

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 5TH DECEMBER, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 5TH DECEMBER, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Attorney-General.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 4th December, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

We welcome back in our midst this morning the Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, the honourable Sakiusa Ditoka, who had successfully overcome bad a bout of virus on his journey back from COP29 in Baku.

Visitors – Wailotua District School

Honourable Members, please join me in welcoming the students and teachers of Wailotua District School from Wailevu, Tailevu. You are most welcome to your Parliament, and I hope that you will learn more about how the Parliament works.

Standing Committee Membership - Honourable P.K. Ravunawa

Honourable Members, please, kindly also take note that pursuant to Standing Order 115, the honourable Penioni Ravunawa will now be a substantive member of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. The honourable Ravunawa replaces honourable Jovesa Vocea.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report – Savusavu Town Council 2011 to 2013 Annul Reports

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and

Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on Savusavu Town Council 2011 to 2013 Annual Reports.

Municipal Councils in Fiji are legislated under the Local Government Act 1972. Municipal councils, like Savusavu Town Council, provides overall policy direction to maintain and improve the quality of services and facilities for their ratepayers. Savusavu Town Council serves an estimated population of 6,000 in the greater Savusavu area and is responsible for the provision and maintenance of a wide range of services to its ratepayers and residents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report captures the various activities reported in the three Annual Reports from 2011 to 2013. Given the number of years that have lapsed, about 10 years to 11 years, the Committee made no assessment on the efficiency or otherwise of Savusavu Town Council.

The Committee is, however, grateful to the Council for the information and data that are presented in these Annual Reports. The Committee is of the view that a consistent reporting structure would assist in the fair analysis of the Reports. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government to work in collaboration with town councils to identify a standard reporting template for use in all its future annual reports.

I wish to thank the Savusavu Town Council for compiling and submitting its annual reports from 2011 to 2013. I also thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, and of course the hardworking secretariat of the Committee for the compilation of this bipartisan report.

With this Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence has dealt with all the reports that were referred to it in the last two Parliament sittings.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics; and

- (2) Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Honourable Members, Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes. After the Minister, I will then invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will also be a response from the Leader of the G-9 Bloc or his designate, to also speak for five minutes. There will be no other debate.

Fiji's Economic Performance and Outlook

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide an update on Fiji's economic performance and outlook and Government's fiscal position. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian economy has shown great resilience, despite the global uncertainties caused by factors such as:

- (1) slowing global growth;
- (2) global inflationary pressures;
- (3) supply chain disruptions; and
- (4) escalating geo-political tensions and geo-economic fragmentation.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to state that our economic fundamentals have strengthened over the years, especially over the last two years. The economy is on a much stronger footing now that what we had inherited to years ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following a growth of 7.5 percent in 2023, the Fiji economy is now focussed to grow by 3.8 percent in 2024 higher than the 2.8 percent growth projected earlier on in June this year. There were some very strong reasons for these upward revisions by the Macroeconomic Committee, an independent committee chaired by the Governor of the Reserve Bank and includes other senior public officials from key agencies.

Firstly, the tourism industry which has been the key driver of Fiji's post-pandemic recovery, has positively surprised us and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka has constantly talked about this. In the first 10 months – January to October 2024 – visitor arrivals rose by 6.5 percent when compared to the same period last year.

The strong growth in arrivals, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is largely driven by higher arrivals from our major tourism source markets including Australia, where the growth of 4.9 percent, New Zealand 3.8 percent, US 8.6 percent. These three countries account for 80 percent of our visitors and despite some of the economic challenges in this country, we have not seen any slowdown in numbers. On the contrary, we have seen stronger growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to highlight that we have recorded new peaks for visitor arrivals in all the months this year and we are going to hit a new record again this year, just slightly below a million tourists. Sir, in light of this strong performance in tourism arrivals to date, the forecast for visitor arrivals for this year has been revised up to 6 percent from earlier projection of 3 percent in 2024.

In 2025, we are projecting visitor arrivals to grow by 4 percent, as we expect continuous growth in tourism demand from traditional source markets, coupled with the introduction of the Nadi-Dallas flights from next week which is expected to bring an additional 1,000 visitors on a weekly basis to our shores. Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the strong linkages of the tourism industry with the rest of the economy, related sectors such as transport and storage accommodation, wholesale and retail are also driving higher growth this year. While positive contributions are also expected, finance and insurance, public administration, information, agriculture, manufacturing, real estate, mining and

quarrying and net taxes are also contributing to the overall goal.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to highlight that following the strong public and political support and the business communities support for the recent budget which had sent a very strong message on the stability, consistency, and the transparency and accountability of our economical social policies. This, together with the inclusive style of governance and bipartisanship we have shown Parliament. I want to thank the G9-Bloc for their bipartisan, I am not too sure about the other group, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has helped a lot with improving investor and overall confidence.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in public sector salaries in the recent budget, increase in the national minimum wages from \$4 to \$4.50 and from \$5 from 1st April. The strategic decision to have increase in Government spending in key areas. The high remittance flows to reach \$1.3 billion this year. The tourism induced picked up and demand and growth in commercial bank lending has helped consumption spending which has supported business and economic activity.

All partial indicators for consumption spending, including VAT collections, consumption lending through the financial institutions and income indicators like PAYE collection, FNPF contribution growth are showing stronger spending activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of investment activity, that current indicators suggest a positive outlook for this year. We have recorded a significant increase in business confidence and investment activity, driven by the commencement of large tourism related projects in the West and also in the North. Other major commercial projects across the country, and the implementation of some of government capital projects.

A key indicator of construction activity, domestic cement sales have risen by 11.2 percent up to September 2024. Furthermore, new lending by commercial banks for investment purposes grew by 25 percent in the year leading to September 2024, primarily due to an increase in lending for building and construction sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the recent groundbreaking of some large project such as google and the announcement on the replacement of four critical bridges worth over \$300 million, the outlook for investment is very optimistic. Similarly, Sir, investment activity also continues to progress. Investor confidence is currently high, as evident by the new investments and construction happening around the country. I take this opportunity to thank our business and investor community for their very positive engagement attitude and helping Government in building confidence.

For 2025, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the growth momentum is expected to continue and as such the growth forecast has now been upgraded to 3.4 percent from an earlier projection of 3 percent. Again, the services sector will be a key driver of growth on the back of strong tourism activity followed by industrial and primary sectors.

In 2026 and 2027, based on the information at hand, we are projecting a baseline growth of 2.9 percent and 2.8 percent. While we may be reverting to the long-term average growth rate of around 3 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a higher growth rate can be achieved easily if we continue improving the business environment for private sector investment, maintain the momentum of economic reforms, ensure the stability of our economic policies, the transparency of our economic policies and provide confidence through well-crafted coordinated macro-economic policies.

Inflation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while our economy is showing strong sustainable growth, we must acknowledge the challenges posed by rising global inflation. We have seen an increase in the cost of goods, particularly fuel, food and transportation. The Government is acutely aware of the burden this

places on Fijian households, and we are taking necessary measures to alleviate the cost of living.

In the 2024-2025 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had announced numerous income enhancing measures such as:

- increase in minimum wages and civil service salaries;
- we are continuing with higher social welfare payments;
- restored pensions for FNPF pensioners that were affected by earlier reforms;
- providing targeted subsidies for electricity and water;
- provided Back to School support for the 2025 school year;
- fully absorbing the new higher bus fares for students receiving transport assistance;
- providing the highest ever sugarcane price of \$105 per tonne;
- writing off \$650 million in TELS debt for over 53,000 families, amongst other things that we have talked about often; and apart from these;
- maintained the zero-rated VAT on 22 items in the Budget.

All these is over a billion dollars in support for our vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to report that the annual headline inflation year-on-year rate has fallen from the fourth consecutive month to 0.8 percent in November 2024. This inflation outcome in November is significantly lower when compared to 5.8 percent in November last year and is also lower than 3.6 percent recorded in October this year.

November 2024 inflation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the lowest in 16 months and is driven by lower prices noted in food and non-alcoholic beverages, transport, housing, electricity, water, gas and other fuels and clothing and footwear, and year-end inflation for this year is expected to be much lower Mr. Speaker, Sir, than our earlier projection of 3.5 percent, and is expected to remain stable in the medium term.

On balance of payments Mr. Speaker, Sir, maintaining external stability is critical particularly, in a global economic environment characterised by volatility. The recent years we have seen fluctuations in global commodity prices, shift in trade patterns and changes in investor sentiments. These factors Mr. Speaker, Sir, have had direct implications on our balance of payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that through prudent macro-economic management policies we have made significant progress in addressing these challenges. Our efforts to diversify exports, attract investment and improve the competitiveness of our industries have begun to bear fruits and I must thank all my ministerial colleagues.

MR. SPEAKER.- There is some difficulty with the sound system again. Is it now better? Thank you, you may proceed.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that our ministerial colleagues in different ministries are all working together as part of our National Development Plan (NDP) strategy and all the sectors are bearing fruits. We have seen an improvement in our trade balance with export growth driven by key sectors such as agriculture, mining and manufacturing. Additionally, it happens to boost tourism, and remittances have contributed positively to our current account position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current account deficit is forecast fall to 4 percent to 4.7 percent of GDP in 2024. From 7.7 percent in 2023 and is expected to remain below 5 percent in the medium term. Moreover, the Government's commitment to enhancing the external reserves has strengthened our position in managing external shocks and ensuring that we have the necessary resources to meet our

international obligations. By focusing on fiscal discipline, foreign exchange management and strengthening bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships, we are building a more resilient economy capable of withstanding external pressures.

Foreign reserves, our monetary policies and financial sector Mr. Speaker, Sir – again I am pleased to report that foreign reserves are comfortable at around \$3.8 billion at the end of November 2024, equivalent to 6.2 months of retained imports, and are projected to remain adequate over the medium term. The financial sector remains sound and continues to support domestic activity. Private sector credit growth has picked up to 11.2 percent in October 2024, driven by lending to both business entities and households. Banking system liquidity remained high at around \$2.3 billion. Modest (I will not say too high) which is also helping keep interest rate at a near historical low and supporting investment growth, compared to interest rate in other countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our fiscal strategy remains focussed on maintaining prudent fiscal management, while addressing key development needs. Despite the challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic, we have kept our fiscal deficit under control, with the target to reduce the deficit progressively over the next few years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now discuss about this state of Government finances and fiscal performance for the 1st Quarter of 2024-2025, the fiscal deficit for 2023-2024 narrowed significantly to 3.4 percent of GDP compared to 7.2 percent recorded in the 2022-2023 financial year.

Government's total revenue in 2023-2024 stood at \$3,646.2 million (\$3.6 billion), 28.1 percent of GDP, while total expenditure was 31.5 percent of GDP. This strong performance in revenue is underpinned by a stronger economy, as well as the combination of well-crafted revenue reforms and expenditure policy that significantly improve the paths of fiscal consolidation. The fiscal trend in the first four months of this fiscal year have been promising, as we continue to surpass taxation targets, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the first three months of this financial year, August to October, Government's total revenue collection stood at \$1,087.5 million, while total expenditure amounted to \$956.3 million. This resulted in a net surplus of \$131.2 million equivalent to 0.9 percent of GDP. This marks a notable improvement compared to the same period last year when a net deficit of \$21.5 million GDP was recorded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a month-to-month basis, tax revenue collections have consistently exceeded the forecast, reaching a total of \$885.2 million in the first three months. This positive out-turn above by \$88.4 million or 11.1 percent was primarily driven by stronger collection in all types of taxes including corporate taxes, PAYE (Pay-As-Your-Earn) and withholding taxes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our non-tax revenue was also higher than projected. So, in terms of our overall revenue collections for the first three months, it increased by almost \$200 million, \$196.1 million or 22 percent compared to the same period last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total expenditure has also been promising. The first three months amounting to \$956.3 million representing 21 percent of total budgeted spending level in the financial year. This comprises \$734.9 million in operating expenditure, and \$211.6 million in capital expenditure, with a good expenditure mix of 78:22, compared to the same period last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public debt while a concern from any countries globally, remains sustainable and we are taking a measured approach to manage it. Government debt stood at \$10.3 billion equivalent to 79.4 percent of GDP at the end of July 2024. Debt is projected to be around 77.8

percent of GDP at the end of this financial year. This is a marked decline from the high of 90.7 percent of GDP in 2021-2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of October 2024, Government's total debt stood equivalent to 75.4 percent of GDP, the debt mix comprise 63.7 percent in domestic debt and 36.3 percent in external debt during the review period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by saying that as you heard, all the macroeconomic indicators; whether we talked about debt management, whether we talk about our revenue management, whether we talk about our investment policies, the mix of the policies that we put in place in the 2023-2024 Budget and in the 2024-2025 Budget is actually working and showing significant signs of the fact that we have set the economy on a right trajectory.

So, in summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would say that:

- (1) our economy is doing much better than earlier anticipated;
- (2) consumption and investment spending have both picked up;
- (3) tourism industry is on track for a record year; and we expect similar trends in 2025 and 2026;
- (4) inflation has eased to 0.8 percent in November 2024;
- (5) foreign reserves stood at about \$3.8 billion;
- (6) interest rates remain low;
- (7) Government revenue collections have surpassed projection for last financial year and for the last four consecutive months; and
- (8) debt levels have been reduced to below 80 percent now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, risk to growth is balanced, while natural disasters, global conflict, geopolitics, and slowdown in trading partners pose downside risks. There are upsides with tourism, with the Dallas flight and other new routes. Picked up in investments as confidence levels continue to improve and the easing of the labour market as outward migration and resident departures have also slowed down.

So, all these put together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is good news for the economy. Good news for the country, and as I said earlier, we want to make sure that the result of this good news also flows to the ordinary people. And as I said we are spending almost a billion dollars in targeted expenditures whether it is for agriculture, social welfare, education, health and it put us in a very strong position to now start preparing for the next budget 2025-2026, and there will be more good news in the next budget. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Statement delivered by the honourable Minister for Finance is promising and it paints a picture that Fiji is doing well.

Mr. Speaker, if the economy is doing well, why are our people not feeling it? The Government proudly announces the growth figures, increased revenues and growing economic projections. They celebrate numbers, but numbers do not put food on the table. Numbers don't pay rent. Numbers don't ease the daily struggles of ordinary Fijians.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Let me ask this. How many Fijians have felt relief at the supermarket, or when paying utility bills? How many Fijians have seen their hard work translating into a better life for their families with increases in duties, taxes and VAT?

For many Fijians the answer is clear. Life has not improved. Instead, the cost of living has skyrocketed. Essential goods and services are becoming luxuries; even butter has become a luxury now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- This Government has not spared bread and butter, daily staples. Despite the election promise to reduce the cost of living. And I recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Prasad during his campaign, he promised the people of this country; we will reduce the price of beer, butter and chops. Did that happen?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bread price has increased from 71 cents to \$1, and 500 grams butter has increased to almost \$14, which is the price of a chicken.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Wow!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, even he did not spare 60-year-old citizens of this country. When citizens reach 60 years of age, he's taken away the bus fare from them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And the Bainimarama Government had put that bus fare. Those who are turning 60 they cannot get free bus fares.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, families are forced to make impossible choices between medicine and groceries, between rent and electricity bills, yet the Government is telling Fijians the economy is strong and is doing well. If that is true, where is the impact? Who is benefitting? Because it certainly is not the hardworking farmers struggling with rising input cost. It is not the nurses and teachers leaving for better opportunities abroad. It is not the small business owners who can barely keep their doors open.

The truth is that this Government's economic policies are designed to serve a select few. We have seen tax-free holidays given to Fiji Water, pay rise for lawyers and others earning about more than \$250,000. All in the name of realignment. They talk about economic growth, but growth for whom? The privilege few, the multinationals, the well-connected elites? Meanwhile, the majority of our people are left our struggling on the margins.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a government that prioritises statistics over citizen has lost its way. Our people deserve policies that lift everyone, not just those at the top. We must invest in our people, lower VAT on essential items to ease the burdens on struggling families, support small businesses that are the backbone of our economy, address the exodus of skilled workers with real opportunities here at home, prioritise capital works that create jobs and improve infrastructure.

Those are not abstract ideas; they are steps we can take now to make life better for everyone. So, today I challenge this Government, if you claim the economy is doing well, let the people feel it in their pockets, in their homes, in their communities. Let the benefits of growth reach every corner of our nation, not just the boardrooms of Fiji Water and a selected few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a true measure of success is not found in the graphs and charts and numbers. It is found in the lives of our people, their well-being, their opportunities and their dignity. Lots of promises were made, but people know what this Government is trying to do. They are trying to squeeze every cent out of them, either through increase in taxes, VAT and everything else. People are struggling and poverty is increasing.

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

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the G-9 Bloc would like to thank honourable Deputy Prime Minister for the update on our economy and the positive outlook it projects, and wishes the Ministry and the Government well. Thank you.

Update on the Great Council of Chiefs Meeting

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament; first of all, I congratulate you for holding the post of the Speaker of this august House and I wish you all the best in your term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to provide a Ministerial Statement on the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) Meeting that was convened from 13th to 14th November at the Grand Pacific Hotel. Please, allow me just to address a few of the issues that were raised on Tuesday afternoon regarding the non-renewal of land leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture is a very important sector for Fiji. In terms of renewal for land leases. The land lease renewal is hovering around 85 percent to 87 percent, which is quite a good standard for a country like Fiji. For agriculture, it is allocated roughly about 50,000 hectares of land, and currently only about 50 percent has been utilised.

By law, before any lease expires, five years prior to the expired of the lease the iTLTB staff should be visiting the farmers to conduct consultations before their lease expires. We have received the request from the farmers that the five years is too short to prepare them if their lease is not going to be renewed, so they need a 10-year consultation period. So that has been facilitated by the iTLTB at the moment.

Few of the issues that have been the main causes of non-renewal of lease are as follows:

- (1) Breach of the lease contract. In some instances, farmers only utilise a small portion of the land that they lease. The advice from iTLTB is always to utilise the portion that they use, and they surrender the part that they are not using, so that is always one of the main areas of concern to the farmers. That is also the main reason why most of the leases are delayed in its renewal to make sure that the land is utilised properly.
- (2) When lease arrears are there, lease cannot be renewed if there are arrears on the current lease. So, that is another area which is always a concern.
- (3) When the numbers of the members of the *mataqali* or *yavusa* increase and they need some land for their food security and also for their development.
- (4) Always when the landowners have seen the yield level of what they can get from the land, for example, if they are planting a certain crop and that area is becoming a well-developed

area and subdivisions are coming up, they will request iTLTB if that land can be returned to them so that they can rezone it so that they can get better benefits from their land.

The current Government is fully supportive of the agriculture sector. Last year, Government provided a grant of \$1.2 million to about 218 farmers to renew their leases. The iTLTB is trying its utmost best to do its consultation properly to help the farmers and also to help the landowners in whatever discussions or whatever needs that they require. I thank most of the honourable Members who are here who raised the issues. My advice is if you can visit the nearest iTLTB office and take the details of the leases that has been a concern to the farmers so that they can address these.

If that is not addressed there, the CEO is there who you can approach, or else you can raise it with me, and we can try and find the solutions on how to resolve the issues that have been raised by the farmers. The iTLTB will always try its best to take care of the issues that will be raised by the farmers and also the issues that will be raised by the landowners. Our main area of concern now is when people visit the farmers and taking their concerns or complaints just from one side. Please get the information from both sides, which we can easily resolve the issues regarding the renewal of leases.

Mr. Speaker, the meeting for the GCC was attended by His Excellency the President of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the *Turaga na Tui Cakau* and the chiefs from the 14 provinces including Rotuma. The chiefs discussed significant issues concerning the good governance and well-being of the *iTaukei* and pass resolutions to that effect. On the first day, members of the GCC were presented with the outcomes of the review of the *iTaukei* Administrations and the establishment of the Provincial Economic Units. The meeting also heard an update on the review of *iTaukei* Land and Fisheries Commission (iTLFC).

Mr. Speaker, the review of the *iTaukei* Administration was undertaken by a six-member team from April to July. They travelled all over Fiji and submitted 10 recommendations to strengthen the *iTaukei* Administration. This includes the *iTaukei* Affairs Board, provincial, *tikina* and village councils. The chiefs noted that the last review was done in 2002 by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC). Two successive reviews tried to improve the work done by the PWC and the work was eventually suspended following the events of 2006.

When the new Government came into office in 2022, it prioritised matters concerning the *iTaukei*, including the review of the legislation affecting them. They were categorised as follows:

- (1) structural issues;
- (2) legislations;
- (3) social issues; and
- (4) economic issues.

The issues were brought before the GCC meeting in Bau last year, and the chiefs agreed that the review of the *iTaukei* Administration be undertaken to assist in addressing these issues. After the adoption of the GCC Review Report last year, attention turned to the *iTaukei* Administration.

Mr. Speaker, the chiefs also heard a presentation from the consultant on the feasibility study of establishing provincial economic units. One of the issues affecting the *iTaukei* is the need for economic empowerment. The GCC meeting in Bau decided that it will take on economic empowerment to address poverty issues. We have the resources, but we lack the means to convert these resources into monetary value.

The chiefs heard presentations from the two review teams on the *iTaukei* Administration and

on the feasibility study to establish provincial economic units. After the presentation, the chiefs separated into their confederacies to discuss this report. The presentations after their confederacy meeting, supported the review report and their recommendation.

