have pledged to provide further support in the future. Government has endorsed Fiji's HIV Surge Strategy, a comprehensive approach that facilitates collaboration with health partners, government ministries, and communities.

The surge strategy is pivotal in strengthening HIV prevention efforts, scaling up targeted national testing for key population groups, improving access to life-saving testing and treatment, reducing stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS, and enhancing the governance of Fiji's HIV response programme.

An important pillar of strength is prevention through education and awareness. This is where we require the support of our community, advocacy groups, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, schools, villages, and communities to educate our children and young people on HIV and its linkages to illicit drug use, as well as the treatment and good long-term outcome with treatment. This is where we can work together to implement prevention strategies and help to identify HIV cases early.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, subduing the current surge in HIV in Fiji will require a whole of Government and whole of society effort. With every Fijian is guaranteed their right to health in our constitution, stigma and discrimination remain the main obstacle to accessing timely treatment and support to our people living with HIV in Fiji. I call on all of us to work together to ensure that no one is denied their right to be tested, treated, and supported without fear, stigma, or discrimination. Let us unite in this fight against HIV and protect the rights of those who live with HIV. Get tested, know our status, and ensure a healthier future for our nation.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to wish your good self, members of the secretariat and the staff of Parliament, members of Parliament, a Merry Christmas and blessed, prosperous and a healthy New Year.

Fishing Co-operatives – Rural and Maritime/Coastal Communities

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; a very good afternoon to you all. I rise today to give a statement that will highlight fishing cooperatives in rural and maritime or coastal communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these cooperatives are not just economic entities, they are the lifeblood of our communities' sustaining livelihoods, fostering collaboration and preserving our cultural heritage. In the heart of our coastal villages and remote islands, fishing is more than a means of sustenance. It

is a way of life. For generations our people have depended on the bountiful ocean to provide for their families and communities. However, in an everchanging world with economic challenges and environmental threats, the need for sustainable and resilient practices has never been greater.

Fishing cooperatives Mr. Speaker, Sir, offer a beacon of hope and progress, by uniting individual fishers under a collective framework. These cooperatives enhance the bargaining power of our community members enabling them to secure fair prices for their catch and gain access to larger markets. This collective approach, Sir, not only stabilises income, but also ensures that the benefits of our marine resources are shared equitably among all members.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, fishing co-operatives are at the forefront of promoting sustainable fishing practices. They play a crucial role in educating and training fishers on methods that protect our precious marine eco-systems while ensuring long-term productivity. Through the implementation of sustainable practices such as controlled fishing seasons and the use of eco-friendly gear, cooperatives have to preserve fish stocks for future generations safeguarding the biodiversity that is intrinsic to our way of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, we currently have 34 registered fishing co-operatives in the country. Amongst the 34 registered co-operatives, we have 3 youth groups and one women group that registers as a fisher's co-operative. A breakdown by division with regards to the 33 registered fishing co-operatives in Fiji are as follows:

Central Division	-	4
Eastern Division	-	9
Northern Division	-	13
Western Division	-	18
Total		44

Mr. Speaker, these are the few opportunities available through the fishing co-operatives, they provide economic benefits to individual fisherman by pulling resources, reducing cost and increasing bargaining power when negotiating prices for their catches or purchasing supplies. Fishing co-operatives promotes sustainable fishing and sometimes additional fishing practices that encourage members to adhere to responsible fishing methods, helping to protect fish populations and marine eco-systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they empower local fishing communities by giving fisherman a collective voice in decision making processes and enhancing their influence in fishery management policies. Co-operatives help mitigate risks associated with fishing, such as fluctuating market prices, weather conditions and regulatory changes by offering support and shared resources amongst members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond the economic and environmental benefits, fishing co-operatives foster a strong sense of community and solidarity. They provide a platform for sharing knowledge, skills and resources, strengthening social bonds and promoting mutual support. In times of needs whether due to natural disasters or economic hardships, cooperatives serve as a support network helping families to weather the storms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of fishing co-operatives in Fiji, is a testament to the power of collaboration and community driven initiatives by working together we can overcome challenges, protect our marine resources and build a more prosperous and sustainable future for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us continue to support and empower our fishing co-operatives, recognising them as essential pillars of our rural and coastal communities. Together we can ensure