On the second day, the Ministry made a presentation on the village profiling survey for the chiefs to see the status of each province, *tikina*, and village regarding sanitation, education, business types, health issue to name a few. The chiefs realised that evidence-based policy making was crucial for effective intervention. As a result of the presentation and with the chiefs' endorsement, we will seek Government's approval for the creation of a data hub to capture all *iTaukei* data, drawing first from *iTaukei* institutions, before moving to other Ministries. The GCC also benefits from an update of the review team of the *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission (TLFC). The TLFC is currently undertaking a review, and this is expected to be completed this month.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, violence against women and children is an escalating concern. The Chiefs expressed their dismay, when the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls (NAP) was discussed. Statistics for Fiji in comparison to the rest of the world does not paint a good a picture, and to do not lie particularly in traditional settings. This is why the chairpersons of the provincial councils are our change agents. The chiefs resolved that our efforts in resourcing awareness and intervention must be doubled if we are to be successful in our fight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic empowerment must be prioritised. We must clear bottlenecks that hinder growth, and we must create pathways that will generate business opportunities. The poverty statistics is a stark reminder on the conditions in our villages. But we must turn these into opportunities. This is why the GCC supported a paper to revitalise the cocoa industry. Cocoa used to be a thriving industry in the 1980s.

We will be discussing this further with the Ministry of Agriculture to see how the GCC paper is aligned to their current programmes. The GCC is encouraging every small window of opportunity to be exploited by the *iTaukei* as they contribute towards the fight against poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GCC also discussed the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL). It gave them the opportunity to address the declining use of *iTaukei* and Rotuma languages, and how these can be revitalised. Language is the means of expressing our culture which is rich in its various forms. The use of our language has been declining for some time and is more noticeable today amongst our young people.

The village profiling survey that I had touched on earlier also points to this truth and the GCC had supported this International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Mr. Speaker, the GCC also heard from our Rotuman chiefs. It was refreshing to hear their voice and the major issues they face. One of the issues they have highlighted was the *Rotuma Bill*; their concerns will be raised through the appropriate channel from the GCC secretariat. Other issues raised was regarding development and challenges faced by our Rotuman communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GCC is mindful of the responsibility they must take on going forward. They must contribute to building a better Fiji. They must be inclusive, and they must be chiefs for everyone. Uniting people from the various cultures was a founding legacy of our leaders. Somehow, this got lost along the way, and the result is that we have a nation that is rebuilding. The GCC must find its place amongst this changing world and weave a thread that will join our community together.

Mr. Speaker, we have completed setting up the GCC Secretariat and the Chairman of the GCC has been appointed and he is leading the work, guided by the thematic areas of good

governance, good leadership, economic empowerment, culture, tradition and heritage, resource ownership, education, health and wellbeing, environment and climate change, gender and violence against women and children.

In 2025, the GCC Secretariat will visit all the provinces as it drives the message on social cohesion, reconciliation and unity. A big change in mindset is required, if we are to achieve some success and we will ensure that that is done. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the responses from the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of G-9 Bloc will be heard following our recess.

We will now suspend proceedings for our morning break and Parliament will resume in half an hour. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.31 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.08 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Now, I will call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate for his response to the Ministers Statement.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his statement this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, I will address the Parliament in the *iTaukei* language on the challenges for *iTaukei* businesses which was also highlighted by the honourable Minister and I have discussed the issue also with the honourable Minister on a few occasions.

The letter was written by Dr. Epli Nailatikau. The title is “*O Keda Ga Na Leqa*”.

Sa vuqa sara na vakasama e cauraki e na noda rawata se sega ni rawata na veika vakabisinisi. E so na gauna e da dau yaco sara me da vakatautauvatataki keda kei ira na wekada eso e ra gole mai vanua tani ka sa ra mai maliwai keda e na gauna oqo, e ra vulagi mai e na noda vanua.

Ia e dua na ka me da nanuma tiko na vanua oqo o Viti e bulia na Kalou ka nona. O keda e da kena i vakatawa ga, e da sucu liga lala ka da na lesu liga lala.

E so na gauna se e na vuqa na gauna e da raici na kai tani me ra keda meca ia oqo e veicalati kei na ka e tukuna o Malakai 2:10:

“Sa dua bau ga na tamada kecegae sega, sa dua bau ga na Kalou sa buli keda se segai?”

O keda kece e da buli e na qele sa i koya na waqa kele e a ceguva na kalou me da tekivu na bula ka me da veiucui kei na Kalou. Oqo na dina levu e dodonu me da tusanaka tiko e na veigauna kece. E na buturara vakabisinisi e rawa ni tukuni sara vakadodonu ni o keda ga na i taukei e keda meca levu taudua. Oqo e dua na kena i vakaraitaki. E dua na sasaga ni teitei e a caka e na dua na vanua e na colo kei Viti Levu. Keirau lewe rua e Viti ka keirau sema e dua mai Kuinisiladi, Ositerelia. Na neitou sasaga e yacana vaka Peretania na hydroponics se na dua na i walewale ni teitei ka vakayagataki kina na wai. Sa rawa na lisi sa tekivu na cakacaka. A lai dolava yani e na neitou sasaga na matanitu e na gauna o ya. Ra tiko kina o ira na i vakaillesilesi ni vakatagedegede sara i cake ka toso vinaka sara. O ira na i taukei ni qele e ra vulica na cakacaka e ra vaka i tavi sara e na cakacaka e na teiteivaki i wai se hydroponics.

Ia, e na i ka ono ni yabaki a qai sogota na gaunisala koya na turaga ni yasayasa o ya. E a mani sega ni yaco rawa yani na lori ni waiwai. Keitou rai toka sa basu na wavu. Na kena i soqoni kece qo ni sa mai vakaleqai na bisinisi ka sa mai tini. Sa tubua na vanua o ya, ka ra sa sega ni cakacaka o ira na itaukei ni qele.

Na gauna e cici vinaka tu kina e kune e na neitou i teitei na capsicum, strawberries, cellery kei na so tale. Na kakana oqo e dau voli tu ga e vanua tani ka vakayagataki kina na matanitu na i lavo levu. Keitou a tea kece.

E na gauna me sa ia na tatamusuki. Sa raica na matanitu ni rawa kina na i lavo levu sa yalataka sara na i liuliu ni matanitu e na gauna o ya ni na vakadrodroi vei keitou na veivuke ka cavuti sara e dua na mata ni vika e 4 milioni. Ia, keitou wai rogoca ni qai soli na i lavo oya vua e dua tale ka sega ni lewenivanua e Viti. E sega ni dede sa taura na i lavo ka sa biubiu tale. Oqo na leqa ni taukei. O keda tikoga. E dua na ka au sa raica, o keda na i Taukei e vuqa sara vei keda e dua

tusanaka tu ni da lotu vakarisito ia e da dau veiqati ga. E dua vei keda ni da raica ni sa toso e da vuvu taki koya kei na nona vuvale.

E vuqa na ka e da cakava e veicalati sara tu ga kei na vakavuvuli ni lotu. E sega ni lomani ira na wekada. E sega ni vakayacora na veika e da vinakata me vakayacori vei keda. Oqo e laurai e na noda vanua ka laurai talega vei ira era tu mai vanua tani. O cei beka e nona i tavi me tutaki na kena yadravi na veika me baleti keda? Na bese va koro, tikina, yasana se yaco sara kina Bose Levu Vakaturaga. E rawa beka ni vakaitavitaki ira na cakacaka ni veivakatorocaketaki dina. E sa lai veitalanoataki na kena volai vou na yavu ni vakavulewa. E sa vica na nona yavu ni vakavulewa? E sa vica na vuaviri? E ra sa walia na noda leqa se sega? E da sa qai raica na nodra sinai e valeniveivesu o ira na noda ka tiko sara i cake na keda i wiliwili ni leqa sara ga na noda veitalanoa me vanua ni Lotu va Karisito o Viti.

E sega ni da vola na i tini bulumakau me veisau kina na lewena. Ke tini ika e na tini ika tikoga veitalanoa na i vola cava e na vakabiri kina. Kevaka e da sega ni veiyaloni se veilomani e da na vakabulai vakacava? Me sa liutaki keda ga na Karisito o koya qo na dina me da taqomaka. Ni da sa vakayacora e da sa na qai tauca na vuana.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, basically in brief, it just displays the jealousy, because of our communal living. If one starts to rise as an *iTaukei*, then the underline current of the communal living undercuts them from the bottom of the line.

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

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his update on the GCC. In doing so, I wish to revisit the review report of the GCC that was done in 2023. There were eight recommendations, and two I really wanted to highlight this morning, because they emphasise the importance of how we progress, the momentum of our progress like we are progressing forward or back.

- (1) Recommendation 4 - GCC being proactive in advocating, directing and oversight of *iTaukei* interests and aspirations.
- (2) Recommendation 5 – GCC maintains and strengthens its advisory function in nation - building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GCC establishment plays a pivotal role at this time. We have seen the Coalition Government that has now produced many prime guidance documents for Fiji, ranging from NDP, our Foreign Policy White Paper, the review of our security, and a list of other prime documents that are very important to be understood in the context of those two recommendations. I am happy to see the indications are positive and good, and under the leadership of the chair, Ratu Viliame Seruvakula, and his secretariat, I think is moving in that particular direction to achieve the intended state of the GCC. Nation building is very important. To influence, lead and be example in nation abuilding.

Secondly, it is about reconciliation. The GCC is in a very good position to bring about unity. It has a unifying effect on our nation. At this time, it plays the pivotal role to bring about reconciliation, togetherness and a sense of belonging to the other races that can generate that energy of power to catapult Fiji forward for a better future. In my simple view and understanding of how the GCC works; I have always called for relevancy of this great body, its transparency and its accountability.

We talk of the great plans to propel the organisation forward and that it serves the best interest of the *iTaukei*. However, I just wanted to say a very simple thing this morning Mr. Speaker, Sir. I'm looking forward to the productivity of this organisation. How can we measure our productivity in the areas of agriculture, education, of health, and law and order.

I recalled when I was a Commissioner of Corrections, I used to challenge the other provincial leaders to say who is the least represented here? I always remember Tailevu used to top the least, followed by Lomaiviti and so forth. But my point here Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the ability to measure our productivity and our progress. It's very important. And you talk about economic empowerment, I look forward to innovation ideas.

I am challenging my colleagues from my Province of Naitasiri; when do we see an economic hub up in the corridors of Naitasiri? When do we see a central market down in the plains of Sawani, down there, which we did during the period of COVID? If it worked during COVID, why can't we do it now? I look forward to the day Mr. Speaker, that we will see a Naitasiri restaurant in the central Suva and a Cakaudrove restaurant perhaps in the West, where we can see the various delicacies of our various parts. Thank you, Sir.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Status of Disaster Preparedness (Question No. 293/2024)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the Ministry's status of disaster preparedness, considering we are into the hurricane season?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka*. I rise in Parliament today to share several ongoing initiatives; the essential disaster preparedness activities undertaken by the Ministry through the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDMO). I wish to begin by highlighting the real impacts of climate change on Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The recent COP29 that concluded last month, stressed that SIDS were at most risk from the adverse impacts of climate change. For our small island nation of Fiji, climate change is causing natural hazards to become more severe, happening more often in affected areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by way of background, Fiji is located between two major tectonic plates, the Pacific Plate and the Indo-Australian Plate. Due to subduction zone movements of tectonic plates around Fiji, earthquake activities are occurring regularly. Earthquakes around the Pacific Ocean Rim including, for instance, South America and Japan, can also generate tsunami wave threats for Fiji. And an island nation with numerous maritime islands, coastal communities, coastal roads and structures, Fiji is extremely vulnerable to tsunamis as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the nation of Fiji, climate security remains as one of our biggest threats. It has put pressure on our systems, to respond with limited resources and capabilities. The International Organization for Migration's explanation is climate security refers to the direct and

indirect impacts of climate crisis. On peace and security, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating underlining vulnerabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji, climate security or climate change remains the greatest single threat to livelihoods, security and wellbeing. Threats to climate security which manifest through variations in weather patterns are placing added stress on our government's targets, not only on the Sustainable Development Goals, but also our National Development Plan.

The Fiji Government has long recognised the serious threat climate change poses to our country. Rising seas continue to erode shorelines and encroach on coastal communities. Between 1980 and 2016, annual economic damage caused by disasters in Fiji has been estimated at \$35 million. We recall in 2016, following *TC Winston*, the overall economic value of destroyed assets reached \$1.3 billion, nearly half of which came in the form of damages in the aftermath of the disaster, as the national economy struggled to recover.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of our efforts to implement measures on the ground to adapt to climate change, we also recognise that some community infrastructures will have to be permanently relocated as the only way to avoid tragedy, save lives, protect livelihoods and prevent social disruption. However, we will only consider relocating people as a last resort after all other feasible adaptation options have been explored.

While Fiji has moved forward in undertaking proactive measures to reduce disaster risks, the impact of national hazards on our communities remain. Geographically situated within the Pacific Rim of Fire and on the path of tropical cyclones in the South Pacific Ocean, the onslaught of national hazards on our fragile environments and economies are given every year.

For our small island nation, the domestic realities of responding to disasters include, but are not limited to pressures on national budgets to cater for the continuous response activities that include activating sustaining emergency operating centres. Whilst financial provisions are made for bigger declared events, it is often the smaller, undeclared events that often result in the reallocation of ministry and national budgets that undermine our national development plans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like our Pacific Island neighbours, we are archipelago of islands spread out and separated by the ocean. Domestic response efforts are often challenged by the tyranny of distance and intermittent connectivity. Ensuring that adequate response and relief efforts reach the last mile, is often a challenge, but met with the assistance of our regional and international partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an initiative that will greatly boost disaster preparedness is the recent passing of the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024. The Act takes into consideration critical developments in the disaster risk management and humanitarian space and ensures that Fiji's disaster legislation is up to date with a future that is increasingly under the threat of climate change.

The Act captures future developments, obligations and thematic areas that will become the new normal in the disaster space. These include considerations aligned with the reviewed National Humanitarian Policy, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy, National Tsunami Response Plan, National Emergency Response Team Mechanism and Government's future priorities identified in the National Development Plan.

Furthermore, the Act ensures that Fiji is aligned to evolving global and regional perspectives specifically addressing the requirements of the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, Sustainable Development Agenda 2015-2030, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change 2050.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the provisions address the following:

- (1) human-induced and technological disasters;
- (2) whole of society and participatory approaches, inclusion and vulnerable group approaches;
- (3) cluster arrangements for effective response coordination;
- (4) the implications of climate change;
- (5) management of disaster-generated waste;
- (6) engagement of the private sector in disaster management efforts;
- (7) incorporation of regional and international agreements and other pertinent matters;
- (8) civil military engagement;
- (9) expedited clearance of aid consignments;
- (10) mortuary facilities for disaster victims and mass casualties;
- (11) gender equality and disability;
- (12) authority levels during disasters;
- (13) shifting the focus from managing disasters to managing risks; and
- (14) whole-of-government approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024, the NDRMO continues to both, lead and work together with its regional and international partners through technical and funding assistance to develop and revise policies and procedures to accommodate the new normals in the disaster space. Some of these policy initiatives and reviews include the:

- development of the Community Based Disaster Risk Management Policy;
- development of the Disaster Risk Financing Policy;
- review of the National Humanitarian Plan;
- development of the National Emergency Response Team Guidelines;
- ongoing review of the National Emergency Operation Centre Standard Operating Procedure; and review and digitising of the Initial Damages Assessment Form.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, disaster preparedness plays a critical role in the work of the NDRMO due to the country's vulnerability to various natural hazards, such as cyclones, floods and earthquakes. We recognise that being well prepared for disaster is essential to saving lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Government for its investment of \$3.2 million towards providing support to improve disaster preparedness and response. The funding and support comprise a suite of interventions designed to increase the capacity of the NDRMO to manage disaster awareness and response in Fiji. It involves technical assistance at the NDRMO, upgrade of early warning and flood protection systems, construction of warehouses, upgrade of Divisional Emergency Operation Centres and development of information management system and preparedness, and capacity building through a peer to peer exchange programme with the National Emergency Management Authority of New Zealand of which I was fortunate to be part of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through its strong partnership with the Government of Japan, the Government is committed to the extension of the Tsunami Sirens and we have recently concluded site survey of all 42 Emergency Operation Centres across Fiji which includes district, divisional and national emergency operation centres.

I stand ready to answer any other further questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, one of the most critical components in terms of disaster readiness for us has always been government shipping services. I know that previously, they are one of the arms of us being able to reach and get, whether it was fresh water or medical supplies

or whatever, through government shipping services. Have you continued that or are they in a state of readiness with respect to assistance that may need to be rendered, if we do get another nasty cyclone coming through, especially one that affects the outer islands?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I thank the honourable Member for that question. We have our own arrangements with the line ministry as far as the use of government shipping services is concerned. As soon as there is an emergency, there are certain vessels that they have made available for their use for disaster response.

HON. V. NATH.- I thank the honourable Minister for his comprehensive answer. We know Mr. Speaker, Sir, that any hurricane will bring lots of rain too. When it rains, the water table on the soil also increases, and we have seen a number of landslides. During our days in Government, we prepared two document proposal papers for landslides. Can the honourable Minister highlight on where are the proposal papers?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, do you want the question repeated?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, I want the question be repeated, please. Which papers are your referring to?

HON. V. NATH.- I am referring to number of landslides, honourable Minister. In this disaster preparedness, landslides is not embedded. How will we respond to it and which Ministry will take over? I remember we had started some work, so in this preparedness, how will the complainants or victims be approached?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What is your question?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, do you get the gist of the question?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It is a bit difficult trying to get the gist of the question. Where landslide is concerned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a few Ministries that work together, including the Ministry of Lands, where geotech surveys are conducted. We work together with the Ministry of Infrastructure and we are only there as a response as far as mitigation is concerned, but other Ministries are involved in that work.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will move on to the next question. I now see that the Prime Minister is not here with us for the second Oral Question, so we will come back to that. I do not see any issue with Standing Order 45 that could prevent the Speaker from saying that we will come back to the second Oral Question later on the day.

On the third Oral Question for today, I now call on honourable Vanawalu to ask his question.

‘Starting a Business’ Model - NOW FIJI Project
(Question No. 296/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the implementation of the ‘Starting a Business’ under the businessNOW FIJI project?

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

question. The Starting A Business Subsystem (SABS), is perhaps, the start of Ease of Doing Business Project in Fiji with the desire to fully automate Government services in Fiji and this was the first system that was automated. It was actually launched on 26th September this year.

Basically, it worked on the philosophy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that you only enter your information once and the agencies then take care of the approvals. What that simply means is that now, you can actually apply to start a business or formalise the starting of your business from your home. The days of queuing will be over for this country in the next three to five years and that, Sir, will give back a lot of time to allow people to create more productivity in the country. We are excited, Sir, because of that potential that exists within this exercise. It was started, of course, by the FijiFirst Government, and we will ensure that we complete that whole exercise because of the transformative nature of this SABS.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that helps MSMEs, particularly in terms of smaller businesses that are wandering around, trying to queue up for TIN and FNPF numbers, which is just another layer of inconvenience, so this system allows us to actually automate all that. The system, once it has been launched, started off with about 10 applications per week. I am now told that it received up to 300 applications up to last week on 27th November, demonstrating the growing adoption of the system, 350 accounts have been created. We look forward to a continued traction in the rollout.

Of course, just like any system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been some teething issues. To support that, we do have technical online assistance and also a call centre that assists, and there is also a team that is positioned to actually assist if the users of the system have issues.

In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a tool kit that has been developed and issued to the agencies that are actually implementing the system, and the agencies include Occupational Health and Safety Service, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, National Fire Authority, FRCS and FNPF, just to sort of give guidance in terms of how the rollout is being conducted.

What we are saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that as a first system of deployment, we are seeing some good signals but, of course, we are continuing to monitor issues, and we will continue to address them. We have now transitioned into the system that the honourable Minister for Housing was talking about which is BPAS and, that is, building permits. To repeat what the honourable Minister said, building permit approvals is one of the toughest things to do in this country. It is a pain, to be quite honest.

For developers, you have to get application papers that normally reach this high, probably higher. You have to make three copies, distribute them to the agencies and then hope that they all get approved at their own pace. What this system will do, all developers will only enter once and all the agencies have access to the application, and they start processing approvals on the spot with the hope to reduce what is typically a two-year process down to one year or even shorter. If that happens, it will transform how investment is conducted in Fiji. So, these are the initiatives that are being undertaken by the Government.

Beyond that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is National Strategy for Digitisation that I hope to bring to Parliament early next year. That will prioritise the automation of the whole of Government and also give guidance to, particularly, the honourable Minister for Finance in terms of how we fund that exercise. But it positions Fiji well in the years ahead in terms of automation and ensures that as our economy continues to grow, we are positioned to become easier to do business and ensure that in the years to come, Fiji is viewed as a country where business is easy to do.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister had given his response, and

we are very much aware of that particular project because it started in 2019. My only question to the honourable Minister would be, the rationale for changing the name from bizFIJI to businessNOW, what was the cost involved because that means changing the logo and other documentations, including the ICT wherever the logo appears?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The changing of branding was managed within the Ministry, so the cost was internally - just advising on the change.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Why change the name?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we got advice on changing the name. The name probably is not the key issue, the issue is that we are automating the processes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Just like you change some names yourself, but that is really not the issue, there is really no cost to the change of name because even the paraphernalia was sponsored by the vendor, so there was not any cost to the change of name. But everyone felt that a different name was required, and that was recommended through the Ministry. I think leaving aside the name, we can all agree that what is being done is transformative for Fiji.

Measures for Combatting Yaqona Theft in Taveuni
(Question No. 295/2024)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises, Immigration and Fiji Police Force inform Parliament on the effective measures that the Fiji Police Force is implementing to combat the increasing *yaqona* thefts in Taveuni?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, may I thank you for allowing me to be away for a while. I thought I would be back in time for the first question and thank you for deferring the question to this time.