that the rich legacy of our fishing heritage is preserved and that the benefits of our ocean's bounty are enjoyed by generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Trade and Co-operative is committed to creating an enabling environment where fishing co-operatives thrive. As we continue to invest in initiatives, we are not just improving the livelihoods of our rural and coastal communities, we are strengthening our nations' future by harnessing the collective power of our people and ensuring the sustainable use of our marine resources. We can achieve lasting economic growth and environmental stewardship for the benefit of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I invite all honourable Members of this august Parliament and indeed all Fijians to support and engage in this transformative enterprise as we work together for a prosperous, sustainable and equitable future for our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my leave, I also want to wish the honourable Members of this Parliament and your good self, Sir, for Christmas and a Prosperous 2025. And to all families of Fiji who are listening in, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous 2025.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin, I also would like to join with honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure in wishing everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and given it is the second anniversary, almost second anniversary of this side of Parliament. I Wish to thank the other side of Parliament, particularly the G9 Bloc for being collaborative and supportive. We have had some arm wrestles now and again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is all in the spirit of trying to serve our nation. So, we thank everyone, including the honourable Leader of the Opposition of course and the G9 Bloc as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought I just reply to honourable Ratu Vakalalabure's wonderful statement. Just picture this in a group of co-operatives all along the coast of Bua and Macuata, they have a co-operative truck that picks up all their fish starting from Macuata, coming down to Dreketi and all the way to Nabouwalu, on the ferry, back to Suva and then supply in Suva for export. If we are able to achieve that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the essence of co-operatives.

Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of Parliament will do its utmost to push co-operatives as a means to really develop the rural economy. We do not need to look far to see how successful co-operatives are. There is Zespri, the main exporter for kiwifruit out of New Zealand. You have Amul in the State of Gujarat and is the largest dairy company in India and is one of the biggest exporters from India to the rest of the world in terms of dairy, and they are a genuine co-operative. In fact, Sir, being a former Director of Rewa Dairy, the Amul Co-operative is a one man, one boat co-operative. No matter if you are a large supplier or a small supplier, everyone is the same. It is a wonderful testament in how co-operatives can work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nutshell what this side of Parliament, through the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, what we are trying to do is rebuild the co-operative movement in Fiji, ensure that we use it as a vehicle to drive rural development and urban development in terms of economy. At the same time, ensure that our hardworking farmers and fishermen do not get left behind or taken an advantage of by middlemen in the process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will see next year is the international year for co-operatives, the whole year. So, we will be conducting awareness events over the year, starting from January to try and really encourage the co-operative movement and try and make sure that it is a fundamental instruments in terms of what we are trying to achieve on this side of Parliament. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Tackling Drug Problems in Fiji

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the menace of drugs is an issue that is now very much in the forefront of our thinking as a nation, as a Government, as Members of Parliament, teachers, health workers, lawyers, magistrates and judges and simply as parents, grandparents and guardians.

A few week ago, I had a little chat with Tu Vili in my car, and at the end of our little chat, we came to a gentleman's agreement - no drugs. As we parted, I asked myself this question, "how can I help Tu Vili stay away from drugs?" I came to this conclusion, Mr. Speaker, that two conditions, if satisfied, will keep Tu Vili away from drugs. First is that Tu Vili simply has the moral courage and integrity to resist the temptation to take or to peddle drugs. The second condition is that there is just no opportunity for Tu Vili to take or peddle drugs. Those two factors that I had just mentioned - temptation and opportunity, make up the formula for fraud.

It is temptation, plus opportunity, that equals fraud. When someone is tempted to commit fraud, they will only do so if an opportunity presents itself and conversely when an opportunity to commit fraud presents itself and the person who sees that opportunity, resists the temptation, nothing bad happens. Temptation is personal but opportunity presents itself through the systems and processes that are in place.

Mr. Speaker, I have very little to no chance to help build Tu Vili's character so he can resist temptation; and he has very little to no help at all in this regard. Tu Vili is a child, 15 years old, and lives on the street here in Suva. He lives bravely, I must add, because he has very little other options. He told me his story – raised by his grandmother, never attended school in his whole life. I asked him in *iTaukei* where he comes from? "*O gone ni vei?*" He very softly said, "*o au sega ni kila* (I do not know)."

Mr. Speaker, Tu Vili was seated on a street in Suva asking for money and food at a spot where the cars were driving and turning very dangerously close to where he was sitting. I invited him into my car which he accepted so he can join me and my wife and drive-through and get some food for the three of us. We had our little *talanoa* session on our way to get food and on our way back to drop him off where I picked him up. Tu Vili is a child in need of care and protection, as defined under Clause 5 of the Child Care and Protection Act that was just passed last night.

Mr. Speaker, the funny thing as we parted with Tu Vili that evening, we said our goodbyes, I leaned over and gave him a long Fijian *uma*, the one *pu* and *tua* do on his forehead like I do to my grandchildren. I notice he froze and stood there for a few seconds before he said, "*moce*" and then he left. As we were driving home, I told my wife, "*Isa*, maybe Tu Vili has never been kissed on the forehead by a grandfather."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I dropped him off, I gave him my MP business card and told him to get someone to ring my number if he needs to speak to me. But I was bothered with this niggling question in my mind, how can an MP like me help Tu Vili stay away from drugs? How can this august House, how can the Legislature help, in support of Government, of course, as they take the lead in this national effort to help protect Tu Vili and our children from the menace of drugs?

Coincidentally, last night in this august House, the Legislature, as we passed those two Bills and now into law - the Child Justice Act and Child Care and Protection Act, I told myself, "Yes, we can". We did help Tu Vili and our children last night. Thank you again to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection and the Government and to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Last night before adjournment, you reminded us of the significance of the work that we had accomplished.

Let me put another perspective of what happened last night. Last night there were four Bills passed, brought into this House by three women. That is history also. I think all the men on that side owe something to the three women sitting behind them for those four Acts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I apologise for digressing, but I am of the view that we can help by targeting the opportunity side of that equation that I mentioned, and we try and remove as much as we can, the opportunities that are being to bring drugs into this country, and also manufacture illicit drugs within our country. Opportunities are presenting itself in the systems and processes that govern our borders, our ports of entry - both air and seaports, the systems and processes that govern the importation and sale of pharmaceutical drugs and chemicals that are used to manufacture illicit drugs.

Overall, I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should try as much as we can to reduce the volume of drugs that is in the country, and at the same time, try and stamp the inflow of drugs into the country. We tackle the supply end of the supply and demand chain, because a lot of effort is now being directed towards the demand side. We heard the very inspirational story from the honourable Minister for Justice last night of that family that his showering love to those children and young adults in Nabua, most if not all of them, caught in this web of drug abuse. One of them robbed me, admittedly a few years ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can do this via a parliamentary inquiry, an inquiry into the drug problem in Fiji. I think we can be surgical in our inquiry through a very specific and focused terms of reference and find those gaps and loopholes in the systems and processes in the areas, some of which I had mentioned and also look at the laws that needs to be amended to effect the required changes. The findings will be presented to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to the Government and we can progress from there. I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that section 129 of the Standing Orders is the enabling clause, I stand to be corrected, there has never been a precedent of an inquiry in this Parliament.

The other aspect of tackling this drug problem is deterrent. I will just say that study has shown that it is not the severity of punishment that deters criminal behaviour, rather it is the certainty of punishment and the swiftness of justice that deters. This aspect can also be looked at by this Parliament inquiry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tu Vili Beranavere (that is his full name) and our children need help. Yes, I firmly believe that we in this august House, we can, Legislature can help.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Viliame Naupoto, especially that emotional and heart rendering story.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I first of all, thank the honourable Viliame Naupoto for his End of Week Statement, bringing out to us a real and very serious problem that we are all facing as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember when I was in the Opposition, the honourable Tikoduadua had raised the issue of establishing a commission or investigation committee of Parliament to look into the issues and the problems of drugs in the country.

I welcome the suggestion that honourable Naupoto has just raised about establishing this drug investigation commission or whatever we will call it, to look into the real issue of drugs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am reminded of our responsibilities as leaders; we are national leaders.

We study the very simple words of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, who was looking at Moses trying to organise the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land and was having an all day and almost all night sessions trying to run court cases and investigations about who had done what. Jethro said, “Moses, you are not doing that right. You have to organise them into smaller groups - groups of 50, groups of 100, groups of 500 and groups of 1,000 and select men (probably the language now would be “people” or “persons”) who can do that effectively, but select people who are trustworthy, hardworking, fear God and cannot be bribed.” Those were the words from Jethro in the book of Exodus.

This is the basically the problem we have in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So many of these things happen because people should be watching, people should be advising, people should be looking after those little groups, even family groups, schools and bigger communities in society - people who can be entrusted with being vigilant in what they do. They have to watch the people and understand the trends of society. As soon as they find out that someone is straying from the boundaries, they would automatically try and find out - where have you been, where are you going, your friends are here, why have you been out, it is late in the night.