I rise to respond to the question by honourable Naivalurua on the theft of *yaqona* in Taveuni. There had been some theft, and probably very difficult to explain, but we know from that song 'Taveuni na vanua bulabula.' No one should be stealing anything that you can plant.

I would like to highlight some statistics. *Yaqona* theft from 2019 to October 2024 are as follows:

- (1) 2019 - 71 cases;
- (2) 2020 - 115 cases;
- (3) 2021 - 111 cases;
- (4) 2022 - 98 cases;
- (5) 2023 - 57 cases; and
- (6) January to October this year – 82 cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Police had been trying very hard to control the theft, including the *vanua* approach. Recently, I believe, there have been cooperation between the Police and the Methodist Church and, perhaps, other Churches too. They found out that praying about that was not working

so in the *kacikacivaki* by the *Tuirara* on Sunday, *na cakacaka ni lotu ena macawa mai oqo, caka lotu masumasu ena siga ka o ka, mataka ni Siga Tabu o ka, vunau o ka, kerei talega na mataqali ka me qai yadrava tiko na yaqona.*

(Laughter)

Those are, perhaps, some of the things that we have to do where there is no excuse to be stealing someone else's *yaqona*.

There was a decreasing trend noted from 2020-2023 but in 2024 alone, an increased number of cases had been recorded from the beginning up to October of this year. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force has been implementing a number of measures to combat the types of *yaqona* in the island which include the following:

- (1) Dynamic community engagement and public outreach that includes empowerment programmes and awareness activities targeting youth and that includes the programmes of the Methodist Church.
- (2) Enhanced community policing initiatives such as visits to known offenders in the island and profiling them accordingly.
- (3) The Fiji Police has also established a joint awareness and empowerment programme with crime prevention committees in all settlements in Taveuni.
- (4) The Police is also working with the *Turaga ni Koro* in identifying whistleblowers on the ground.
- (5) Increased police visibility through mobile patrols throughout the island.
- (6) Re-enforcement of offenders and visibility in red spot areas.

The Agriculture Station where Police worked closely with the Agricultural Officers in identifying those farmers who are prone to theft and other illegal activities. Engagement of the District Officer in the registration of all *yaqona* farmers in Taveuni and to assist in the monitoring of sales and purchase of *yaqona* in the area. In the event of theft, the District Officer will assist the Police in verifying farmers' ID and ascertaining whether they are registered or not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the measures that I have highlighted above are for dry *yaqona* only. Moreover, there has been an increased cases of green *yaqona* theft as well but currently, there is no regulation for the sale and purchase of green *yaqona* in place. I get very worried when I see big *yaqona* plants presented to me in the *sevusevu - na veiqaravi vakavanua*, wondering whether it was uprooted the day before or the night before. The Fiji Police Force is proposing that all *yaqona* business licence holders must include those that are buying and selling green *yaqona*, as well as its criteria.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Police restructure that was approved in Cabinet in 2018, the Force will establish a new community police post in Taveuni to assist in resolving that issue. The Police will work closely in collaboration with key stakeholders such as young farmers, state and non-state actors to ensure that *yaqona* theft in Taveuni is resolved once and for all. Let me assure this august Parliament that Government will continue to support these farmers to ensure they fully reap economic gains from the sale of *yaqona* to support the needs of their families.

Those who are involved in the illegal trade are getting very sophisticated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because now they are using inter-island shipping, particularly outboard powered boats. So, if you are watching the Taveuni market, you may not catch them because they are going straight from the farm, they are robbing the farmers, straight into the illegal traders who bring them out, *qai la'ki*

vakamamaca tu i Vanualevu se i Labasa. So, there is very very sophisticated illegal trading going on, so we will just have to ask the Police to be more vigilant, and also the *vanua* administrators.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, the issue of *yaqona* is very serious in Taveuni. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his response and the effort by Government. I agree with the honourable Prime Minister that we should nip it in the bud, therefore, as a supplementary question, may I ask Government to deploy a special investigation or inquiry team, whether internally or externally, to really get down to the roots because this is connected to many other parts, as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister always say, the economy, productivity in the village, leadership in the village, government agencies whether they are working together, et cetera. So, it is connected to many others and at the bottom part of it is the economy of the medium-sized island of Taveuni.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure honourable Naivalurua knows that there has been some time that the people of Taveuni have come to jokingly know the group that is involved from the Police to investigate this *Kila Vata* squad (KVS). The sooner we get the changes in the manning of those posts, the better it will be for the farmers.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Prime Minister can be reminded that the motion in response to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs has already declared that Naitasiri is now more fertile than Taveuni. My question to the honourable Prime Minister, Sir, you mentioned about the new police post in Taveuni, simply where will that be located?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- On the farm.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You mean, Navakawau side?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Sir, the strategic plan is with the Police Headquarters and they will position that in the most appropriate way.

Free Water Assistance – Fiji Water
(Question No. 297/2024)

HON. S. NAND 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 which communities are being assisted by Fiji Water in their free water assistance programme?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Nand for his question. Just before I dwell into the substance of the honourable Member's question, I would like to address some remarks made by honourable Premila Kumar regarding the free tax to Fiji Water. That is absolute nonsense, Mr. Speaker, Sir! That is incorrect. I have repeatedly, on this side of Parliament, cautioned the honourable Members not to keep on using this allegation that for some reason we are favouring Fiji Water.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You are!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, maybe, I will get a calculator and come and explain it better. As I have explained, with Fiji Water, the fundamental issue is this, in order to

regularise the tax structures within the industry, all manufacturers of water got tax free status. However, in the calibration of the water tax, the Fiji water tax was increased. In other words, in total, there is no loss of revenue to the Fiji Government. That was not confirmed by me, it was confirmed by the Ministry of Finance and Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we come and make comments in this Parliament, I urge that we be factual and if you have facts to the contrary, bring them and we can debate them. But I just caution some level of responsibility when we are talking about companies in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the question from honourable Nand, the Fiji Water Foundation which actually does the charitable work and is a charitable arm of Fiji Water, is separate from Fiji Water. When I first saw the question from honourable Nand, I was wondering whether he had the Water Authority of Fiji in mind as opposed to Fiji Water because of the separate nature of the two entities.

Basically, the Fiji Water Foundation is funded by the Fiji Water Company which has been established in 2007 and has been focussed in improving the lives of all Fijians through various initiatives that they have been doing since 2007. So far, in estimation, it has invested up to \$3.2 million in water-related projects, which is benefiting over 60,000 Fijians in over 30 rural communities throughout Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Foundation, of course, is dedicated through various initiatives that they have with community development. They look at reliable infrastructure, access to clean water, healthcare and education to the rural communities, particularly in the Yaqara area, who are the traditional landowners and where a lot of employees reside. They also assist with healthcare services for underprivileged communities and providing relief during natural calamities. Education such as classroom grants, is another area that they assist in.

On environmental conservation, they fund a lot of clean water initiatives that are aimed to provide sustainable and hygienic water sources to the rural population. Finally, of course, some of their funds are directed at grant programmes, trying to assist with economic empowerment, with particular focus on women empowerment and leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In terms of some of the specifics, as I have said, Fiji Water has been helping communities in the Yaqara area, such as Drauniivi, Naseyani, Togavere and Rabulu, particularly with borehole pumps and reticulation systems. They are apparently paying for electricity for those pumps since installation and they have a full-time plumber who is actually supporting the village communities. They also have Village Water Community Committees who actually look after or watch those systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you also know that Fiji Water has now started to focus on commercial agriculture. Right now, the focus is on citrus, papaya and honey. They are moving around the country, looking at available land, even in Vanua Levu, Sir, so we look forward to Fiji Water assisting in commercialising agriculture.

Apart from that, they are now looking at constructing a solar plant to support their factory out in Yaqara. They are in deep conversation with Energy Fiji Limited in terms of that solar plant, and most likely they will construct a solar farm that not only supplies their factory but also supplies back to the grid, which will be quite helpful as we try to transition to renewable energy. I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition is quite passionate about the transition to renewable energy and let that be music to his ears.

Mr. Speaker, in a nutshell, I hope that does answer the question by honourable Nand that,

indeed, Fiji Water has been a very responsible corporate partner for the country. In fact, what we are saying is, they can do more for Fiji. The advent into commercial agriculture is certainly one opportunity. The second, of course, is the solar project, and the next one that is coming up because they have now quite a large maritime business, they are going to be making some significant investments into FNU to assist with the maritime school there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are some of the things that I thought I would just add on as part of honourable Nand's question, and I thank him for the very useful question.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, during drought, the schools between Rakiraki and Tavua are seriously low in clean drinking water. I am not only saying between Rakiraki and Tavua, but most of the schools, they run low. Is it possible for the Government to negotiate with Fiji Water so that during these critical times, these schools can be provided with clean, safe drinking water for our children to prosper?

MR. SPEAKER.- Before the Minister answers the question, I ask the relevance of this question because Fiji Water is a private entity and if Government has any influence over the distribution of water, then I think that it is relevant to ask whether the Government is distributing water in a fair way. You are now asking a follow up question that says, should the Government or will the Government help in the distribution of water from the private entity to the sectors in Tavua and Rakiraki, is that correct?

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is, can the Government assist the schools by requesting Fiji Water to deliver clean, safe drinking water?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I am sure the Water Foundation receives requests from a lot of communities and I am certain that they can look at that as well. Perhaps, I can coordinate with honourable Nand in terms of getting the letters to Water Foundation. I am sure, given that it is an area that they are focussed on assisting, education as a key area they are focused on, I am sure they will be very interested.

Implementation of Audit Qualification Issues
(Question No. 298/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the short-term and long-term measures that the Ministry and Municipal Councils have taken to implement the audit qualification issues identified by the Office of the Auditor-General?

HON. M.KNALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question before this august Parliament this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the common audit queries that were raised by the Office of the Auditor-General when they conducted audits for Municipal Councils around Fiji are legacy issues and these issues should have been addressed 10 years ago. These are issues that mostly have to do with the internal control systems, as well as some of the Government issues that should have been addressed here and then. Simple internal control issues, like bank reconciliation, updating of the fixed register, variances between the general ledger and subsidiary ledgers, as well as VAT, rates, salaries and other things like errors in the financial statements, misapplication or non-compliance

with International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). Those are very pertinent in the administration of any Council for that matter.

After looking at all the issues and challenges faced by most of these Municipal Councils, the Ministry has come up with some solutions. One solution, which is based on one of the recommendations that was proposed to us by the Office of the Auditor-General, is to have a monitoring system within the Ministry to audit some of those Municipality reports.

For this financial year, we have recruited and hired officers who have accounting and auditing backgrounds, to assist the Ministry in monitoring the financial affairs of those respective Councils. It is very interesting to note that most of the Municipal Councils have backlogs in the auditing of their financial reports. A good example is the one presented by honourable Naupoto this morning on the Savusavu Town Council.

Other Councils have backlogs in auditing their reports, some have been there from 2017, 2018 and 2019. But there is only one Council that is really up to date with the auditing of its financial statements and that is Rakiraki Town Council. I commend the Special Administrators as well as the CEOs for getting their financial statements in order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the audit team that I highlighted earlier includes officers who are tasked to conduct a detailed review of all these financials, rectify errors in financial reporting and overseeing and rectify all audit qualification issues. After recognising the lack of expertise in all these Municipalities, we have also come to understand that the reason why we have these errors is that most of these Councils, even though they have some finance people but they do not have the right expertise to actually manage their financials.

Also, we have been organising training programmes for the Councils in collaboration with the Office of the Auditor-General to carry out some of the very important programmes that will transform some of these Councils, ensuring that there are better processes, systems and policies in place in their respective Councils. We also encourage Councils to engage and participate in trainings organised by some of the financial institutions and non-government organisations based on their needs.

One of the main objectives of having this internal audit within the Ministry is to ensure that Councils comply with financial and operational guidelines. The Ministry has also reached out to Municipalities to carry out their audit plan, on how the Ministry is going to coordinate the auditing of all Municipal Councils' financial reports.

With respect to the continuation of capital projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has developed a Project Management Policy and monitoring templates with specific milestones and timelines that the Councils commit to. The Ministry also has a project team that heavily undertakes site-visits. However, there is a need to build on this project team, where the skills are required to monitor the implementation of capital projects and proper utilisation of public funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government has also advertised an Expression of Interest to engage an experienced trainer to deliver a comprehensive one-day governance training programme for Special Administrators and CEOs of all the Municipal Councils throughout the country. The purpose of this is to ensure that the training enhances governance capabilities, leadership skills and operational effectiveness of Municipal Councils across Fiji. This is scheduled for next year.

The Ministry has reviewed some of the policies and SOPs that are in place, and we will

continue to review that to ensure that we have all the right features in the policy, to address some of the issues that have already been highlighted by the Office of the Auditor-General. This includes their Financial Manual, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

One thing that we also aspire to do is to have a standardised accounting system within all Municipalities, something we are lacking in right now because when we request for reports, it is really difficult to obtain them from these Municipalities. So, when we have this system in place, we will be able to have a proper reporting system to check all the various financial activities that are being carried out by all the Municipalities. This has been taken on board with the assistance of the Lautoka City Council. They have engaged a local consultant to assist the Council and the Ministry in this particular area. They will come up with an accounting system that will be used by all the Councils throughout Fiji.

Another area is ensuring that all Municipal Councils conduct a Board of Survey. This is a mandatory requirement that some of them have been lacking in all these years. This Board of Survey has to be done annually. So, by virtue of section 130 of the Local Government Act 1972, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done the appointment of inspectors to investigate and report upon the manner in which the Councils are exercising all or any of their functions under the Act. Those inspectors are going to assist me, as well as the Ministry, in carrying out this work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to earlier, it is something that we are trying to fix with all the Municipal Councils throughout the country. It is significant to note the progress made by the Councils thus far in keeping records of all these irregularities and queries, and we hope to rectify these this year, as well as in the coming financial years.

Through the Council's endeavour to resolve the audit qualification issue raised by the Office of the Auditor-General, our approach combines immediate corrective actions with long term reforms to ensure that the Councils are equipped to meet high standards of governance. I thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. H. CHAND.- Honourable Minister, one of the reasons for the audit issues is high staff turnover and shortage of qualified staff in the finance departments of the Councils and one way to retain staff would be job evaluation exercises. Are there any plans for the job evaluation exercise?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. When I took over the office, there were some outstanding industrial matters in some of the Municipalities regarding staff welfare and salary increases, and I am glad to inform the Parliament that there are some Municipalities that have taken steps to address some of those issues.

Another issue that we have right now is the issue of not having the right personnel within the Ministry, especially the finance people. That is the reason why we are having a lot of audit queries and that is something that we all should address within the Council. A good example is Suva City Council. They have a very good Finance Manager who has been hired by one of the accounting firms. One of the things that I have also shared with them is to look at ways of retaining officers, especially the good officers in the Council.

The other issue is, perhaps, when doing the job evaluation exercise within all the Councils, to ensure that we have the right remuneration, as well as the right benefits in place, in order to maintain or contain the staff in all these Municipalities. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, one of the issues that came through during our time and I think it is still continuing is the

mandate of the Special Administrators. We have the CEOs who are supposed to do the micromanagement of the Councils, but there are Special Administrators who go beyond their mandate and start to micro-manage the Councils, and that is where the issue starts. The CEO is supposed to be reporting to the Board itself. What is the Ministry doing in terms of stopping these Special Administrators who are going beyond their mandate and doing the micro-management of these Councils?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can assure Parliament that within the parameters of the Special Administrators, they are given specific KPIs, as well as special instructions are given on how to conduct themselves in managing the affairs of the Council.

Something that I have also been sharing with them is the importance of having a Special Administrator who is supposed to be a strategic thinker and must make sure that they give directions and provide strategies to the Council. I think it is working in most of the Councils. I have been stressing with the Special Administrators, when we have our forum with them, the importance of ensuring that they provide directions, while the CEO does the operational arm of carrying out the operations of the Municipalities.

Eligibility of Foreign Nationals Entering without Permit
(Question No. 299/2024)

HON. P.D. KUMAR 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 on measures in place at the Fiji Immigration Department to verify the eligibility of Girmitya descendants and those registered in the Vola ni Kawa Bula holding foreign citizenship to enter Fiji without a permit?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question. On Friday, 13th October, 2023, the Fiji Immigration Department and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs formalised their collaboration by signing a Memorandum of Understanding to carry out the mandatory responsibilities outlined in the Immigration Act 2023.

The amended Immigration Act 2003 allows *iTaukei* individuals who are registered in the Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) to enter, reside and work in Fiji under exemption status, as specified in section 8(1)(g) of the Act. Similarly, descendants of Girmityas are eligible under the exemption by descent, as outlined in section 8(3).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has implemented a multilayered approach to verify the eligibility of the Girmitya descendants' exemption by descent and VKB registered individuals who hold foreign citizenship for permit entry into Fiji. These measures ensure the integrity of Fiji's border management, while honouring historical and cultural obligations.

Girmitya descendants, those who were exempted by descent, are granted to a direct descendent of a person (that is the principal citizen) who was considered a citizen of Fiji on 10th October, 1970, and holder of a valid foreign passport to enter, reside, study and work in the country. Direct descendent include the principal citizen's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren

[Parliament Sitting was disrupted due to technical fault]

The Parliament adjourned at 12.25 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we begin, honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the students and teachers of Nailagotabua Primary School from Verata, Tailevu. You are most welcome to your Parliament, and I hope that you will learn more about how your Parliament works.

(Acclamation)

Honourable Members, first, I apologise to the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members, on behalf of our technical staff and the Secretariat, for the disruption to our morning session caused by some technical glitch to our sound system. As you are aware, it also happened yesterday, and maybe on second thought, I should not have mentioned our woes from Waidina making their presence felt. At any rate, the problems are fixed and we, hopefully, can proceed without any further interruptions this afternoon.

Honourable Members, we shall continue with where we left off this morning on the honourable Prime Minister's response to the question that was posed by honourable Premila Kumar. If the honourable Prime Minister so wishes, he may begin now.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my response to the question asked by honourable Premila Kumar on the eligibility of Girmitya descendants and those registered in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB) holding foreign citizenship to enter Fiji without a permit, the Fiji Immigration Department and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs formalised their collaboration by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to carry out the mandatory responsibility outlined in the Immigration Act 2023, which allows *iTaukei* individuals who are registered in the VKB to enter, reside and work in Fiji under exemption status, as specified under section 8(1)(g) of the Act. Similarly, Girmitya descendants are eligible under exemption by descent, as outlined under section 8(3).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has different merits, a multi-layered approach, to verify the eligibility of Girmitya descendants who are exempted by descent and VKB registered individuals who hold foreign citizenship for permit for free entry into Fiji. These measures ensure the integrity of Fiji's border management, while honouring historical and cultural obligations.

Girmitya descendants' exemption by descent is granted to a direct descendant of a person, that is, the principal citizen who was considered a citizen of Fiji on 10th October, 1970, and a holder of a valid foreign passport to enter, reside, study and work in the country. Direct descendants include the principal citizen's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. You probably know that in Africa during the wave of independence movement when the African States became independent, they granted citizenship to descendants - people whose great grandfather was the citizen of that country or a citizen of that colony. Jomo Kenyatta was one of the examples of those first independent movement leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under section 83 of the Immigration Act 2003, Girmitya descendants who hold foreign citizenship can enter Fiji without a permit if they meet specific eligibility criteria and provide the necessary documentation. This criteria ensures that descendants can maintain their ancestral ties, while preserving the integrity of Fiji's immigration system. The eligibility criteria and documentation requirements for Girmitya descendants are as follows:

- (1) Individuals must provide evidence that link them directly to Girmitya ancestors who arrive under the indentured labourer system.

- (2) Request letter from the applicant to be submitted by the applicant's parents if the applicant is below the age of 18 years.
- (3) Support letter from the applicant's Guardian and copy of Guardian's valid national photo ID, if the applicant is below 18 years of age and will not be residing with either parent in Fiji.
- (4) Certified copy of the applicant's valid passport biodata page.
- (5) Recent passport size photographs.
- (6) Certified copy of Birth Certificate.
- (7) Copy of parent's Passport biodata pages, if the applicant is below 18 years of age.
- (8) Certified copy of Marriage Certificate, if applicable.
- (9) Copy of Foreign Citizenship Certificate, if applicable.
- (10) Police clearance from the country of citizenship or country of current or normal residence, if the applicant is above 18 years of age.
- (11) Medical Report must be conducted within three months prior to the date of lodgment.
- (12) Proof of funds, for example, copy of bank statement issued in the last three months.
- (13) Support letter from a Fiji citizen considered to be a family member, confirming the relationship of the applicant to the principal citizen, and a copy of his or her valid national photo ID and Birth Certificate.
- (14) Official document to prove the past or present existence of the principal citizen on whom your ancestry claim is based. For example, the copy of Fiji Passport, Fiji Citizenship Certificate, Birth Certificate, Death Certificate, Marriage Certificate, et cetera.
- (15) Official documents to prove the applicant's relationship to the principal citizen. For example, copies of Birth Certificates.
- (16) Copy of current permit or exemption, if already residing in the country.
- (17) Local Police report or clearance lodgement receipt, if the applicant above 18 years of age, only applicable for extension application.
- (18) Copy of employment contract or company registration form and letter is only applicable also for extension application and if the applicant is working or investing in the country.
- (19) Copy of previous exemption, only applicable for extension.
- (20) Search fee of \$12.30 for record search conducted to confirm the principal citizen's Fiji citizenship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table the response after, and we will also be circulating this to the Foreign Embassies for the information of the Fiji Diaspora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Act 2003, specifically under Section 81(g) granted exemption say that to iTaukei individuals registered in the VKB, allowing them to enter, reside and work in Fiji without requiring a permit. A registered individual in the VKB is granted to a person registered in the VKB maintained by the iTaukei Land Commission and hold a valid foreign passport to enter, resides, study and work in the country.

The eligibility criteria and documentation requirements for registered individuals in the VKB are as follows:

- (1) Completed exemption application form.
- (2) Request letter from applicant to be submitted by the applicant's parents, if the applicant is below 18 years of age.
- (3) Support Letter from the applicant's guardian.
- (4) Copy of guardian's valid national photo ID, if the applicant is below 18 years of age and will not be residing with either parent in Fiji.
- (5) Certified copy of the applicant's valid passport biodata page.
- (6) Two recent passport photographs.

So, mostly, they are the same, they run parallel - the Girmitiya descendant and the VKB descendant, parallel all the way in the application.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department conducts cross verifications with national databases through collaboration with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs on the VKB registrations. For Girmitiya descendants, historical and archival records are accessed in collaboration with cultural and heritage institutions. Additionally, citizenship verifications are carried out through the Citizenship Unit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department also conducts identity security checks such as signatures, facial comparisons and passport data match against existing immigration records to ensure authenticity and prevent identity fraud. It is a very complicated and detailed response to a very valid question with the fluidity of the population we now have in and out, and I believe it should be presented at the end of my time for honourable Members to look up if they have any related cases or relatives to communicate them to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Prime Minister. We note the offer by the honourable Prime Minister to table the qualifications required of the would-be applicants to those holding foreign citizenship to enter Fiji without permit.

Memorandum of Cooperation - Japan Tourism Agency
(Question No. 300/2024)

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 the Memorandum of Cooperation with the Japan Tourism Agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Vocea for his question. I appreciate the opportunity to update this esteemed House on the recent Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed between the Government of Fiji and Japan Tourism Agency, which is part of Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, dialogue on the MoC had started in 2018 and was formalised during my recent visit to Sendai, Japan, representing a significant milestone in Fiji's bilateral relations with Japan. It underscores a mutual commitment to strengthening our tourism sector through sustainable practices, disaster resilience and knowledge exchange. The agreement aligns closely with Fiji's National Development Plan which prioritises economic diversification, environmental sustainability and building climate-resilient infrastructure.

Under the MoC, Fiji and Japan will collaborate on key areas such as crisis management, sustainable tourism development and infrastructure resilience. This partnership provides an opportunity for Fiji to learn from Japan's expertise in disaster preparedness and response - a vital area, given Fiji's vulnerability to cyclones and other natural disasters. By leveraging Japan's advanced technical knowledge and best practices, we aim to fortify our tourism industry against future shocks, while fostering sustainable growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, the MoC sets the stage for capacity building initiatives, technical exchanges and joint programmes to promote eco-friendly tourism. These efforts will not only protect our environment but also enhance Fiji's appeal as a leading destination for responsible tourism, catering to increase global demand for suitable travel experiences.

The signing of this MoC also coincided with Fiji's participation in the Japan Tourism Resilience Summit, where I had the privilege of addressing Asia Pacific Tourism Leaders on the importance of resilience and innovation in the face of global challenges. This Summit further reinforces the objectives of the MoC by highlighting shared strategies for recovery, sustainability and regional cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this agreement, Fiji is building a future-ready tourism sector that balances economic prosperity with environmental stewardship. By deepening our ties with a global leader like Japan, we are securing not just the immediate benefits of partnership, but also the long-term resilience of the industry that is vital for Fiji's socio-economic development.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in light of the fact that the agreement has been signed with the Japan Tourism Agency, is there a likelihood that we will be making an increased presence in Japan with respect to Tourism Fiji and Fiji Airways, bearing in mind that Denarau was built on the back of Japanese tourism?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, Japan is a huge market for Fiji and it used to be amongst the top three or four for Fiji back in the 1980s before the collapse of the Japanese economy at that time with the way the real estate market collapsed in Japan. But since then, Japan has been rather flat in terms of numbers, even globally, and more so now with the Yen being so weak.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they admit this, they will not see any growth on outbound travel for Japan because of the Yen. For us, Fiji, we are flying into Narita right now. We used to fly to Osaka at one time and Nagoya is a possibility, so going forward, the possibilities are there. We believe we have the capacity in terms of equipment, but at this point, given the economy in Japan and the way the numbers are still flat, we will not be considering any additional city in the immediate future.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a quick question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Infrastructure resilience is one of the key areas covered under the agreement. Could you just elaborate further on that, honourable Deputy Prime Minister?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conference was in Sendai. Sendai, during Easter of 2011, had an earthquake and a tsunami that killed almost 20,000 people. I think you will remember that 30 metre high waves came in and flattened that part of Japan, the big Sendai earthquake. It was the worst in Japanese history.

What they have done now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is build infrastructure around that coastal area to stop or to weaken the power of the tsunami that would come into the coastal areas of Japan. So, those are the types of infrastructure that we can benefit from, as we also prepare against risks like that. It is quite phenomenal; they even now have a way of determining that. Once an earthquake happens, immediately they know if the tsunami is coming - their warning system is highly developed also, and that is where we are coming from.

It is amazing that the area that was flattened, about 800 homes were swept away in a matter of minutes during that period. I think if you saw the documentary on BBC and CNN, the school where people ran to from the tsunami is still there. We went to the school and we saw marks of how high the waves went up, this is the fourth-floor building. However, the important thing is the way they have recovered and what they are putting in place, so that is an example. There are other areas, on the kind of infrastructure that is built to guard us against flooding also. So, all these technical support will be there with Japan. They know how vulnerable we are, and they are willing to share what they have with Fiji and other countries in the Asia Pacific.

Enhancing Capabilities of Firefighters – NFA
(Question No. 301/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the measures being undertaken to enhance the capability of the fire fighters of the National Fire Authority?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Before I proceed, I would like to inform this august Parliament that today, at the Marist ground in Flagstaff, Suva, the National Fire Authority (NFA) conducted their National Drill Competition and this competition gives opportunities for all the firefighters in the three Divisions - Central, Northern and Western Divisions, to not only display their skills, but also showcase the fitness level that they have in their respective Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the 5-Year Strategic Plan for the NFA, the Authority places much emphasis on the ongoing announcement capability of the firefighters to improve their quality of response, improve readiness to emergencies and increase technical skills, and to achieve the outcomes mentioned, focus on physical development and training on technical skills of all our firefighters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after recruitment, the firefighters can attend to fire incidents, material accidents, urban search and rescue, high-rise technical rescue, road accident rescue, swift water rescue and natural disaster rescue. These core responsibilities require a high level of fitness and technical skills to ensure tasks are executed efficiently and effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all firefighters undergo Required Fitness Level (RFL) training on a quarterly basis, as the very nature of work demands it. Every year, they undergo four RFL tests to ensure that they have the physical capability to conduct their work. Passing RFL tests means that they are physically capable to douse off or extinguish fires, respond to vehicle accidents, respond to people during floods or during any natural disaster, high rise rescue and any emergency that will need their response.

Before they undergo RFL tests, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a health screening medical check is conducted to make sure that they are in the right state of health and mind to take the test. To ensure that they maintain physical condition, the Authority is working on equipping all Fire Stations with appropriate gym facilities and equipment. To date, 11 of the 21 Fire Stations have proper gym facilities and equipment, and there are plans already in the pipeline for another 10 Stations to also have proper gym facilities and equipment.

In the 2025-2026 financial year, the Authority is looking at constructing gym facilities for Labasa, Levuka, Nausori, Suva, Valelevu and Sigatoka Fire Stations, and the following financial year, gym facilities have been earmarked for Pacific Harbour, Ba and Tavua Fire Stations. In the current financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NFA will be constructing a proper gym facility for Lautoka Fire Station.

The Authority also takes the Health Wellness Wednesday Programme seriously. Every Wednesday, all staff are required to participate in physical activities as organised by the Training Department. As part of their annual cost operational plan, Corporate staff are required to walk a minimum of 10 kilometres every month. With the rise in NCDs, all Authority staff should maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Authority also invests heavily in building the technical capacity of its firefighters. As part of their progress up the ranks, they undergo promotional courses which they need to pass in order to advance. These courses include a Leading Firefighter Course, a Qualified Firefighter Course and a Firefighter Course.

The Leading Firefighter Course prepares the officers to take on senior leadership, managing a team of people, supervisory skills and test their ability to make decisions at an emergency site or ground. The Qualified Firefighter Course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, prepares officers to take the leadership role in their respective stations, strengthen their skills in public speaking and presentation ability, compiling proper records and test their ability to conduct drills. Those promotional courses, Sir, are conducted by the Authority's senior staff, internal training staff or certified trainers.

The Firefighter Course training tests the skills and knowledge in fire terminology of our probation officers after they have completed a 12 months' probationary period. Upon completion of the training, Mr. Speaker, Sir, officers are then confirmed to their positions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firefighters also attend international trainings in collaboration with international organisations and overseas counterparts. In May this year, 18 officers participated in International Aircraft Rescue and Firefighting training coordinated by Airports Fiji Limited with trainers from the USA and Australia. Recently, two officers returned from Japan after attending a three-month technical training. This opportunity was coordinated through the JICA sponsorship, in conjunction with the Ministry of Civil Service Training Division. Officers were trained in rescue techniques, fire management and disaster risk reduction. In 2023, an officer was sent to attend a three-month rescue technique coordinated by JICA.

Also, in the same year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, three officers from the Structural Fire Safety Department attended a course on fire safety regulations in Sabaudia, Rome, for three weeks. Also, in 2023, 21 officers took part in a training coordinated by the Australian Disaster Assessment Team on Urban Search and Rescue held in Suva. These trainings, coordinated and conducted by international organisations, ensure that our fire service personnel are well versed with the current firefighting training trends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all officers who attend training locally and overseas compile reports and learnings from training are often shared or taught to their colleagues. The NFA is also building networks with international counterparts for long-term training plans. Discussions are currently underway with a Singapore Fire Service, to explore the possibility of an MOU between the two organisations. On the emergence of new technologies on electric vehicles and lithium batteries, the Authority is hoping to send officers to Singapore for training in firefighting strategies, attending to electric vehicles and lithium battery fires.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also looking closer to home in building capacity for our firefighters. In April this year, the Authority signed an MOU with the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services of Queensland, Australia. This is through our Vuvale Partnership. This MOU will bring enhancement capabilities to our fire services. With the implementation of this MOU, Sir, three senior officers have returned from Queensland Fire Services on a one-week study tour. There are now discussions to explore overseas training for more officers to attend the same type of training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of measures are being taken to enhance the capability of our firefighters. With Government support, the Authority is continuously building capacity of its firefighters to meet the needs and risks of today and tomorrow. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, in the area of disaster related assistance and responsibility, the National Fire Authority is tasked with two main rescue elements - water rescue and hopefully, this is from lessons learnt during *TC Winston*, infrastructure structural damages assessment. I want to know what progress has been made in these two areas based on the previous arrangements that were also made with our overseas partners. In terms of water rescue, their capabilities and skills, and of course, infrastructure structural damages assessment.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for asking a very important question. Yes, the Authority has been collaborating with the Queensland Fire Services in the areas such as water rescue, as well as one that he has just mentioned, which is on infrastructure structural damages assessment. That is something that we are also considering to review so that in the future, training that we are going to have, the Authority is going to have this kind of training with counterparts from Queensland, as well as Singapore. We also have this training to be part of their training overseas.

If you can recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in some of the flooding situations that we have just had late last year as well as early this year, especially in Rakiraki, the NFA Team was there to rescue some of the people that were caught during the flooding. That is also part of the training that the team is doing right now.

They have also created paramedic training, and that is going to manage the provision of ambulance services. We are also thinking of getting ambulance from overseas that will have these facilities to also take care of some serious cases that are near death. These are some of the new initiatives that the Authority is undertaking in addressing some of the latest incidents in major health and also risky situations that they have encountered. Thank you, Mr. Speaker Sir.

Economic Empowerment of iTaukei
(Question No. 302/2024)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament on the opportunities and programmes that are currently available for the economic empowerment of the iTaukei?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Finance for the question. The economic empowerment of the iTaukei is not a challenge only for the Ministry of iTaukei but it is a whole of Government approach, to ensure that the benefits of economic growth is shared widely.

However, it is merely a redistribution policy but is based upon building a sustainable framework that will allow more and more iTaukei to establish and run businesses successfully and, hence, generate new economic growth potential. This is also aligned to the Government's Economic Diversification Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this regard, the itaukei institutions have been working more collectively under the Solesolevaki Framework, to formulate new initiatives for the economic empowerment of the iTaukei. Under the Framework, illegible landowners go through an investment ready programme with the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and the iTaukei Land Trust Board before they are channelled to Fijian Holdings Limited for their investment assessment, or the Merchant Finance for lending requirements. Some of the key initiatives include the establishment of wealth fund by the iTaukei Trust Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time in 84 years' history of iTLTB, 10 percent of the annual lease money are being set aside for future investments. This is a historical initiative that will create a fund that allows the landowners to effectively develop resources, participating in:

- (1) business entrepreneurship;
- (2) invest or buy up expiring commercial leases;
- (3) assist in providing education assistance for specialised fields; and
- (4) in the same initiative, we are already on track to open up a landowners' bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the iTaukei Development Fund by the iTaukei Land Trust Board. The iTLTB has already allocated \$5 million in concessional financing to iTaukei businesses. So far, the sum of \$2.7 million has been approved for 33 landowners' projects ranging from agriculture, gravel extraction, tourism transportation services, logging fleet and SMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also provide some assistance to eco-tourism. As part of its broader strategy to empower iTaukei landowners, iTLTB has committed \$1 million in financial assistance, specifically targeted at supporting eco-tourism projects within the landowning units. This initiative recognises the critical role eco-tourism plays in sustainable economic development and the conservation of Fiji's natural resources, particularly in areas like Yasawa, where landowners operate eco-tourism ventures.

Eco-tourism projects were badly affected by COVID-19 and iTLTB has taken the initiative to assist in revamping these operators in better quality standard to operate in the market. A study has been concluded and the iTLTB management is currently reviewing the recommendations provided by the consultant. These initiatives align with iTLTB's reasons of driving sustainable economic development by empowering the iTaukei landowners to take a leadership role in tourism and conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Vanua and Marama Finance by Merchant Finance, the Merchant Finance has launched two financial products - the Vanua Finance and Marama Finance, to allow more access of capital to iTaukei businesses. The Vanua Finance is specifically for iTaukei resource owners who want to unlock the commercial value of their resources. This programme is targeting businesses, such as land subdivision, property development, gravel extraction and cartage operators. Over \$6 million has been distributed for land subdivision projects, with five landowning groups. This is a huge opportunity, and the pipeline is very robust.

The Marama Finance is targeting SME businesses in agriculture and other sectors. This facility allows women to access between \$100,000 to \$500,000 in loan from Merchant Finance. It should be noted that Government will be subsidising the interest for the first three years of this loan and no interest will be paid by the borrowers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on investment towards landowners joint venture with Fijian Holdings, the Fijian Holdings Limited through its impact investment programme has allocated 10 percent of its capital of around \$50 million to directly invest into landowners' group. This is through the joint venture model where Fijian Holdings Limited will contribute 60 percent equity and 40 percent will come from the value of the land, and the joint venture is the development of property for commercial development. Close to \$50 million has been committed by Fijian Holdings Limited for five projects around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Resource Owners Forum, for two consecutive years, we have been running the Resource Owners Forum where relevant Government agencies, the actual processors and exporters of these resources and the relevant financial lending institutions come together to discuss

the economic empowerment of iTaukei resource owners. It is from this Forum where most of the initiatives that I am sharing today were identified and initiated.

On training and development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the need for more training and development of landowners in financial literacy and businesses is critical. The Government is also committed to this and is working in association with the Government Ministries, non-government organisations and the private sector to ensure that this challenge is addressed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, the need to economically empower more iTaukei by getting them into business is a priority for this Government. However, we should be under no illusion that this will be achieved overnight. Our Government is coming up with programmes and is trying to set strong foundations to ensure that this is sustainable over a long term.

Replacement Crossings – Nasovotava Village
(Question No. 303/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on the construction of replacement crossings for Nasovotava Village in Valley Road, Sigatoka, which were washed away in the 2012 flood?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, we have included Nasovotava Village crossings in the Fiji Road Authority's road works for the next financial year, specifically 2025-2026. This means that necessary resources and plans have been drawn up for the current financial year. The survey and design works for the replacement crossing is close to completion. These preliminary steps are crucial to ensure that designs meet the safety and capacity needs of the area, while considering the flood risks which led to the damage in 2012.

The design will consider the lessons learnt from those floods, especially climate resilience, so that it can withstand the future challenges. It includes appropriate materials, structural enforcement and modifications. Consultations are ongoing with the affected communities, including the residents of Nasovotava. So, as mentioned, the replacement will not only improve the safety and accessibility but also enhance the resilience of the Valley Road network. Government is fully committed to addressing the needs of all Fijians, especially in our rural and flood affected areas, and we recognise the importance of connecting our rural communities.

To conclude, I fail to understand why I am being asked about Nasovotava crossing because you could have asked the former Minister for Infrastructure and his Assistant as they had 10 years from 2012 to 2022, 10 years! But that was not addressed, so as our Government is for the people, for the Fijians in the rural areas which had not been addressed, we will definitely look into those. Thank you.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. I would just like to bring to the honourable Minister's attention and if he is aware of it, that recently the Buabua Bridge has been washed away in Lautoka and the Arolevu Bridge in Nadi has been badly damaged. It serves the people of Barosa, Tunalia and part of oNawaicoba. Thank you.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, I will get more details on that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I do not have the specific details, but in the last few days I have been very concerned about the perception put up by the other side of the Parliament, that we are not doing anything and we have been labelled ‘hogwash’. This term has been introduced by your side, so it has now become very popular.

The other one was being called as incompetent and inaptitude. So, when we, the Coalition Government came in, we have worked hard, we did not rubbish the past projects but to continue and build on that. But one thing that continues to flabbergast me is the Queen Elizabeth Drive which contracted the sum of \$61.9 million was awarded with a variation of \$4.5 million and a final sum of \$65.9 billion. This is what I am saying, that you cannot call us inaptitude or incompetent, when I can also say that of you. But the good thing is that this is a Coalition Government which is not abusive, we listen to you, and we work with you. When we are labelled as incompetent and inaptitude, this Queen Elizabeth Drive comes to mind.

With the final sum of \$6.8 million, a length of 4.5 kilometres or 14.6 million a kilometre, that could have been reasonably upgraded because the objective was to make Queen Elizabeth Drive more pleasant and for leisure walks and drives so that could have been done for \$20 million. So, minus that from the final cost is \$45 million. You could have built 30 crossings like the one which was being asked at \$1.5 million per crossing, including the Nasovotava Crossing. Sir, that is just to put things into perspective when they labelled this side of Parliament as incompetent and inaptitude.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I am saying that not to condemn you, but just to balance. I am sure we are not perfect, but we are making things right and building on what you have started. Someone said, “failed to do”, maybe I should have said that, but thank you very much.

HON. J. USAMATE.- When we are talking about crossings and you go and talk about our road in Suva, that is inaptitude. But in terms of getting things right, what is the honourable Minister doing?

Just a few months ago they did road markings. When there was heavy rain now, you cannot see the road markings. That is inaptitude! So, what is the Ministry doing? Are you buying cheap paint or is it that the contractors are not doing the right thing because those road markings that we did earlier this year have completely disappeared? What is the honourable Minister going to do about that to make sure that people drive safely on the road from Suva to Nausori?

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- This could be labelled a new question, but this goes back to the situation during their governance where they removed the Public Works department. So, within the Public Works Department, they used to have a Quality Assurance and Testing Unit but that was removed. They used to test the quality of the roads, what types of materials were used and the material used for road painting which is resin, he knows the answer but he is asking me. Yes, I am the Minister, so we are in the process of bringing that back to address that.

The other thing is that the quality assurance work was being done by the private sector company who was engaged in that contract. That is like asking Dracula to look after a blood bank, so the two needs to be separated because one is monitoring the other, so that is the process.

Role of FCCC – Fostering Market Competition
(Question No. 304/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the role of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission in fostering competition within the market while maintaining oversight of price-controlled goods and services?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Tunabuna for the question. Of course, the Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) is a very important independent regulatory agency of Government that obviously monitors competition in the marketplace, provides oversight of goods that are price-controlled and also ensures that market behaviour remains fair and equitable.

On a bit of history, FCCC was established in 2010 and actively regulates markets where competition is limited or absent. It controls prices of essential goods and services and also looks at anti-competitive behaviour and attempts to address such behaviour where there is suggestion of prohibited practices such as exclusive dealings, price discrimination, et cetera.

The FCCC reports to the Ministry of Trade, and we do work closely together in terms of just watching the market. I do receive regular advice from them in terms of particular market behaviours and also attempts to address them. Maybe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of the close working relationship, I will just share some of the things that we have been working on together or trying to facilitate.

Of late, there has been the Geogas Pacific Acquisition, Petro Oceania Energy Pte Ltd - acquisition of Mobil operations. There was the Telstra Corporation acquisition which happened not in our time, but that was a big exercise as well. So, they do look very closely at acquisitions, particularly significant acquisitions, that may impact on market position, creating unfair competition or may disadvantage consumers.

Lately too, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do things such as when we introduced the increased VAT, FCCC was very active in monitoring all the retail shops around Fiji, to actually ensure that the right pricing was being transferred to the people of Fiji and where they felt there was some strange behaviour let us say, that was actually addressed there and then around the country.