If the people are vigilant enough and diligent enough, they should be able to nip the problem in the bud as soon as it starts. I do not know what they look like on the streets. The problem with high office is that you get driven here, there and driven home. So, you are not on the streets to see what is happening, what the people are doing.

You are very fortunate that you found someone that you could extend a helping towards and help him out. That little *uma* on his forehead took him time to understand – what was that? Never had any demonstration of love before. So, he must have been thinking, what was that? You said that he was brought up by his grandmother – we must thank grandmothers, widows and mothers who bring up children without the support of a male partner.

These are the things that can come up if we establish a special parliamentary committee to look into the problems of drugs and using them. I do not believe that those high up in society in the communities are not involved. When we find a young man with a mobile phone perhaps, and we know that that young man has not been employed, we should be able to go and find out, probably without even asking him, how would he have gotten that mobile phone or other luxury items that people have on the streets now. So, immediately we should have indicators of unexplained wealth or unexplained benefits that people get.

We are always hamstrung by the limitations on law enforcements in regards to freedom. People are free, they tell you, “I got it”. You ask, “where did you get it?” The response, “I just got it, I sold something.” Again, you ask, “what did you sell, where did you get what you sold?” Those are the things that perhaps we should be aware of happening right around us. It is a good End of Week Statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I can only promise that we will co-operate to find ways and means of controlling the issue of drugs.

When I was talking to the Prime Ministers from Australia and New Zealand, even those Ministers who were here, I am looking at cooperation, border security co-operation. Right now, we are introducing drones and drone operators’ courses to be run here in Fiji, they will be incorporated into our border security operations. We know or we have been suspecting the way the illicit substances have been introduced into Fiji.

We have a very porous border. So many people can just come in and go out without our even knowing, but once they get into Fiji's territory, there is very little checks at the outer island airports and ports. Yesterday, the news media asked me, "when did you start putting the canine section's up?" I said, "I don't know, it must have been initiated by honourable Tikoduadua." But if they are out there, that is good then they can control from the point that they have entered, to another point inside the border. How do we find out what is out there coming in? The big catch in Europe destined for Fiji, those are the things that should wake us up. There is a bigger movement out there and we have to look after our people, particularly our young people.

Honourable Tikoduadua said that we could become a nation of zombies, people walking around not knowing where they are going, not knowing what they are doing, not even knowing their names. That young man who did not know where he was from, you cannot blame him. He was brought up by his grandmother, probably she did not tell him, "*O iko na gone mai ka.*" I asked my caddy one day, "*iko gone ni vei?*" He responded, "*gone ni Nabua.*" I further asked, "*O cei nomu yasana?*" He responded, "*Yasana yani I na keba.*" *Sega cala qori.* But that is our responsibility, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Government will take up this suggestion and we will introduce this body to be run as part of a Committee of Parliament to look into the problem of drugs.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 24th February, 2025 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week and this session. I am sure, I speak on behalf of my predecessor His Excellency the President, *Turaga Na Tui Cakau* and myself in expressing our gratitude to each and every one of you for your contributions throughout this year to the second session of Parliament.

For the information of all honourable Members, Monday, 16th December, 2024 would mark the Prorogation of Parliament. This is not a Sitting day and by tradition Prorogation marks the official conclusion of Parliamentary Session of the year without or within the four years Parliamentary term.

The Speaker will notify His Excellency the President of the Prorogation as well as the State Opening of the Parliament. As all honourable Members are aware, His Excellency the President will address the Parliament at the Opening of Parliament.

So, once the Parliament is prorogued, Parliamentary business including Parliamentary sittings and Parliamentary Standing Committee proceedings on Bills, Motions and Reports are suspended or ceased until the Opening of the new Parliamentary Session, with the exception of matters that would be deemed urgent and necessary at the discretion of the Speaker.

Since this will be our last Sitting for this Session of Parliament, I would like to wish all the honourable Members, all those seated in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings and everyone in Fiji a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous 2025. For myself, it has been my particular honour and privilege to serve you honourable Members and the people of Fiji this week.

I now declare Parliament adjourned until Monday, 24th February, 2025 at 10.00 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.30 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 315/2024 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics (Ref. Page 2606)



**MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND STRATEGIC PLANNING, NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND STATISTICS
(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad)**

Reply to Question No. 315/2024 is as follows:

- Table 1 below shows the breakdown of revenue generated from Import Duty, VAT on Imports and VAT Refunds from 2019 to 2024 to-date.

Table 1: Yearly Collections on Import Duty, VAT on Imports and VAT Refunds

Year	Import Duty (\$m)	VAT on Imports (\$m)	VAT Refunds (\$m)
2019	420.5	471.1	215.6
2020	304.8	334.9	237.2
2021	280.8	354.0	200.0
2022	329.7	563.1	220.9
2023	343.1	715.7	301.2
2024 (Jan-October)	306.6	737.7	321.6

Supplementary Information

- The VAT refunds for resale of imports is integrated within the overall total of VAT refunds as the current system used by Fiji Revenue and Customs Service does not capture these transactions separately.
- Compared to previous years, collections from Import Duty and VAT on Imports in 2023 and 2024 (January to October) have been strong reflecting the economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and changes made to the duty and VAT rates.
- In the FY2023-2024 Budget, the previous three-tier VAT rates of 0, 9 and 15 percent was amended to two rates of 0 and 15 percent effective from 1 August 2023. Government maintained zero-rated VAT on the existing 21 essential items with the addition of listed prescribed medicines.
- In terms of the major changes to the duty rates, Government had reduced fiscal and import excise duties on around 2,000 items to either 0 or 5 percent in FY2020-2021. In FY2022-2023, the import duty on used passenger cars was increased by 5 percent. Additionally, import VAT of 9 percent applicable on electric vehicles was reduced to 0 percent. In FY2023-2024, import excise duty on new and used passenger motor vehicles was further increased by 5 percent.
- In FY2023-2024, the Government had also reduced the fiscal duty on various food products (canned mackerel, corned mutton, corned beef & beef, prawns and duck) from 32 percent to 15 percent. Fiscal duty on sheep/lamb meat was reduced from 5 percent to 0 percent, while fiscal duty on canned tomatoes was reduced from 15 percent to 5 percent. A 3 percent fiscal duty was also

imposed on raw materials in FY2023-2024 and subsequently removed in the FY2024-2025 Budget.

7. In FY2024-2025, the maximum threshold for personal imports concession was reduced from \$2,000 to \$1,000 and with a 15 percent VAT applied. Prior to June 2020, the threshold was \$400 and increased to \$2,000 during COVID-19 Budget to encourage imports for personal use and assistance from families overseas. A 5 percent increase in excise duty for alcohol and tobacco was also implemented in FY2024-2025.
8. For further information, please refer to the Government's Economic and Fiscal Update Supplement to the 2024-2025 Budget Address and Fiscal Performance Report for FY2023-2024, available on the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics website (<http://www.finance.gov.fj>)

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 316/2024 tabled by the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government (Ref. Page 2606)



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

Reply to Question No. 316/2024 is as follows:

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 45(3), I submit my Written Response to the question by honourable Premila Kumar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to provide an account of official overseas trips undertaken by Special Administrators of Fiji's Municipal Councils from January 2023 to November 2024. These trips were undertaken with the purpose of enhancing capacity building, fostering partnerships and aligning our municipal operations with international best practices. I will outline the details of these trips, including their purpose, activities and the significant accomplishments achieved as a result.

Part A – Breakdown of Overseas Trips Undertaken by Special Administrators

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between January 2023 and November 2024, only three Municipal Council Special Administrators participated in eight official overseas trips. These trips were planned, ensuring they addressed key capacity-building needs for municipal councils and delivered tangible outcomes that benefit local governance and the citizens of Fiji.

The destinations, hosts and themes of these trips included engagements with international municipal bodies, attendance at global conferences and participation in regional training programmes. The overseas trips were funded by the respective international agencies. The municipal councils only paid for the incidental and per diem allowance to the Special Administrators.