Lately, as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have talked in this Parliament about the National Food Safety Taskforce. That Taskforce is still ongoing and, hopefully, we can come back and report to Parliament on some of the work that is happening there.

But, certainly, some of the things that we were seeing was the prevalence of inferior goods on our supermarket shelves, and FCCC as well as Consumer Council have been quite active in actually moving around towns and cities, also working with the Health Inspectors in the Town Councils and trying to work together to go and monitor these places and ensure that some of these issues are being addressed.

At the moment with FCCC and Consumer Council, there has been a bit of work going on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in trying to address the issues of food safety and food standards as well in the country. We hope to bring a separate set of legislative changes, and I know the Ministry of Health is actually looking at food safety at the moment and the FAO is working with them. We hope to piggyback on them and strengthen the standards, if you like, Sir, so that we can ensure that we do not have substandard food circulating on our shelves around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, certainly from my perspective, FCCC has been quite active in trying to do its role. We interact regularly on all sorts of issues, and they do help provide guidance as well, where there is requirement for adjustments in bus fares or adjustments in other tariffs. So, it is a useful agency in terms of continuing to ensure that in the Fijian marketplace, that equity and fairness prevails and that our consumers are not gouged, Sir. Thank you.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his answer. He spoke about standards of foods. FCCC also regulates the pharmaceutical industry, and they also regulate medicine. I am not too sure, honourable Minister, whether you are aware of this or not, but the standard of medicines that are actually regulated are not accepted by the Ministry of Health. So, are there any, I would say, views of the Minister of excluding the substandard medication that are not accepted by the Ministry of Health and bringing the standard medication and have it priced controlled that are actually accepted by the Ministry of Health? For example, at the moment, if a particular brand of paracetamol is accepted by the Ministry of Health, that should be the standard followed by FCCC but currently, it is not. Anyone can bring paracetamol of any standard and get it under price control. Sir, is there any model to standardise that?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you very much, honourable Maharaj, for that question because it is part of your profession. I thank you for the information.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think I can only promise to find out more about what you have raised, and I am quite happy to engage further in terms of trying to work out what you have just mentioned. Clearly, the Ministry of Health says that it is acceptable that, that should be the standard and that we should not be deviating. So, we will certainly find out a bit more on that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is to the honourable Minister and it is in regards to short term price control. We have seen during Diwali time that the price of ghee, from \$18, it shot up to \$32. During cyclone time, the price of candles and batteries goes up. So, there are businesses that are trying to make money. These are mainly unscrupulous businesses at the misery of the people. So, my question to the honourable Minister is, are you going to short term price control certain items based on the situation?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I forgot to mention ghee and that actually came up as an issue lately. We have actually put that under price control because there were some very irregular pricings that was seen at the time, so that is under price control currently. In terms of the candles and batteries, we will have a look at that and see what can be done in that space as well.

Specific Measures – Upcoming Cyclone Season (Question No. 290/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament what specific measures is the Ministry implementing to prepare the tourism industry for the upcoming cyclone season and the impacts of climate change?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful that this question was able to be deferred from yesterday because I had to leave early to go to Nadi to officiate in the consultation and the announcement of a new tourism project at Wailoaloa Beach that occurred in Sheraton, Denarau. So, things are looking good for tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I am grateful that I was given the time to go, and that question was deferred until today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Koya for the question. The impacts of climate change, as you all know, is a reality we share. We have lived and recovered from it - each time taking a lesson. In my years with the tourism industry, I have seen all these disasters as a hotelier, as an inbound operator and someone in charge of destination marketing for the country.

In terms of cyclone preparedness, we can never be too prepared. But I also want to commend the role that the private sector industry has played which is quite instrumental in preparing for disasters. As we know, preparing for a cyclone or any other natural disaster for that matter is not a one agency job. When it comes to managing the impacts of a crisis or a natural disaster, it is absolutely critical to have a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism.

On communication, one of the very first ways of preparing is to ensure a transparent and ongoing communication. In Fiji, we have what we call the Tourism Response Team (TRT). The TRT's key objective is to act as a consultative forum of public and private sector to coordinate, share information and provide assistance during natural disasters. It has membership of the Ministry of Tourism, National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), hotel association, tour and transport association, national airline, airports and utility bodies, like energy and water.

While functioning informally, we are now in the process of formalising the TRT that it is not only activated during a crisis, but prior for better planning. This will also involve clearly communicating each agency's role and responsibilities. This includes sharing information real time on guests who may be stranded, flight cancellation and expected water or power disruptions. Part of this includes disseminating information on evacuation centres, situation reports and emergency contacts. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the leadership played by NDMO. Through Tourism Fiji, we also ensure timely consumable information to our global partners to provide reassurance of the safety of visitors to Fiji which is paramount. We also roll out re-start campaigns to let our visitors know we are open.

On Business Continuity Plans, a few of the additional actions the Ministry will take, as identified by the National Sustainable Tourism Framework, is to identify resources and partners to support tourism businesses, MSMEs in particular, to develop business continuity plans and build contingency funds. This is a big part of building resilience. We also work with financial institutions and private sector associations to expand insurance options.

With respect to how we are supporting the industry and prepare for the impacts of climate change, I think the approach, to a large extent, focusses on adaptation. This means, having in place climate resilient infrastructure, incentivising energy efficiency and ensuring access to climate finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the initiatives the Ministry will spearhead is the introduction of National Sustainable Tourism Standards. The proposed National Sustainable Tourism Standards will act as a guide to enhancing the holistic visitor experience and the long-term sustainability of Fiji as a destination. It will also comprise specific indicators to ensure compliance, while fostering alignments with international and regional frameworks. This, amongst other areas, will look at energy conservation and waste and water stewardship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the next few years, we will also conduct an audit of available toolkits/resources for mainstreaming sustainability best practices, and adopt Fiji-specific toolkits for operators to support the adoption and to the meet requirements of the Fiji Climate Change Act 2021:

- Develop a voluntary green building code for hotels;
- Focus on ecotourism products; and

- Invest in sustainable aviation fuel.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very quick question to the honourable Minister, Paramedic Insurance is currently a programme for social welfare recipients in preparation of and respond to national disasters. Can the honourable Minister consider a similar type of insurance for villages hosting tourists and small tourism enterprises when disaster hits and it affects their business so that covers their losses?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a good question. We want everyone to be insured. There are a number of options out there but certainly it is something that we are working on, honourable Member.

Tourism now has a huge element of community involvement these days. As I said earlier, it is no longer just the sun, sand and sea. People want to visit our communities, in fact, some prefer to stay in community establishments. We insist on insurance, and we will look at options to cater small scale types of businesses.

Just a bit of background, because there is a bit of history to this, at one time, we had four cyclones in Fiji, to the extent that underwriters refused to underwrite anymore insurance for Fiji. Such was the impact on the bottom line. We had to go to Reserve Bank of Fiji so that people set up their own insurance. They carried their insurance at the time, I am going back some years now. But that is the kind of stuff that happened when Fiji had that kind of calamity.

I think honourable Members will remember those days back in the 1980s when there were four cyclones for over two weeks or something. Those are the kind of risks that we face. I think today, it is much better because the risk for insurance has now spread globally. I do not think we will ever have that situation again where we would be virtually isolated from the insurance community because of the types of disasters that occur in our country. But going back to your question, yes, it is something that we will look into and be part of a tourism setup.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to, perhaps, ask the last supplementary question. Lessons learnt, particularly from *TC Winston* and *TC Evans* in 2012 for the outer islands, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the main issues were communications backup and transportation. This is dealing with bringing the tourists back. The ones along the coast, on mainland, are water issues. What is the Tourism Response Team, together with NDMO, doing to continue with the preparatory work to cater for such incidences?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the outer islands, thankfully the warning system in Fiji is quite effective, and just going back to my earlier statement regarding Japan, most of the weather systems in Fiji is through the support of the Japanese Government and we all know that. What we normally do in the outer island resorts is try and empty our resorts prior to the cyclone arriving because we want them near the airport. The anxiety, these things are covered globally on television, et cetera. The relatives back home are worried, so it is good that we always try and move them quickly into Nadi, near the airport areas or into the mainland. You do not want to keep your guests on island resorts. The warning system enables you to do that in good time so that they are safe in a mainland resort.

The communication system is adequate. My last resort was back in 2010, I was in an island resort, communication was alright and was also centred through Tourism Fiji. Now, with Starlink, things will be a lot easier.

On the mainland, water is an issue but what we notice is that most resorts now carry storage

capacities that enable them to operate for three days, and some can do more than that. So, part of the resilience and infrastructure is to ensure that you have backup in your water supply system. Just about everyone now has a generator so when power goes off, the generator kicks in within 30 seconds. All in all, the tourism industry is very well positioned and equipped to handle crisis, like cyclones.

I think of all the industries in Fiji today, the tourism industry is very well positioned and structured to handle any kind of disaster. We have seen it. How many cyclones have happened here for the last 30 years or 40 years, but we always survive. When you are managing a hotel and you have about 400 guests and some of them are, for the first time, feeling this kind of stuff, that is the main part of the equation - to make sure they are safe, and you also make sure that your property is also safe. But as I have said, the industry is pretty well positioned and well structured to meet these types of threats.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I ask the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his suspension motion, I wish to inform honourable Members that the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources has submitted his written response to Written Question No. 274/2024 which was asked on Monday, 2nd December, 2024 by the honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs. That is now tabled and will be distributed accordingly.

For the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the last item, Consideration of Bills to consider including the Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill 2024 to be introduced, Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill, Heritage Bill, Child Justice Bill, Child Care Protection Bill, Aquaculture Bill and BSP Fiji Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- We do have a lot on our plate, I ask the honourable Members those who wish to make interventions, the floor is now open for debate, if any.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 3.58 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.42 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, take note that there will be seven Bills for consideration today. The first one is a Procedural Motion under Standing Order 51 and the remaining six Bills will be for debate, vote and passing. Out of the six Bills, four will have a one-hour time limitation whilst the other two do not.

SUGAR INDUSTRY (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 23/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at the next sitting of Parliament and upon presentation of the report on the Bill by the Standing Committee;
- (e) the Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament and that one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on various occasions, I have emphasised my plans in addressing the challenges of the sugarcane farmers. One of the matters that I have agreed to resolve as the Minister responsible for the sugar industry was to give farmers back their voice by allowing them to choose their own members to serve the Growers Council Board. We want to stop making decisions on matters affecting them as farmers, and this can only happen if the growers election is reinstated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to assure the honourable Members of this august House that we are making appropriate use of Standing Order 51. The Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill to facilitate the reinstatement of the process of the election of members of the Sugar Cane Growers Council (SCGC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, For the past two years, I have had many pocket meetings with the sugarcane farmers both, in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The farmers, in nearly all meetings, had inquired with me on why there are delays in conducting the elections for the members of the SCGC. Their eagerness and interest indicate that they can no longer wait to get their voice back. It was taken from them in 2009. Since then, the farmers voices have been diluted with the experience from the previous government. This not only affected them psychologically but impacted their contribution to the industry, resulting in an overall decline in production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is 15 years now and we cannot afford to delay the elections and reinstate everything back to the way it was before in 2009.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual work to reinstate the process of the SCGC began as soon as I got into Parliament in December 2024. Following necessary consultations with the SCGC and the institution representing all Growers Councils - the Sugar Industry Tribunal, the Registrar of Sugarcane Farms, approval was given from Cabinet in August 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has continuously been consulting the SCGC to ensure that necessary work is undertaken to allow sugarcane farmers' election to be conducted before the beginning of the next cane crushing season, which is June 2025. After the election is conducted, the new Council Board or Directors will get into office to take charge of the farmers' affairs. There will no longer be any appointments made by the Minister, which has been happening since 2015.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill was drafted by legal experts from the Office of the Solicitor-General with input from the Ministry of Sugar, the SCGC, the Sugar Industry Tribunal and Fijian Elections Office. The Bill aims to simply reinstate the election process for the members of the SCGC.

Certain clauses of the Sugar Industry Act 1984 was removed to repeal the SCGC election and the composition of the Council. Therefore, through this Bill and the Principal Act, it will amend to reinstate Clauses 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 43, 46 and 47 that were either amended or completely deleted. The reinstatement of these Clauses will also allow the election to take place and new members of the Council Board to be appointed through the farmers election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done necessary consultations, and this Bill is a straightforward one, so we are referring this Bill to the Standing Committee for further deliberation. The Standing Committee will have several weeks to conduct their own consultations and analyse the Bill. My Ministry, including the SCGC and the Sugar Industry Tribunal are available to provide any further support to the Standing Committee where and when required.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I open the floor for debate, I wish to remind Members that you may speak for up to 20 minutes only and I should emphasise that the debate should be confined to the procedural aspects of Standing Order 51 and why the Bill needs to go through this process.

Honourable Members, the floor is open for debate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate the honourable Minister for coming up with this particular Bill that I am sure is very vital for the sugar sector, in particular, for the sugarcane growers. I think, as a matter of principle, it has always been our hope that things would not have to go through Standing Order 51, but we are grateful that in this particular case, while it has gone through Standing Order 51, it is something that is needed and there is time. There is a bit of time.

We know we have Christmas around the corner and to get this Bill back by March will mean that the Committee will have to start working in December, and probably by February, and we hope that, that will be facilitated so that we can meet the deadline that the honourable Minister requires. As I have said, we always talk about not using Standing Order 51 but in this case, there is some time, which gives us an opportunity as representatives of the people to take this back to the stakeholders and to come back with a full assessment of this particular Bill for the benefit of Parliament and Fiji. So, we agree with the recommendation that is before this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Since there are no other interventions, I now call on the honourable Minister to speak in reply.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Usamate and the Opposition for taking this Bill very seriously. I hope we can settle this Bill by March and hold the election before June.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 23/2024) referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 2nd December, 2024, the debate on the second Bill will be limited to one hour.

PRESIDENTIAL PENSIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 2nd December, 2024, I move that:

The Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 20/2024), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had some discussions on Monday on this Bill which is very clear. The short title, the amendment to the Act decided the Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Act 2024 and if approved, this Act comes into force on a date appointed by the Minister by notice in the gazette.

The only amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is section 8(1) of the Presidential Pensions Act 1994, which is amended to delete “five years”, substituting it with “three years”, because of the situation we are in where the presidential term in the 2013 Constitution is for three years or prior. Previously it had been five years. The pensions were calculated or determined by the term of the time, rather than a term in office, as had been changed in the Constitution.

We find ourselves now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have the first President who only served a term of three years, although they may be appointed for a further term. The immediate past President served only three years and should not be denied the benefits he would have derived if he had served the full five years. I thank the honourable Members who had supported the motion to bring it this far, and I also thank the *Turaga na Tui Macuata* for his term, and we do not want to deny him any of the benefits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen that our Heads of State had really carried the flag of the nation well wherever they had gone. The immediate past President had carried that flag to the Olympic Games, World Cup Rugby, United Nations General Assembly and has really been a worthy holder of the Office of Head of State - President of Fiji.

Without any further ado, I commend this Bill before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of three speakers, and may I remind that each speaker will only have 10 minutes each for their intervention.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the floor on the motion that is before this august House on the amendment to the Presidential Pensions Act 1994. It is a legislation that has covered the pensions for Presidents and also for Governor-Generals in the past, those who

had been our Heads of State and also when we did have then the Vice Presidents of Fiji. It is something that is important and relates to the highest office of the land in terms of the Commander-in-Chief of our Fiji Military Forces and all that it entails, hence the Head of State.

First, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister and members of the Executive, who have brought this up because as we can see, there is an anomaly, to some degree, between the duration of the term that they serve and the way that it was set in the original legislation. I think this sort of motion or Bill being brought up under Standing Order 51 makes sense because it is apparent that there is a need for it. No one needs to get a big textbook to be able to see that need. There is nothing new that has come up. It is not a substantive change, it is something just to correct, something that needed to be corrected. I think this is something that the Government needs to realise - you use Standing Order 51 for something like this, that is sensible.

The good thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that this is an Opposition that is sensible. We do have our senses about this. In the past, we have had an Opposition who would sit on this side and oppose anything and everything. This particular Opposition, we do have our senses with us, and we see that this is something that is just logic or something that needs to be done. It needed to be done so that is why, as the Opposition, this is something that was ideal for Standing Order 51, not aquaculture.

The Aquaculture Bill is a totally new Bill. It should have gone through the whole process but because it is sensible and look at us, we are all sensible, including those on this side who really support the other side, we are all sensible on this side of the House. That is the reason why. For me and all of us on this side, we unequivocally support this Bill. It makes sense, it is a sensible move and we are, I would say, the sensible Opposition, not like that lot when they were sitting on this side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support this whole episode of nominating Presidents. We have the process where the honourable Prime Minister has a nominee, and the honourable Leader of the Opposition has a nominee. However, that particular process has now ended. The former President has now departed and is back in Macuata.

We now have a new President. In the appointment of the current President, one of the things that concerns us, which is the second reason, is the flip-flopping nature in which the Government approached this issue. Honourable Prime Minister, with all due respect, Sir, we once again saw that flip-flopping nature which was apparent right from the very outset

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 60 on relevance. Also, it is unnecessary that the honourable Member is casting aspersions on the appointment process. He is talking about flip flops. His Excellency the President has been appointed by a process of Parliament. This Parliament appointed him. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unparliamentary, irrelevant, and an attempt to bring disrepute to the Office of the President by raising the matter of the appointment of the President.

MR. SPEAKER.- I do agree and I will rule honourable Usamate out of order in that particular respect. You may continue nevertheless on other aspects of it, if you wish.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not question the manner in which His Excellency the President was appointed, I do not cast aspersions on that. I think we now have the honourable President who is in place, *Na Gone Turaga Na Tui Cakau*, and there is nothing that I will say that says that there is anything wrong with that. It has been done. I was just talking about the fact that the

nominations changed over time and that is alright also because it is the prerogative of the honourable Prime Minister to change his nominations.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hold your horse!

I think one of the things that did happen here, to a large extent, was the build up of expectations. I am sorry, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Usamate.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill 2024. This Bill, at the outset, it is a clear, simple

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just a clarification, I was under the impression that you had asked me to stop. Is that correct?

MR. SPEAKER.- Well, I have asked you to stop, yes, now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I was under the impression that you had asked me then, that is why I sat down.

MR. SPEAKER.- I said, “do continue if you wish” but you then sat down, so that ceases your opportunity to present. I did ask you to continue, that is correct.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Can I just clarify, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- What do you want to clarify from me?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I was under the impression that you had asked me to stop, that is why I stopped talking. I did not realise that you had given me leeway to continue.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is on the record. I did ask you to continue if you wish, but then you sat down and said you are done. Continue, honourable Naivalurua.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, this is a very simple clear amendment Bill that can be easily discussed in a very short time. It is a Bill that is urgent. Secondly, it is a Bill of necessity. It is quite clear from the discussions on the Bill that it has been long overdue and there is a misalignment of the Constitution to the actual Act, in my understanding, of this.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the amendment will surely bring a degree of fairness to His Excellency the President who has recently retired. If we fast-track this quickly, he will be able to receive a fair remuneration of what he is supposed to receive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House, we are clear on our position. We support this amendment Bill for the simple reason that it is urgent and a matter of urgency. But the point that I

would like to emphasise is that it was long overdue. It should have been realigned long ago, but it was not, so let us do it now. I, and our G9 Bloc, support the amendment of this Amendment Bill.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to support the Bill that was moved in this august House by the honourable Prime Minister on Monday, 2nd December, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I do that, I suppose I should join the chorus of congratulations and well-wishes that have been expressed in this House by honourable Members, as well as outside of the House, to your good self for your appointment as the Speaker of this august Parliament. I am sure that you would have already observed by now that it is, indeed, a little harder to maintain the House that you had, compared to the house that you had previously had domain over in the courts.

Perhaps on a lighter side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since we are well into the evening, in the courts, only one lawyer has a right of audience when he or she is on her feet. In this House, Sir, you will find that 55 Members would think that they all have a right of audience all at the same time, even when you have only given permission to one. But I wish you all the very best, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

A bit of background and context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, indeed, a very short Bill. It seeks to correct a legacy error of the previous Administration. Let me correct myself, Sir. The misconception of a legacy and the era that they did not correct. What was the legacy? Around 6th September, 2013, a new Fiji Constitution was signed into law by decree. We all know how that Constitution was constructed - by a few, quite possibly by one, and forced on the people of Fiji.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- This was after the widely consulted Yash Ghai Draft which was released in March 2013. Later, as we all know, was hideously burnt at the back of the Printing House. On whose orders? That attack on a democratic consultative process was done. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some honourable Members on the other side of the House know.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Usamate, your Point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- My Point of Order is Standing Order 60 – Speech must be relevant. We are talking about an amendment to this Bill and the honourable Member is talking about Yash Ghai and the making of Constitution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not talking about our Constitution. The speech making is totally irrelevant. We are just talking about the amendment.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! I will just allow him for a little bit more. Carry on, honourable Minister.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, could I just rehash that? On whose orders that attack on the democratic consultative process was done?

Perhaps, some honourable Members on the other side of the House know. Now, with the passing of the Truth and Reconciliation Act yesterday, they are now free to tell us who gave those orders. So, the much publicised fanfare of constitutional making in 2013 that provides for the President's Office's functions, powers, terms in office and other provisions concerning that office of the President, Section 85(1) of the Level 7 Constitution of 2013 states, and I quote:

“The President holds office for 3 years, and is eligible for re-appointment for one further term of 3 years, but is not eligible for re-appointment after that.”