Detailed information are as follows:

Council	Details of the Trip	Year Attended	No. of Trips Attended
Nadi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum (APUF-8), Seoul, Republic of Korea 20/10/2023 – 29/10/2023. The trip was attended by Chair Lawrence Kumar. • ICLEI World Congress, Sao Paulo, Brazil 15/06/2024 – 24/06/2024. Attended by SA Chair, Saliceni Raiwalui. 	1. October 2023 2. June 2024	2
Labasa	COP28 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates 09/12/23 – 14/12/23. The trip was attended by SA Doreen Miller.	1. December 2023	1
Suva	• 8 th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum (APUF-8), Seoul, Republic of Korea 20/10/23 – 29/10/23. The trip was attended by Chair Ritesh Singh.	1. October 2023 2. March 2024 3. March 2024 4. May 2024 5. Sep-Oct 2024	5

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste Management Technologies (seminar) 16/03 – 19/03/2024. The trip was attended by Chair Tevita Boseiwaqa. • Smart City Summit & Expo Kaohsiung, Taiwan 21/03-26/03/2024. Attended by Chair Tevita Boseiwaqa. • 5th China Shaoxing International Friendship Cities Conference 18/05 – 28/05/2024. Attended by Chair Tevita Boseiwaqa. • International Workshop on Climate Change Impacts on Oceans 29/09-05/10/2024. Attended by Chair Tevita Boseiwaqa. 		
Total			8

Part B – Amount funded by each Council

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between January 2023 and November 2024, three Municipal Councils funded the eight overseas trips for Special Administrators in the sum of \$20,712.78. The said sum comprises of the payment of visa application fees, meals, per diem allowances and incidental costs.

The detail of the specific costs of the trips are as follows:

Part C – Purpose and Accomplishments of Each Trip

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these overseas trips have delivered far-reaching benefits for Fiji's municipal councils. The capacity-building initiatives have equipped Special Administrators with the skills, knowledge and global insights required to lead reforms and improve service delivery.

Some notable impacts include are as follows:

Council	Details of the Trip	Cost of the Trip
Nadi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum - \$1,900.85 • ICLEI World Congress - \$4,099.50 	\$6,000.35
Labasa	COP28 UN Climate Change Conference	Nil
Suva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum - \$3,919.08 • Waste Management Technologies (seminar) - \$2,329.38 • Smart City Summit & Expo - \$4,147.12 • 5th China Shaoxing International Friendship Cities Conference - \$2,764.28 • International Workshop on Climate Change Impacts on Oceans - \$1,552.57 	\$14,712.43
Total		\$20,712.78

Council	Purpose	Accomplishments
Nadi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum reflected on colliding crisis faced by Cities in Asia & Pacific for action for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) • The World Congress session unveiled what it means for cities, towns and regions across the world in the face of unprecedented change and uncertainty. The need for action-oriented impact and innovative solutions becomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights on how best to support sustainable urban development through deliberations on real-world experiences of resilience-building and transformation through and beyond the pandemic. • Integrating resilience into the legal, policy and planning frameworks and institutions to build a stronger and more resilient Fiji

	more pressing than even, and the session discussed a broad set of voices, as we co-develop key messages, which feed into the Roadmap to COP30.	is a critical issue. This includes mainstreaming disaster risk management and climate change adaptation into the core government documents and institutions to achieve risk-informed development. It also includes reviewing disaster risk management legislation and policies.
Labasa	Participated in the Local Leaders Summit to Voice Out How Climate Change is Affecting Them, and What are the Plans.	Voicing Out How Climate Change is Affecting Labasa Town; Call on governments to speed up the transition away from fossil fuels to renewables such as wind and solar power in their next round of climate commitments.
Suva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum reflected on colliding crisis faced by Cities in Asia & Pacific for action for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). • Participated in the seminar and learned about the practices adopted by other Smart Cities. • Participated in panel discussions for Sustainable Living. • The Special Administrators were invited to attend the conference and also networked for friendship cities. • Participated in the Local Leaders Summit and Voice Out How Climate Change is affecting smaller nations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights on how best to support sustainable urban development through deliberations on real-world experiences of resilience-building and transformation through and beyond the pandemic. • Learning the technologies used by other Smart Cities on Waste Management. SCC along with Sigatoka Town Council were nominated by the honourable Minister to attend the seminar in Hyderabad, India. • The Special Administrators participated in panel discussions was held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan where Chairman Boseiwaqa joined SA Ravai and 1 Director from Hyderabad, India. • Participated in the workshop and gained practices for Suva City to adopt resilience practices to tackle impacts of Climate Change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all overseas trips were undertaken with accountability and transparency. The trip's expenses, objectives and outcomes were meticulously documented and reviewed to ensure value for public funds.

The accomplishments outlined underscore the importance of continued investment in capacity building. By empowering Special Administrators, we are strengthening municipal governance and ensuring the long-term development of our cities and towns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the response to the written question is respectfully submitted.