Since 2013, Mr. Speaker, there have been four Presidents to-date. The first two Presidents served more than five years. The recently retired President of the Republic of Fiji served one term and, that is, three years. Whilst the two Presidents qualified for Presidential Pension, the retired recent occupant of the State House did not. Therein, Sir, is the error of the so-called legacy of the FijiFirst Government. They forgot to correct the President’s Pension Act of 1994, in particular, section 8, to align the constitutional term of office and the entitlement that must ensue after they leave.

This amendment, Mr. Speaker, that is being brought in by the Coalition Government does more than just correct the legacy error of the previous Administration but also reflects a government that is ensuring that Heads of State are treated alike after they have completed their term in office. Whether they have completed one term or after completing a re-appointment term, this Coalition Government is taking the step to ensure equity to all past Heads of State who have served our nation well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this amendment shows a government that is committed to fairness and parity and in that regard, I urge the honourable Members of this august House and the members of the G16 Bloc to also support the Bill moved by the honourable Prime Minister.

MR. SPEAKER.- I would just like to comment further, after listening to the honourable Minister, that I find his intervention relevant as a background to why the present amendment to section 8 is made.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very short reply, but I would like to just reflect on the great motion we agreed to yesterday on the Truth and Reconciliation Bill which became the Act. I would like to thank all the Members who participated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you were ambassador, one of the few ambassadors we have had during our term out of the Commonwealth in the Court of St. James, I came to present my *matanigasau* to Her Majesty. You became Her Majesty’s *matanivanua*. I still do not know what Her Majesty had told you to say to me, but I was very happy with the way she received me and I am sure that if we go through the process that we have agreed to go through in the passing of the Bill yesterday, we will have the same sort of friendship and comfortable relationship that I had with Her Majesty until her demise.

However, coming back to this Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank those who participated, and I apologise for the flip flop, that was a sincere disclosure. We were sincere about moving for the reappointment of the former President, but the circumstance is beyond our control which forced us to look for someone else.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill before the House and I hope that we can now vote on it and agree.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 20/2024), passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. 16 of 2024)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we move on to the third Bill. Pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Friday, 15th September, 2023, the debate on this third Bill will be limited to one hour.

FIJI WORLD HERITAGE BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Friday, 15th September, 2023, I move:

That the Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023 (Bill No. 25/2023), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023 was introduced as a key legislative measure to safeguard Fiji's natural and cultural heritage, ensuring its alignment with the international obligations under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

Fiji became a State party to the World Heritage Convention on 21st November, 1990, joining a global commitment to preserve sites of outstanding universal value. Adopted in the 1972 World Heritage Conference, the Convention provides a framework for protecting cultural and natural heritage worldwide. As a signatory, Fiji pledged to implement legislative administrative measures to uphold its responsibilities under the Convention.

In September 2023, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights was tasked which scrutinising the Heritage Bill with a mandate to review its provisions and report findings to Parliament. This process ensures that the legislation was comprehensive and reflective of Fiji's unique heritage needs.

The Heritage Bill 2023 seeks to domesticate the principles of World Heritage Convention, providing a framework for recognising, protecting and managing sites with potential and outstanding universal values. The Bill establishes mechanisms such as the Fiji Heritage Council, the Fiji Register, the Trust Funds, along with provisions for buffer zones to safeguard surrounding areas. These measures aim to preserve Fiji's heritage for future generations, while fostering a sense of national pride and cultural identity.

On the issues noted by Committee, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights identified several key issues with the Heritage Bill 2023. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may just outline here, on two occasions, the draft Bill has lapsed before Parliament and it was initiated again by the Coalition Government.

One of the first issues that was highlighted is the 'outstanding universal value' and its meaning. The phrase may undermine the values and rights of indigenous and local communities by imposing an external perspective on heritage significance. This is one of the issues that the Committee had to deal with it here and tried to explain to those who appear before them.

The definition of the word 'management'. The narrow definition of 'management' in the Bill fails to adequately incorporate indigenous Fijian cultural aspects that limit the scope of heritage preservation.

Another one is the definition of the word ‘nominated property’. The term does not sufficiently link cultural heritage to indigenous culture, potentially overlooking indigenous contributions to heritage.

The term ‘buffer zones’. There is a need to specify the size and extent of the protective buffer zones around heritage sites to prevent damage from nearby developments.

Another issue is the Council composition. The Heritage Council should include community representatives from areas with listed heritage sites, to ensure local and indigenous issues are adequately addressed in Heritage Management decisions.

What is the extent of the changes made to the draft? The Standing Committee proposed several key amendments to the Heritage Bill 2023, to ensure clarity, precision, and in alignment with Fiji's obligations under the 1972 World Heritage Convention. The key proposed changes include the:

- Bill Title
The title is proposed to be amended to ‘Fiji World Heritage Bill’, to clearly reflect its focus on World Heritage Sites and avoid confusion with broader heritage terms.
- Short Title Amendment
The Bill’s purpose is proposed to be redefined to highlight Fiji's commitment to UNESCO World Heritage Convention, emphasising its obligation and guidelines.
- Inclusion of Tentative World Heritage Sites
The Fiji Register is proposed to include both sites on the UNESCO Tentative List and the World Heritage Property List, ensuring a comprehensive documentation.
- Composition of the Council
The Fiji World Heritage Council membership is proposed to be reduced from 12 to 8 members for efficiency, with key stakeholders retained for relevant experience.
- Nomination process
Sites would be required to be first nominated to the Fiji Register, before considered for Tentative List or World Heritage List.
- Stricter Penalties
The Committee proposed an increase in fines and imprisonment term for violations, impacting heritage sites, with higher penalties for individuals and corporations.

I noted that there has been some slight increase in fines. Normally, this is seen as a deterrence, but as you understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are actually the maximum fines. There was an issue for the local communities whether these fines reflect their needs, but we will rely, when these matters come before the court because these are the maximum. Normally, fines will be imposed, or the penalties will be commensurate with the extent of the offence.

- Buffer Zones
The establishment of buffer zones is proposed to apply to the Tentative List and World Heritage Sites, providing additional protection from nearby developments.

What is the Minister's role? The Minister would be required to formally declare potential World Heritage Sites before nomination, aligning with international process. One of the key issues

too that the Committee dealt with is the deliberation on the funding and management.

The heading for Part 7 was amended to recognition and management heritage places and is proposed to be revised to establish a clear funding and management structure of heritage sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendments made to the Bill were extensive, reflecting a thorough review of its provisions. Clarification of terminology, streamlining of council membership and enhanced penalty structures are particularly significant in improving the Bill's practical application.

The emphasis of Fiji's obligation under 1972 World Heritage Convention, along with the establishment of the clearer process for site nomination management, ensures that Fiji's heritage sites are better protected and managed in line with international standards. These changes stem from the Bill's alignment with UNESCO guidelines and reinforces its ability to safeguard Fiji's unique cultural natural heritage for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a few days ago, there was a reference made by honourable Premila Kumar as to the extent of the changes made. The changes are significant because once the policy changes, then it will be reflected in the subsequent in terms of the use of terminology. That probably reflects that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I endorse and commend this Bill to this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate and I have five Speakers. Each speaker will have only eight minutes to speak.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Justice for his presentation of the Bill, but most of all, I want to thank the Chairperson of the Committee and the Committee Members, who have done a lot of hard work to get this Bill into the House as quick as they did. I sat on the Committee for quite a while, and I understood the nuances behind what had actually transpired.

Also, I want to take the opportunity to thank the honourable Prime Minister, who referred this back to the Committee because this was originally brought under Standing Order 51. He saw the light, Sir, and sent it back so that it could be thorough.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just some background on this particular Bill, the honourable Minister for Justice said that this had gone through previous Parliaments, et cetera, and had a bit of a long life. One of the reasons why this Bill had come through initially, so that we would be compliant in terms of Levuka. So, it was pretty much, when it was originally done, it was like a Levuka-centric Bill. But opposed to Levuka getting its World Heritage status, it needed to be modified, it needed to be strengthened, it needed to look at how we would deal with other sites once they come up, all the places that required application to go get listed.

The list, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on how you get into the World Heritage Listing is actually not easy. You have to tick many boxes to actually get there. I think as has been spelt out by the honourable Minister for Justice, the criteria for the assessment of it is that you must be of outstanding universal value. Some of the things in there, Sir, the nominated property, and I think there are about 10 or 12 of them, are just some examples, and you must represent the masterpiece of human creative genius. You must exhibit the important interchange of human values over a span of time, and the list goes on, and whether it is on the sea, whether it is on the land, there are many things in Fiji, and this relates to our tourism industry also. Once you get onto the World Heritage Listing, it becomes a tourism attraction, so this value-adds to our tourism industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, to get on to it, it is actually not easy. But along with the list that it has with respect to getting on to the World Heritage Listing, there is a lot of difficulties that we would have faced if it came in its original form. That is why I take my hat off to the Committee, Sir, for having done such a phenomenal amount of work, purely because there are sensitive issues in this.

One of the things that was most important and something that everyone needs to know, is that the minute you go and try and get listed on the World Heritage site, you have to have a buffer zone that actually covers that area that you are actually trying to list. When you have these buffer zones, you are talking about people's land, people's livelihood, et cetera, it may be encroaching upon.

There are issues that need to be dealt with very sensitively when we actually do make the application to do this. I remember, Sir, visiting Sigatoka Sand Dunes and the village nearby and the questions that were raised at the time were very valid. They said, so if you put the buffer zone around this particular place, we have already used up that particular area. What is going to happen to the people who actually live there? So, there are genuine questions that came about with all of this.

Some of you may know that have a particular bat cave in Vanualevu, the name slips my mind at the moment of the area, but that particular bat cave exists and it could be one of the World Heritage Site Listing, it could go on, but there were issues because the actual cave and the bats are looked after by the villages of the surrounding area, but they do not own the land. It is actually a piece of freehold land that was given to them, I am not sure, maybe the Chairman might be able to correct me, I am not sure if it was given back to the State, but it is actually owned by a particular person. So, these things need to be dealt with, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Maybe, the State needs to step in to ensure that it goes back to the native landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of you have seen a \$100 note on which a cockroach like photo exists, that is something that is edible. It actually exists in Navua, Sir. It only comes up once every eight years, and it is a delicacy. So, these are the things that we have within our country that we can actually put in, in terms of listing. We take these things for granted, but it must be done very carefully.

There are very sensitive issues that come about with respect to land and whatever is in it and on it, and I think, Mr. Speaker, the issues that I have actually raised were of genuine concern. I remember the first time we actually visited Levuka to try and get some discussions done, they did not turn up because they were angry, because they were not sure, because they were not able to do many things.

Once this Bill comes into place, there is a long road ahead to get things right and this particular Bill, I think in the next Budget, honourable Minister for Finance, we might have to sit down and have a look at it and probably get some funding in it on a yearly basis so we can actually take care of these things, so we can actually get some research done, so we can have a good team to work on it so that we protect what we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is now something that will have to be included in our Budget on a yearly basis so that we get the system right, so that we can put these things on the World Heritage Listing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I commend the entire Committee that has done a lot of work on it and I commend the initial people that were actually on it who drafted the Bill. As a matter of fact, we faced a lot of difficulty because those who initially drafted were no longer at the Solicitor-General's Office. So, it was a very hard job trying to even get the Attorney-General's Office to actually provide all the necessary information. I also commend to the former Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, who was very, very approachable when we were trying to get this done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with what is in it, I commend what is before us and we agree with the Bill being put forward before the House. I thank you.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my contribution to the motion that is before the House, just a continuation with respect to the Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023, in its current form that has been amended from the Solicitor-General's Office, is perfect. I wish to inform this august House that this is the Bill that everyone has been waiting for.

There are three issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to raise with regards to the Bill that we are speaking about. Firstly, this has been a long overdue Bill and the weight of this long overdue Bill has been carried much about Levuka, given that the introduction of this Bill, as rightly said by honourable Koya when it was tabled in its first instance, was Levuka-centric, the wording in its name itself had highlighted Heritage Bill.

Upon further consultation and upon advice from the Department of Heritage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we came to find out that it was to be focussed on sites that had World Heritage status. Hence, if you see the amendment, honourable Members, there is an amendment in the name of the Bill which says that it is only centred on World Heritage status sites in Fiji and it has been long overdue for this and that has touched on the lives of the people of Levuka, given that it has been coming through the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, then it went to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, it has lapsed and has come again in this Parliament term. We are very fortunate that we are finally here to have this Bill passed.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, with regards to the substance of what the Bill has entailed in terms of our world heritage status in Fiji, firstly, we are meeting our requirements as per the UNESCO Convention. Secondly, if you go to Levuka, you will find out that they have raised a lot of issues with regards to this Heritage Bill.

Finally, after the previous Friday, we finally got the green light from the landowners, and it had been one of the challenging times for us to get them. They are owners of the buffer zones, as was articulated by the honourable Minister for Justice and honourable Koya. We did not have time to consult them and that was our last consultation, and for them to give their blessings towards the amended Fiji World Heritage Bill in its passing, it is truly a remarkable achievement with regards to the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to contribute to this particular Bill that is before us. As very rightfully said by honourable Members who have spoken before me, it has taken quite a time to amend this Bill and bring it in the form that it can be presented into this august House.

I would like to thank the Chairman and the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for inviting me to the Committee after I objected to the initial motion that it should not be rushed through and should be passed on to the Committee for deliberation. We had a thorough discussion, and I can see that the name of the Bill has changed to 'Fiji World Heritage Site', focussing mostly on Levuka rather than all the other national heritage sites.

Mr. Speaker, I was going through the Bill and I would like to quickly go over some of the Clauses that still seem to be a bit confusing and there were certain recommendations that were accepted. The first one is about the Fiji World Heritage Council. It is good to see that the number has drastically decreased. It was a very big council at first but now it is eight. My only concern is, if we are focussing specifically on Levuka, I was told that we can co-opt someone to be part of the council but that person might not have the voting rights as a co-opted person.

This is the only site, Mr. Speaker, whereby we are dealing with people - Fijians. In all the other national heritage sites, we are basically dealing with animals or forests. So, at least, they could be included. In the near future, if we are going to review the Bill, we might have to consider, not just the ratepayers of Levuka, but also the landowning unit. Someone should represent them in this council because their views and ideas should be very much incorporated and heard in the council as well.

The other thing the honourable Minister might want to clarify is on the function of the council. Now that we are focusing specifically on Levuka as a World Heritage Site, Clause 8(1)(a)(i); “the recognition and management of places in Fiji having potential and actual world heritage values.” Is it still with the World Heritage Council or is it something that is under National Trust of Fiji now because there is a National Trust Act as well which manages all the heritage sites. So are we duplicating or is it something we need to look into?

The other thing is establishing, maintaining and updating a database of Fiji’s heritage sites. Again, this is something that was dealt with by the National Trust of Fiji. So, if we are just focusing only for Levuka, these people will have one register and National Trust of Fiji will have another register, so how will they communicate with each other, or is it preferable to have one register rather than having two?

Moving on further in the Bill, Mr. Speaker, there is similar concern in Part 4 – Fiji Register, whether Clause 16(a) and (b) should be part of it or as we are saying, this particular Bill is only for the World Heritage Site and whether (a) and (b) is null and void now, a potential world heritage place and on a tentative list. So, who keeps this list, is it the National Trust or is it the World Heritage Site, because this is only dealing with one particular site now?

So, there are some changes here and there, and it might be confusing. As I was saying, the initial Bill was overlapping, the Fiji Museum, the National Trust, Heritage Department that was formerly previously with the Ministry of Education and then the Council. So, there were a lot of overlapping and these are some of the things that we might want to fine tune if we actually opt to review this particular Bill in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other one I would like to support, is on the increase of penalties. Again, it is very important to protect the sites and there needs to be hefty penalties in place if we want to actually protect our national heritage sites. But very well explained by the Minister that these are the maximum depending on the kind of damage or destruction that is actually done. The Magistrate or the Court might decide what would be the fine that is going to be placed on.

But one of the very important things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this and we also found during our time was, we need a high level of advocacy in Levuka, especially in Levuka because the initial understanding of the people was that they cannot do anything with regards to their building, and that it had deteriorated to such as state, that now some of those buildings cannot be maintained. But it was not the case at that point in time, I believe the advocacy was not there. The face needs to be the same and the interior, that can be changed, but at least the face would actually look the way it is supposed to be, as it was. We cannot actually change it, we can maintain it, but it should remain in

the form that it was when it was actually built.

Sir, a lot of advocacy is needed, and for that to actually eventuate and to implement this particular Bill, especially in Levuka, we need to ensure that we have an office based there for town and country planning because the application is coming all the way to Suva, and by the time it goes back, it becomes a very tedious and long process. I urge the Government to set-up a department so that people can be addressed and their processes when they do an application, can be expedited and handled by someone sitting in Levuka, rather than people of Levuka travelling all the way to Suva and trying to get things done over here to renovate the buildings. We have seen that some of the buildings has gone down and they are more no more. So, in order to actually prevent that from happening in the future we need to set-up our department of Town and Country Planning and a staff to be based in Levuka.

The other thing that is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we might want to consider in the future is whether we still want to have the whole of Levuka Town as a World Heritage site or we want to specifically select a couple of buildings, so that other buildings can be brought down and new buildings can be constructed to increase the economic value of Levuka.

Majority of the building owners they are very much interested to be part of this particular programme, but some of them they actually want to. So, while we are protecting some of the properties as a heritage site, we can allow some of the building owners to come up with a new building. So that economic activity also increases because at the moment we do not have enough rooms if we want to take tourists to Levuka to see these heritage sites, and then they have to go a bit further away from the buffer zone to have resorts and and hotels built.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nutshell, I thank the Committee for bringing this particular Bill and I request if they can consider the recommendation in the further review. Thank you and I support the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the Bill that is before Parliament and that is the Fiji World Heritage Bill, 2023. Before I go further, I just like to respond to few issues that were raised by the honourable Maharaj and that is on Clause 6 on the World Heritage Council.

The World Heritage Council establishes those that are there in Clause 6(2), it comprises all the Permanent Secretaries and those responsible for the Trust, Fiji Museum plus other representatives from the Town and Country Planning. This Council is for those that will be key decision makers on part of Government that will be overlooking these World Heritage Sites.

For those that are in the management in the World Heritage Site they will form a management committee. This committee will include the residence that are there at that World Heritage Site, like Levuka and it will also include those landowners that are in the buffer zone. They will be in the committees. They will not be part of this Council.

What this Council will do, will then work with that Committee, and that Committee is provided with funding. If you look at the funding that is there in Clause 30 of the Bill, the Council will then approve the funding where this Committee will then manage those World Heritage Sites and also include the buffer zones where the landowners too surrounding the UNESCO Levuka World Heritage Site will also benefit and managing that, so they can minimise the impact on the core World Heritage Site.

On the register that you have raised, in terms of the register for the National Trust and also the register that is established here. If you go into the definition of register it talks about the Fiji's register of places established under Section 16.

If you go to Clause 16, it establishes the Fiji Register for the registration of any place dominated to be:

- (1) In order to become a World Heritage Site, and a potential World Heritage place.
- (2) Tentative list to meet the requirements. After meeting those requirements with UNESCO then you can be declared or listed and seen to be a World Heritage Site.

So, that is why this particular register that honourable Maharaj said, whether there will be two registers, it will be all in one register where you will have in that register those that are potential world heritage places. They will go for nomination, and if they pass, they will be listed as a tentative list under UNESCO. If they go pass that, then they will be declared or listed as a World Heritage Site. So, it will be all in one register so that there is no double system. It will complement each other.

The other important thing given one of the key issue in this particular Bill is the World Heritage Site needs to have this outstanding universal way, and that is what we are protecting in this particular Bill. And now in Fiji there is only one World Heritage area that is under world list and that is Levuka Town.

We had issues when we went there earlier with the residences of Levuka, given the processes they have to follow in renovating their homes and also in trying to develop other businesses. But the passing of this Bill will then allow a pathway in Clause 29 that will allow the process of how the applications, whoever wants to do any development will go to the Council, be approved through the management plan and also the commencement of the Council will be requested after it goes to the Town Council Planning or the Director of the Town and Country Planning.

There were issues raised in Levuka. Opposite of the Mavida Hotel, there is a service station that was built two years or three years ago. The issues were brought up on how that particular service station or how that businessperson was allowed by the Town and Country Planning to build that particular service station. Because there was no law available at that time that prevented a new development to take place in that World Heritage Site.

This particular Bill, when it comes into force, Clause 29 now provides a procedure on how the Director Town and Country Planning will need to adhere to this particular Council on what type of development to be done there so it does not have more destruction on what we call this outstanding universal value in Levuka. I think it was done during that time, it was surprising given probably two years or three years ago, I do not know who was the Minister responsible, I will not name.

That is a concern that was raised in Levuka, given that Levuka was listed as a World Heritage Site back in 2013. In 2013, the Government then, had the view of protecting Levuka as a World Heritage Site but we do not know what happened later when that development was allowed, given the intention there was to protect Levuka. Those are a few things that I would like raise.

The other thing that we clarified with the Council and the Department of Heritage was a buffer zone. It will not affect the rights of the land-owning units. If they want to go and use their plantation or build their houses, that does not affect anything. If only they want to go and lease out their land, then they will have to go through iTLTB that will have to get their consent from the Council on what type of development will happen on the lease, so it does not have an impact on the whole heritage area. So those are a few things, Mr. Speaker, Sir that I would like to comment on, and I fully support

the Bill.

Just to end on a few things that also came up, and it was good that the honourable Koya has raised this, because of one of these issues is on the historical injustice in Levuka and probably a land claims tribunal to be set up, given these are some of the interests from the people of Lovoni, where the honourable Minister will know, they have some historical claims on the land and also the *Turaga na Tui Levuka* if a land claims tribunal can be set up and their interest can be brought forward on those claims with their evidence to prove that there were traditional owners.

Already it will be a Heritage Bill, if the settlement happens, the honourable Minister for Lands, and probably this land can go back to native. It did not happen before, it was not allowed in the previous Government, but we hope that under this new Coalition Government that can happen. It will give much freedom and justice to those who need them, especially the landowners in Levuka.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023. Some may argue that World Heritage is a foreign concept. The principle that guides its successful implementation at the national level, is best left to the State party like Fiji. We need to embrace this and dictates its implementation, ensuring the careful blend of traditional and indigenous values.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill shows our deep commitment that heritage matters. We are sowing a culture of respect and reverence for the legacy that our forefathers have left us. We need to embrace this, so that our children of tomorrow can celebrate their values. The Bill is a necessity. Fiji rectified the 1972 World Heritage Convention in 1970. It is a requirement for State parties to take appropriate legal measures necessary for the identifications, protection, conservations, presentations, rehabilitations of its heritages. We are a nation that champion discipline and honour at international stage.

In the same way, we are committed to honouring our obligation under the 1972 World Heritage Convention. This Bill is comprehensive. Comprehensive because, it has gone through a series of consultation. Concerns, aspirations of resource owners, our people and our communities collated during these consultations, have been factored into the Bill. The latest of these consultations was with the landowning units, that traditionally own land located within the buffer zone that protects the Levuka nominated property.

They were never consulted, and I have been reliably informed that the land-owning units welcome the initiative and the purpose of the Bill which was then explained to them for ease of understanding. The bill paves the way for the legal protections of Fiji Natural Cultural Heritage, expressing our shared commitment to preserving a legacy for the future generations. This is our moment and the only time we can work collectively to safeguard what's ours, is for now and in the future.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Bill is not impediment to development. Over the years, especially in Levuka, and on the island of Ovalau, our citizen has been misinformed and ill advised that Heritage halts development. These benefits spans from social infrastructure to economic returns which are crucial for the management of the site or place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill enhances our ability to protect Fiji rich culture, legacy and makes it easier for resource owners to engage with the heritage regulations, the streamlining of regulatory process, offering a more efficient and user-friendly approach to managing heritage properties is expected to benefit Heritage site owners, developers and the nation by providing clear guideline and reducing administrative hurdles.

The Bill promotes sustainable system. One of the biggest challenges faced by the heritage sector has been the provision of management plan to support site or place managing community given approach to management and the availability of sustainable funding. The Bill now provides for this missing core arrangement to support the successful management of potential world heritage place in Fiji. Fiji tentative and world heritage listed sites, this is also extended to support the demarcations and management of buffer area that supports the core Heritage Protection area. This is the first for Heritage related legislation in the country. Our new Fiji Sustainable Tourism Framework promotes culture and heritage as a key pillar.

Tourist based are geared towards this interactive experience. However, Fiji lacks cultural program, content in our heritage space, such as Levuka Town, Navala Village, Sigatoka Sand Dunes, lack the financial support and incentive to be remain viable. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am indeed grateful to be Chairman of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law, Human Rights and its esteemed Members from both sides of the House for their invaluable support and careful scrutiny of the elements of the Bill. This has contributed immensely to the finalised amendment Bill we have which I firmly believe is ready to be passed by Parliament. I could never be firm in saying that the Bill is ready for passing to be an Act, fostering recognition and management of heritage place and space, including properties that have the potential to become world heritage sites. Mr. Speaker, I fully support the Bill.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to thank the Committee and its Chairman for their hard work, visiting Levuka, of course, Ovalau. As we all know, the old capital of Fiji, there is a lot of history. Thank you, honourable Bulitavu, for picking out a story about the people from Lovoni.

I have just been handed a note from the honourable Prime Minister that some *i taukei ni qoliqoli* from Makogai are under the VKB with the people of Navatu. I think the other day, an honourable Member from the other side was talking about Navosa, yes, indeed. As we deal with some of these key issues, it resonates with the search for the truth and, of course, the Coalition Government is committed to doing that.

Imagine, eight years have lapsed, and this Bill has been going round and round. Honourable Koya mentioned about the role of the honourable Prime Minister. Yes, we have a Prime Minister who cares and listens, not the Prime Minister who existed in the past Administration.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, we concede, we go, we change, we listen and we have the political will, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We will do it, just like we did it last year. Honourable Prasad said that. If anything, it is the demonstration of who your leader is. Unfortunately, you cannot say it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Too much hot air.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, why disinformation exists is because people from here do not go to Levuka. When you carry out planning, you meet with the very people. If you had done this from the beginning, we would not be here, but we are here, we listen and that is the hallmark of democracy. The people of Levuka are so grateful.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is going to help improve the area's image and pride. It promotes the community beautification for Levuka. When you talk about Levuka, you talk about Lomaiviti - the heart of Fiji. It also builds opportunities and a healthy productive community partnership.

Honourable Bulitavu and honourable Vasu mentioned about the Council. In 2022 and last year, there were a lot of engagements with the people of Levuka. I have begun to explain to them why. Why they understood because we just sat and *talanoa* with them. This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the gateway but it is not one size fits all. Yes, we recognise the other things that needs to be done. It will be done, but first get the Bill endorsed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is under the Ministry for iTaukei Affairs, but at one time, it was with the Ministry of Education. One of the reasons why it has laboured on is because it has just been moving around. We are committed that under the steady leadership of the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and, of course, with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we need the financial support.

One of the key issues with the people of Levuka is, what is the point of preserving when they cannot be assisted financially? As we speak, the restoration of the Cession has not been fully completed. We have discussed at length, we are so grateful that we have come to an agreement, and this is the way forward for Fiji - by endorsing this Bill before the House.

I thank everyone for their contribution, I fully endorse this Bill before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Fiji World Heritage Bill 2023 (Bill No. 25/2023) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. 17 of 2024)]

CHILD JUSTICE BILL 2024

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024, I move:

That the Child Justice Bill 2024 (Bill No. 04/2024), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, and to all who are viewing from home on our *Facebook* page or on television; today marks a transformative moment in our history.

This new law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, catapults us from old ways of thinking that keep crime rates the same and leave children without rights, to a new safer Fiji, one where children in conflict with the law do not go on to re-offend but instead, go on to become contributing members of society. This law also catapults Fiji into the role of leading the Pacific in evidence-based crime prevention and the recovery of children's lives. We now stand shoulder to shoulder with global leaders in this.

As I have said before, this is because the Act finally responds to why children come into contact with the law, based on research and science about what stops children from offending. One of the most significant aspects of this Act is the focus on diversion and the raising of the age

of criminal responsibility. We recognise that children are not merely miniature adults, they are developing individuals who require understanding, support and guidance.

By prioritising diversion, we shift our approach from punishment to rehabilitation. We shift from entrenching existing problems to creating a pathway out of them. We create a chance for children to grow up as positive contributors to Fijian society. As we embrace this important step, it is essential to recognise how the Child Justice Bill works hand in hand with Fiji's Child Care and Protection Bill. Together, these two pieces of legislation create a comprehensive framework designed to protect and nurture our children, ensuring they receive the support and protection they deserve, and that they go on to thrive as adults who will make a difference in our country.

The Child Care and Protection Bill, of course, sets a foundation for the rights and welfare of children across our nation and we will be discussing that next, but by raising the age of criminal responsibility and focusing on diversion, the Child Justice Bill complements the protection of children by ensuring that children who find themselves in conflict with the law are heard, and the circumstances that led to their offending in the first place are addressed. These laws collectively signify our understanding that children are not simply individuals who have made big mistakes, but they are most often children who have survived or suffered neglect or abuse.

The Child Justice Bill recognises that many children enter the justice system due to circumstances beyond their control, and it is our duty to intervene positively. To my fellow Parliamentarians, this is a call to action. We must champion the integration of these two Bills in our policies and practices.

It is not enough to pass legislation. We must ensure that our systems work together seamlessly. This means collaborating across Ministries, engaging our communities and investing in resources necessary to implement these changes effectively. To my own ministerial colleagues, the success of this legislation hinges on our collective commitment to its implementation.

We realise that the passage of this Bill to Act is only the beginning of our work, but each Ministry will have to do their work in bringing the Act to life. Of course, our Ministry will play a key role in supporting our colleagues. We will play a role in diversion and working with children and their families to understand why those children have come into contact with the law in the first place.

As I have said when I introduced the Bill, many children who find themselves in conflict with the law come from backgrounds where they are homeless, broken homes or being neglected or abused. These are the very children we need to protect and support to build attachment with their own communities.

To my Ministerial colleagues, the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Justice, I pledge to support your Ministries in the policy and cultural changes demanded by this new law. For the Police, this means officers need to be confident and adept at safely engaging with children, to properly understand their circumstances and to engage with my own staff in offering diversion. It means you will need policies, procedures and training to underpin this.

To the honourable Minister for Justice, your role is in training legal professionals and law enforcement in the principles that this new Bill is vital. You must ensure that everyone involved understands the importance of rehabilitation over punishment and is equipped to implement these changes effectively, but this is not just an Act that has implications for the Police or Ministry of Justice.

Schools are the optimal place to foster environments where children feel safe, supported and empowered to succeed. Safety will sometimes be the only protective factor for a child where they do not feel this belonging or safety at home. School can be the ultimate circuit breaker to a child coming into conflict with the law, through the very provision of safety and support. I look forward to working with the honourable Minister for Education and his Ministry to bring this to life.

Similarly, I address the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services. Your support in addressing the mental and emotional needs of children involved in the justice system is crucial. We need to ensure that appropriate counselling and therapeutic services are accessible, guiding our children towards healing and personal growth.

The success of this legislation will not rest solely on the shoulders of Government. It is imperative that all Parliamentarians, regardless of party affiliation, recognise their obligation to support and promote the implementation of this Bill.

To my colleagues across the aisle, I invite you to join us in championing this cause. Let us work together, united by the common goal of creating a just and compassionate system for our children. Your voices are essential in raising awareness and fostering a culture that prioritises rehabilitation over retribution.

We need to engage our communities, to inform them about the benefits of the diversion programme and the significance of raising the age of criminal responsibility. We need to encourage discussions that dispel myths and understanding of our new approach to child justice.

Your role as Opposition is crucial in ensuring that this Bill receives the support and scrutiny it deserves. I know you will hold us accountable for implementing this new law and monitoring its progress, in ensuring that our commitment to child welfare is reflected in tangible outcomes. Together, we can ensure that this legislation is not merely a set of words on paper, but a living commitment to our future.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I commend the Bill to the House and seek the support of all honourable Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of five speakers with me. Again, each speaker will be given eight minutes to speak on the Bill.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise with a deep sense of purpose and hope as I speak in support of the Child Justice Bill 2024. This Bill is not merely a piece of legislation, it is a beacon of compassion, justice and a brighter future for our children. It is a testament to our unwavering commitment to nurturing and protecting the most vulnerable members of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the core of this Bill is a simple, yet powerful principle - the best interest of our child must always come first. This is not just a legal requirement, it is a moral imperative. Our children are our future, and it is our sacred duty to ensure that they grow up in an environment that fosters their wellbeing development and dignity.

One of the most transformative aspects of the Child Justice Bill 2024, Sir, is its emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment. This Bill recognises that children, by their very nature, have an immense capacity for growth and change, instead of subjecting them to punitive measures that can scar them for life. This Bill promotes rehabilitation and re-integration into society. It embodies the belief that every child deserves a second chance, an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and

become productive law-abiding citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is heartening to see that the Child Justice Bill 2024 continues to uphold key protections for children that were previously addressed in the Media Industry Development Act 2010. It is good to see that the following provisions which were in the repealed Media Industry Development Act 2010 are now included in this Bill.

- (1) **Protection of children:** The best interest of the child is prioritised, and children are protected from harm. This includes ensuring that children in police custody are treated with care and respect, taking into account their age, gender and social needs.
- (2) **Content restrictions:** This Bill prohibits the publication of information that identifies children involved in legal proceedings. This crucial measure protects the privacy and dignity of our young ones, preventing potential harm from public exposure.
- (3) **Privacy:** The confidentiality of records related to children in conflict with the law is maintained. These records are kept secure and are only accessible for purposes relating to the administration of justice, safeguarding the privacy of children.

It is almost as if we needed a reminder of how essential these protections are. So, thankfully, this Bill ensures they remain intact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill provides a comprehensive framework that balances accountability with compassion. It introduces several key provisions that reflect both, legal and moral ideas.

- (1) Age determination and criminal responsibility
This Bill raises the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years. This change acknowledges that younger children lack the maturity to fully understand the consequences of their actions. For children between 10 years and 13 years, the prosecution must prove that the child knew the actions were wrong at the time of the offence. This ensures that only those who have the capacity to understand their actions are held accountable.
- (2) Diversion programmes
The Bill emphasises the use of diversion programmes to handle minor offences outside the formal justice system. These programmes include community service, counselling and educational activities which are designed to address the root causes of offending behaviour and support the child's rehabilitation.
- (3) Child Justice Court
The establishment of specialised child justice courts ensures that cases involving children are handled by trained professionals who understand the unique needs of young offenders. These courts will operate with less formality, creating an environment that is less intimidating and more supportive for children.
- (4) Custodial measures as a last resort
The Bill mandates that custodial measures should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest period necessary. This is in line with international standards and reflects our commitment to minimising the negative impact of detention on children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial to address these specific provisions for children under the age of 13 years, who commit crimes. Under the current legal framework, children under the age of 10

years cannot be prosecuted for any offence. For those between 10 years and 13 years, prosecution is only possible if it can be proven that the child knew the actions were wrong at the time of the offence.

This Bill reinforces these protections and ensures that children are treated with the understanding and care they deserve. Children under 14 years cannot be imprisoned for any offence. Instead, they are placed in approved institutions where they can receive the necessary support and rehabilitation. This approach is not only legally sound, but also morally just. It recognises that children, especially those under 13 years, are still developing their understanding of right and wrong, and should be guided, not punished harshly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Child Justice Bill 2024 is a testament of our commitment to justice, compassion and the future of our nation. It is a Bill that embodies the moral and legal principles we hold dear. By supporting this Bill, we are making a powerful statement that we believe in the potential of every child, that we are committed to their rehabilitation and reintegration, and that we will protect their rights and dignity at all costs.

Let us pass this Bill with the generous support it deserves. Let us show our children that we believe in them, that we are here to support them, and that we are committed to building a just and compassionate society for all.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today, in this august House, for a matter of profound importance - the Child Justice Bill 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this legislation is not merely a set of rules, it is a commitment to the future for our children and our society. It is essential that we teach child offenders differently from adult offenders. Children are not mature adults. They lack maturity and understanding that comes with age, therefore, they cannot be held to the same standards as adults.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Frederick Douglass makes a statement that resonates with the intent of the Bill, and I quote: "It is easier build strong children than to repair broken men."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Albert Einstein, once said, and I quote:

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."

Children are known for their imagination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, research has consistently shown that while teenagers may appear fully grown, they are still in the process of developing physically, socially, cognitively and morally. The Bill acknowledges these development stages by establishing guiding objectives and principles in Clauses 3 and 4, clearly signalling that those children in conflict with the law must be treated differently from adults.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my eight as a Judicial Officer, I have on occasions from time to time, been reminding the Police and asking, "Where are the parents of this child?" When this Bill becomes law, it will create an obligation and, of course, with necessary training, that children should be treated separately. It is the acknowledgment by the State and revision of this Bill of the importance of children, especially so, Sir, in light of the young offenders that we face in these courts.

A few days ago, I visited a home in Nabua that houses young people. The youngest was 12 years old. There are 40 of them, who are drug addicts, delinquents, for one reason or another, and I acknowledge the Tabua Family who lives in Bougainville and who accommodates these 40 children. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they share their lives, their journey from marijuana to ice, to cocaine - the thefts in Nabua, I was even told that one of them had robbed the former Commander of RFMF. So, one reason they have been accommodated in this home is because they have found love. They have found peace. I was told that some may have Police cases, but they have lost contact with them. It just goes to show how we should treat our children.

Children are inherently more amenable to rehabilitation than adult offenders. International studies indicate that the likelihood of positively influencing a child's behaviour through counselling and support message is significantly higher than for adults.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very grateful in terms of the diversion. Madam Minister, you can count on me. There has been some discussion this year with Australia and New Zealand, and next year the ministry is going to take a tour to New Zealand. Sir, you are fully aware of how the Maori community and the regional government have treated this issue in terms of the unique problems facing the Maoris and how they deal with it.

Our prisons are full of *iTaukei*. They start off as young offenders - juveniles and migrate to become a common criminal. The problem in our justice system is that we have not created sufficient diversion. We have left out what we have - our culture and tradition, how to change a man and how to change a woman. And it is about time, and I think with this Coalition Government, we are committed to do that.

By focussing on rehabilitation rather than punishment, we can help these young individuals to avoid a life of crime but to instead, nurture them into productive law-abiding citizens. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, diversion can reduce offending rate by up to 70 percent, depending on the quality of the programme.

Our Bill introduces provisions for diversity, particularly, Clause 18, regarding Police cautions, or based on successful practices already implemented by the Juvenile Bureau and international best practices.

Community-fare based measures have also greater efficacy than custodial orders, and I also call on faith leaders. It is about time that they should step in. I do so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the issue of crime, I see it an issue that really focusses on the *iTaukei* people. Some of the disconnection that we are faced before Independence, after Independence and, of course, the development phase that we have gone through. So, it is about time that faith-based religious leaders should stand up and make and account, take real action in terms of the rehabilitation of these young offenders.

The Child Justice Bill 2024 will replace the outdated sections of the Juvenile Act concerning children in conflict with the law. It outlines special treatment for children at the various stages of the criminal justice process, from the initial police contact, through to trial, rehabilitation and reintegration. The Bill defines a child as anyone under the age of 18, alive both juvenile as criminal responsible is the age of 10.

The Bill is crucial because our current Act is outdated and does not reflect Fiji's advancement in the juvenile justice system. The Child Justice Bill 2024 consolidates best practices for handling children in court with the law, while ensuring compliance with international commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In conclusion, Sir, let us embrace this opportunity to enact meaningful changes for our children, transforming lives through understanding, compassion and effective rehabilitation, rather than punishment. Together, we can build a brighter future for all Fijian children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I endorse and support the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture, we will suspend proceedings for dinners. Parliament will resume proceedings in one hour's time. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.35 p.m.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand to contribute to the Child Justice Bill 2024 before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the onset, the Child Justice Bill 2024 is an essential Bill and a very important one. It is good to see that this Bill is aiming to improve the treatment of children within the criminal justice system by aligning it with international standards for the rights of children.

The Bill focusses on addressing children in conflict with the law who are under the age of 18 years, in a way that prioritizes rehabilitation, education, reintegration rather than punishment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally agree that children cannot be pitched similar to an adult in a criminal justice system. They need special attention and greater effort in education, rehabilitation and reintegration. However, it does not mean, in any way, that a child between a certain age cannot be held criminally responsible for his or her actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, setting the age of criminal responsibility for a child to 14 years may seem like a step towards addressing juvenile crime and aligning it with international standards. However, it carries a number of potential disadvantages for the criminal justice system and the community at large. During some of my discussions with the community, the following concerns were raised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people believe that it is morally wrong not to hold a person below the age 14 responsible for a crime which, in a number of cases, were committed knowingly. They strongly believe that a child who is over the age of 10 years can commit a crime should be held accountable for his or her action.

Setting the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years could mean that certain children, particularly those who commit violent crimes or other serious offences, may not face the criminal justice's consequence, even though they are capable of understanding the wrongfulness of their behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these people are quite frustrated with this. They have expressed that they are making the system too lenient on young offenders who commit violent crimes. This gravely undermines the trust in the justice system and will cause people to question the effectiveness of our justice policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if a child who is under 14 years of age, commits a crime and he or she is not held criminally accountable and gets away with a knock in the knuckles, we will be missing opportunities for early interventions. This probably would mean, raising a hardened criminal in the later years. By delaying accountability until 14, young offenders might not receive the rehabilitation or deterrence opportunities they need at this critical development stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if our criminal justice system delays responsibility until the child reaches 14 years of age, we will be condoning the abnormal and unacceptable behaviours of a child, and this child may never really understand the consequence of such behaviours. For children who are repeat offenders who commit serious violent crimes, setting the criminal responsibility age to 14 years may allow them to avoid appropriate consequence for their action during the time when they could still be rehabilitated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without early intervention, these children might grow up into adolescence and later, adults, who will continue to engage in criminal activities, perpetuating a vicious cycle of

crime. This delay for these children in facing the consequence of their actions could lessen the deterrence effect of our criminal justice system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children are very smart these days. If they are aware that they will not face the criminal consequence of their action until they reach the age of 14, they may not feel deterred from committing crime. If they know that there are no immediate legal consequence, they would be more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour, leading to higher crime rates in the long run.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as children grow, their behaviour becomes more complex. It could be harder to intervene effectively with a 14 year old, who has already been committing crime for years. Early intervention is often the most successful in shaping positive behaviours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years may disproportionately affect children from marginalised communities, who are already at a higher risk of criminal behaviour due to factors like poverty, neglect or family instability. If serious offenders who are often from disadvantaged backgrounds are not held accountable at early stage, our community could see a rise in crime rates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these children who do not face the consequence of their criminal activities, might struggle to reintegrate into our society and thus, continuing a cycle of criminal behaviour that impacts the entire community. This lack of action on offenders could lead to higher crime rates in the community, as these children grow older, negatively affect the public safety and security of the community and, ultimately, having an effect in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, criminal gangs and illicit drug traders will take advantage of the setting up of the criminal responsibility age. Children below the age of 14 will be widely recruited to carry out these criminal activities, knowing very well that a child can get away without facing any dire consequences. By setting the criminal responsibility age to 14, we are openly inviting these gangs to use children in their criminal activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one does not become a criminal just like that, it probably starts at a young age - petty crimes, such as picking stuff from someone's compound, petty garden thefts, picking coconuts from trees that does not belong to you or without the permission of people. If these behaviours are not reprimanded earlier, then these small time petty thefts or activities can get a snowball effect, gradually growing into violent robberies, like the recent one in a supermarket in Nasinu. These are not the people who wake up one day and decide, "Let us go and rob a supermarket." These are people who have gone through the mill and come to this stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public fears that children who commit serious crimes at a young age should face the consequence and should be rehabilitated. Setting the criminal responsibility age of 14 can lead to perception of impunity and leniency.

The fear, Mr. Speaker, is that if the Committee believes that young criminals or young children are escaping the justice system because of age restriction, it could reduce public confidence in the justice system. The public and the victims of crime will view the justice system as ineffective, and particularly if it allows dangerous offenders to evade responsibility actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force is also worried about setting up the criminal responsibility age at 14. They are worried that crimes will increase, and public safety is at risk. A balanced approach is needed to ensure children are held appropriately accountable for their actions. I hope these necessary amendments will be done to the Bill to muster the public confidence in our criminal justice system, whilst safeguarding our children. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the

Bill.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very short. I rise in support of the Child Justice Bill 2024 and the point that was raised by honourable Sachida Nand, the next Bill will cater for that which is the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024. Those under 14 years old, if they commit, they will be treated as a child in need for care. That is the second Bill that will cover for that age group and how they will be rehabilitated once they agree if they could be used, given the increase in criminal age to 14 years.

Also, in response to the immediate statement by the Assistant Commissioner of Police Crime, Mr. Mesake Waqa, who also raised the same issue, that to change the age of criminality could result in increase in juvenile crimes. But if you look at Clause 13 of the Bill that is before us, which is one of the most important sections in this particular Bill, a child will be considered for diversion. One of the deciding factors there is that a few officers will be empowered to carry out the diversion - Clause 13(1)(a), in a case of summary offence. The officer in charge of the police station, in consultation with the charges officer, will be doing that diversion, or they will be empowered to do diversion.

Clause 13(b) in the case of an indictable offence other than murder or attempted murder, it will be done by a prosecutor. So, for murder and attempted murder, they will not be covered in the diversion, but they will have to go through the criminal justice system. Other offences other than murder and attempted murder will be considered for diversion.

In Clause 13(2), it talks about the requirements and the requirements also for the interest of justice in subclause (d), "... that the matter be resolved through diversion" in determining whether the diversion is in the interest of justice subject to that subclause (b), regard must be made to the following, the:

- (1) nature and seriousness of the offence; and
- (2) background and circumstances of the child.

So, if this child is going through diversion once or twice and keeps reoffending, that will be another consideration that needs to be considered, whether this child is taking advantage of this diversion. Also, the views expressed by the victim and the need to ensure there is public safety. If this particular child under 14 or above 14 is committing and turn to endanger public safety, that will be the grounds whether to consider them for diversion or not.

The Committee sought clarification from the drafters on the view expressed by honourable Sachida Nand and also the Fiji Police Force, and they have assured us that the powers that will be with the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), that is in Clause 13(6), "...may issue guidance on the exercise of discretion. So, the DPP will then decide on the seriousness of the offence, the nature of the offence and other things that should qualify this particular child to continue through diversion. If the child does not learn from the diversion plan and all other rehabilitation, then the DPP will then decide whether this particular child will still go through the normal criminal justice system.

I just wanted to clarify that point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where diversion will be applied, or the discretion will be with the DPP to decide on whether the child will go for diversion or not. How the juvenile court will then decide the orders on what other punishment the child will have to go through, community work, plus other things that are available there to rehabilitate the child.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in support of the Child Justice Bill 2024 that was moved in the Parliament by the honourable

Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection. It is after dinner, Sir, and perhaps, a little story to keep us awake in the course of tonight's proceedings.

Four to five years ago, I was sitting in a court just behind this Chambers waiting for my client's case to be called. The juvenile list was being called, and the first three to appear would have been roughly 13 years, perhaps 14 years old. They looked messy, scrawny, punk hair style and whole size in stature. I imagined, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they did not attend school and were being charged for gang theft to a house, commonly known as aggravated burglary.

The Juvenile Magistrate wanted them to be bailed, so she asked for the parents to be available in the afternoon. In this case, one of the fathers of the young boys comes and says to the Juvenile Magistrate, "I do not want to be responsible for this boy, if he commits another offence or if he does not turn up to court on his next date." The Juvenile Magistrate had no choice but to order that the child be kept as a ward of the State.

In the new Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, those types of heart wrenching moments will be overcome because the new law will provide for a presumption in favour of the release of the child. Fiji's Juveniles Act will be 51 years old this year. There are features of the Child Justice Bill 2024 that needs to be highlighted in tonight's deliberation.

Firstly, the age of criminal responsibility as has been highlighted by the speakers before me, has now been moved up to 14 years as opposed to 10 years in the previous regime under the Crimes Act 2009. I am aware, as has been raised by the honourable Nand, that the police had had some reservations on the enlargement of the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14. But by some benchmark, Mr. Speaker, Sir, New Zealand has a criminal responsibility of 14, Australia is between 12 to 14. For the countries between that bracket, such as Australia, 12 to 14, must be proved that the child knows or understands the context of the criminality that he or she has done.

In Canada, 12 years; in Africa between 10 years to 14 years; in the United States it is quite interesting, 14 is the age of criminal responsibility, but it is reduced in case of intentional homicide and other life-threatening offences to 12 years. However, an adult between the age of 18 years to 21 years, can still be sentenced as a juvenile under the juvenile justice system, if it is proved that the person is mentally immature. So, the increase in the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years is of course supported by science.

Science that was not developed in 1973, when the Juveniles Act came into law. Science informs this decision-making process and confirms that children below 14 years are still in developing stage, physically and most importantly, psychologically. Afterall, the test of criminal responsibility, is understanding of the wrongness of one's conduct, and not the physical size of the child. Understanding or knowing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you would understand, is a cognitive assessment and there is no better guide than science.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statutory diversion process is now permitted under Clause 12 and 16 of the Bill. I remember Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2006, when I was at Legal Aid Commission of Fiji, there was a Fiji Australia Justice Sector Programme that had started just to pilot a juvenile diversion programme only for summary offences without the statutory provisions that would allow it to happen freely. Magistrates in those times, were urged to use the discretion they had in sentencing, to manoeuvre their way in between sentencing harshly, as the law required of them and diversion, as humanity would demand, especially Mr. Speaker, Sir, for youth offenders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Juvenile Act, protection of juvenile was also provided. But in the advent of more definition of human rights, science upgrade of police procedure in criminal

interrogations, a more defined criminal justice is needed. Now, police conduct in managing child offending is going to be statutorily imposed. Section 25 provides the guardrails and prescriptions on how police should conduct themselves in investigations. Any form of physical force can only be minimally used as necessary and must be documented by a Child Justice Officer. So, we can expect the proceedings would be more informative in the Child Justice Court.

The new law would ensure that the timeline of the child encountering the police for the first time and production at Child Justice Court is documented, known, accounted for, and presented in evidence if needed. It prioritises the interests of the child. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the focus of the new Bill. How do we address child justice? Provide diversion, remove stigma and still be able to create a pathway for a child offender to become somebody better in his or her own life later.

The Child Justice Bill will open the opportunity, create intervention and provide the standpost where they can get to know, that their makeup, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has many good thoughts about them. Thoughts, that if they were to be counted, are more than the sense of the sea. It removes the stigma of conviction and sentence from the life of a child. By removing that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world becomes a yolk of opportunity for the child, albeit with a small interaction with the law.

I have sat in too many courtrooms, both early in the days as a prosecutor and later as a private practice to see young lives being wasted. Some of their first altercation with the law, handled by adults as and with a system that treats them as adults by default, creates recidivist who go in and out of prison their entire life. Imagine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if their first appearance, they would have been diverted, rehabilitated, followed up and strongly urged to reform. Their lives would have been markedly different from the recidivists they are today.

We have an opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to do right to our future generation, even if they fought. The Child Justice Bill will ensure that the rights are fully observed. Their treatment is that of a child. The environment is calm and homely, and every opportunity to create a better life is provided.

The parent is involved under Clause 21. The role of the Child Justice Officer is well defined and must be respected by police at all costs. Manner of police interview is now going to be regulated by Clause 24, and the police will be required to develop officers within their ranks in special training in handling child justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my contribution to the Child Justice Bill 2024, and I would urge all honourable Members of Parliament to support the motion that is brought in by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection. Thank you very much.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think all the honourable members have contributed to the debate on this Bill. I now call on the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection to speak in reply.

HON. L.D. TABUYA-Mr. Speaker. Sir, and honourable Members, the passage of this Bill will not be a standalone victory if it happens tonight. It is really going to be part of a broader commitment to try something new, something that is evidence-based and, yes, there may be differing opinions, but they are just that - opinions. They are myths that need to be dispelled and that is where I seek the assistance of us, as Members of Parliament and as representatives of the people, to dispel those myths. When you meet with your communities and explain to them, I think they will understand.

When we work together with the Child Care Protection Bill 2024, which will come up next, we really are laying a foundation for a future where each child gets another chance. Talking about

second chances, third chances, this is it. It needs to begin from childhood, not when they are older or when they become adults.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to sincerely thank the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, especially in sitting beyond normal hours, and their hard work to bring the Bills in this sitting before the end of this Parliament session. I thank them very much.

I also wish to thank our development partners, especially UNICEF, for working with the Ministry to bring these Bills. These Bills have been 12 years in the making, and we have had contributions, and I acknowledge the contributions and hard work of my predecessors, the former Ministers for Women. I thank the leadership and the FijiFirst Government for initiating this, and we have continued this work and here it is today.

So, this is something for all of us to celebrate and all of us to be proud of. It is historic. It has been a week of history created here, and I think our children will remember us when they become adults, that we have made this change. I, therefore, seek the support of Parliament to vote in favour of this Bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Child Justice Bill 2024 (Bill No. 4/2024) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. 18 of 2024)]

CHILD CARE AND PROTECTION BILL 2024

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 23rd May, 2024, I move:

That the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 (Bill No. 5/2024), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members, The Child Care and Protection Bill embodies our commitment to the well-being of children in Fiji. The Bill commits us to protecting and supporting all Fijian children, but especially those deprived of parental care, and those who cannot remain with their families because of abuse or neglect.

This Bill displays our commitment also to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which we ratified 30 years ago. Our Ministry in partnership with UNICEF produced the latest 2024 report titled Economic Costs of Violence Against Children in Fiji, and this survey conducted revealed shocking statistics, 81 percent of our children, aged 1 to 14 years, experience some form of violent discipline, 65 percent of our children experience psychological aggression, 68 percent of our children experience some form of physical punishment during this period in their lifetime. This survey also revealed a significant problem, which is called poly victimisation. The exposure of a single child to multiple types of abuse.

The study revealed that the total economic cost of violence against children in Fiji, is estimated about \$460 million which is equivalent to about 4 percent of our GDP annually. This Bill represents the Coalition Government's response to the shocking statistics and the urgent need to protect and care for our children.

The National Development Plan aims to eliminate violence against children through responsible policies and coordinated referral networks. The Bill replaces the outdated Child Protection Philosophy of Rescue and Removal which is over 50 years old. This outdated philosophy ignores the importance of children's holistic development within their own family and community. Indeed, it ignores the harm of depriving a child of their broader families nurture and the importance of their community.

Mr. Speaker, under the United Nations Committee which monitors the Child Rights Convention as pointed out, that the number of residential homes and children coming into residential care in Fiji keeps increasing over the years. Most children find themselves in residential care because they have been neglected or abused by family. They spend very long periods of time in residential care with no love of family or their community. We cannot let this continue. That is why the Child Care and Protection Bill prioritises family preservation and family-based forms of care. It explicitly acknowledges and reinforces the key role of parents, families and communities in raising children and protecting them from harm. It also makes the distinction between a child in need of care and protection and a child in conflict with the law.

Importantly, under the current child protection laws, the Government can only intervene once a child has been abused, and this is too late. Success only comes when we prevent or intervene early, and this Bill encompasses that prevention including early intervention and response services. Options for voluntary care plans can be negotiated with the child's parents or caregivers where court orders are used as a last resort when agreements cannot be reached. The child, parents, extended family and community leaders can be actively involved with care planning.

Priorities given to kinship and family-based care. Prevention and early intervention has to be the new talk that we walk. That is why this Bill is revolutionary and it is transformative change because we do need to prevent and intervene early before it is too late. This will be the key to breaking the cycles of abuse that are being inflicted upon about 80 percent of our children.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I commend the Bill before the House, and I seek the support of Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have a list of speakers with me, honourable Members. The floor is now open. There are six speakers with six minutes each.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk on this particular Bill. I think over here in this House, for a long time now, we have been talking about the social ills that impact our country. When we talk about it, at the end of the day, the solution that we always come back to is the family.

At the heart of that family is children. That is why this is important. I think if we are able to do what this Bill wants us to do, is we are to have an impact on all the other problems that we are talking about. If we are talking about drugs and all of those things, it comes back to this, to being able to look after children, to be able to care and protect for them.

If you look at the title of the Bill, it talks about providing for welfare and providing protection for children. I think this is fundamental. The crux of this Bill is to be able to do these two things.

One, to provide for that protection, to provide for that welfare. Secondly, to promote it, to make sure that it becomes instilled in the minds of everyone about the importance of this. To promote the welfare and to promote the protection of children as something that is important for us.

The way that I see it, children are actually our future. If our children do well in strong families and if they do not have care and protection that allows them to become the kind of people that they are supposed to be, this Bill helps us to get there. It establishes a department for children that tries to make sure that children get the future that they deserve, and when children get the future that they deserve, that means the future of our country is in better hands. I look at that Bill, this is precisely what it is talking about because the breakdown of the family is the root of most our problems. When there are problems in families, as we will see, later on we will talk about the responsibility of parents, which is part of Clause 7 of this Bill is very important. It will be able to address that particular issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just looking at some of the Clauses that we have in this Bill, I will just look at some of the big motherhood things that we have in this Bill. It talks about the objectives of the Bill to promote the wellbeing of children, promote them and protect them. That is basically what we are talking about here. This Bill acknowledges that this is something that cannot just be done by schools or just the department or just a family or just a church. There is a role for everyone. I think at the end of the day, one of the messages that has come through this is Part 4 and Part A - the role of parents, families, communities, children, government agencies, non-government agencies, the importance of collaboration with that ultimate aim of making sure we can care and look after the children. Providing for the care and protection of children in circumstances where their parents, families and communities are unable to do so.

In the past, in our communities when children did not have that care and protection, we had extended families that could help. But where we are going through these flux in Fiji where that level of social support has begun to deteriorate, eroded over time. I think this mechanism is kicking-in at a time as we are going through these flux between extended families to nuclear families, we have this message that comes in, these mechanisms that we have here that allow us to make sure that we can care and protect the children. Who is this Bill for? It is for all the children that are not getting the care and protection that they need.

Under Clause 5, it lists them all; children who are orphaned, abandoned and also where the parents of the children are unable to care for that child and unwilling, the child lives or works on the street in circumstances that expose them to exploitation. This is a major problem. When you talk to the people at the Department of Children, they talk about parents who are unwilling. I think there is a crisis there in terms of values or the responsibility that we have in this in this country for the children that we have. Children have been displaced or separated from their family, the physical development of the health of the child.

Wherever we went around Fiji, you know what people said we need to do? *Kana kuita!* This is the solution that people think about. I believe that the problem that that mentality comes from is the failure for us to deliver what we have in Clause 7. Clause 7 talks about responsibility of parents and this is where the emphasis has to be.

A parent has the primary role of the safeguarding (keeping them safe), and promoting the well-being of the child, registering the birth of the child. So many people are not even registered. When you are not registered, you are not a legal entity. You do not have access to all the things that you need to get. All of these responsibilities - child's basic needs are met, receives adequate nutrition, children must have enough food. Why do they steal? Maybe because they are not getting food, maybe they are not getting that emotional support. We have to be able to make sure that the parents can do this.

Child receives appropriate medical care, child's access to basic education and further study, child to participate in social and cultural activities. It is important that parents inculcate social cohesion and the culture of the parents into the children. A lot of us today, some of our children cannot speak their own languages. They have forgotten about *tilou* and all of these things, have gone out of the door. Instil self-discipline, tolerance and respect. These are the kinds of things, we have talked social cohesion the other day, this is where it starts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have only got only 16 seconds. I believe that this Bill is very important for us. We need and it requires a paradigm shift on how we look at children. I call upon the honourable Minister for Finance, there will be a need to do a lot of training; people will need to be trained, the staff in the Ministry, the Police, et cetera. There will need be resources thrown at this.

This thing will not work unless it is operationalised by training, translating the legislation and making sure there is enough resources to make it work. If we do not get the resources behind this Bill, it is not going to happen and I call upon the Government to make sure the resources are put in place over a phase sort of approach to make this happen for the future of our children, for the future of our country.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contribution to the Bill that is before the House. I would just like to continue from where honourable Usamate has left off, and that is rightfully so the responsibility of parents, which is highlighted in Clause 7. I, for one, when we were go on consultations. I usually said during our consultations, this is one of the Bills that Government should not have created in the first place. This is the negligence of parents that Government has seen that it intends to come and create this Bill.

When we were at consultations, those were my words. This is the negligence of parents that government has seen, they are not doing their responsibility, that they are keen to develop this Bill. I am thankful to the previous government for coming up with a Bill and to the current Minister for putting the Bill to Parliament. There are few sections that are in the Bill that I would like to touch on that are very important, especially one responsibility of the parents and this is one, that is the most important in my opinion of the Bill.

The Bill entails basically what the heading is - Care and Protection. It also introduces new offences, the offences that will intend to amend Crimes Act 2009. There are some new offences that have been created because of changing times and what have children been doing, things like luring sexual communication of children, all these are new offences which intend to amend the Crimes Act.

A lot of the things that are in this Bill are basically straightforward and the reporting of children, mandatory report as highlighted in this Bill are some of the suggestions that came during our consultation to also have church leaders inside, to also have the *turaga ni koro*. Those were some suggestions during our public consultation. But there was also the risk that, if those were the people that would be the mandatory reporters, even they would be the ones who are committing the offences against children. There was a big risk there.

So, with consultation with the Ministry, we remained with what they have had in what is in the Bill. The Bill also protects all these mediatory reporters, there is the notion, especially in our *iTaukei* culture. If there seems to be something that is going on in our village setting, we tend to bury it, we tend to keep it. If we take it up to the *turaga ni koro*, he will just say, "let us just solve it there." What we intend to do with this Bill is that introduce mandatory reporter, in cases of children that all these must need to be reported, given the seriousness of the offences that are coming in with regards to children, if you can see the proposed penalties, these are some of the suggestions that the Committee proposed – more serious penalties because of the risk of the children.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, my last contributor, I tend to remind everyone again, and to those who are watching, and I urge, the introduction of this Bill is solely based on the negligence of parents. It should not have been coming in as a Bill, but this has something that Government is fully concerned, given the number of children who are wandering our streets who have lost love, who have lost that protection, so the Government has stepped in. This is my opinion, Mr. Speaker. This is a very important and urgent Bill and I thank the honourable Minister for bringing this Bill and I support it.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, the esteemed Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and respected Members of this revered Parliament. I rise this evening to lend my voice and strong support to the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024. As we consider this Bill, let us be reminded of two roles that we share in agreement as lawmakers and guardians of our future which is our children.

The heart of any nation lies in the well-being of its children. In their eyes we see hope, ambition and the future of our great country. It is our duty as lawmakers to invest in the safeguard of their future. Clause 4 of the Bill stipulates the objective of this Bill, and its core objective acknowledges the absolute right of our children, rights to protection, rights to normal childhood, the sense of being loved, cared for and fundamentally the right to life. It accentuates the responsibility of families, communities, government agencies, non-government entities to not just protect the right of our children, but to promote their overall well-being, providing them with a nurturing environment for their growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our ethical response ability to ensure that every child is carefree of violence, free of abuse, neglect and exploitation. To this point, the Bill outlines clear circumstances in Clause 5, under which a child is considered to be in need of care and protection. To encompass a breath of situation, be it a child who has been an orphan or displaced, who lives or work under harmful conditions, or who is being neglected or abused or exploited, this Bill ensures that no child is left vulnerable.

I request all honourable Members of Parliament to come together and support the Bill with an unfeared voice. These children depend on us and we must not let them down. We are making a solemn pledge to protect our children, confirming our commitment to shape a brighter, safer and more promising future for our country. This Bill is not just of great importance to our children, but it is also central to the makeup of our society. It will defend us as a country that nurtures its future generation with kindness, respect and dignity. Let us remember that every child in need is a call for us to respond, a test of our humanity and a reflection of our values. We owe them our best effort, our kindness and our care.

As we discuss and debate the details of this Bill, let us remember to put our children first, for they are not just a beneficiary of this Bill, but also the promise of a better tomorrow. Biblically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are reminded of our critical responsibility, drawing from the *Bible* thoughts, each child is a divine gift to a family, an arrow in the hands of society. From Genesis to Revelation in the Bible underscore the irreplaceable worth of children and nurturing their protection and careful development.

The Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 19:14, said and I quote:

“Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them for the Kingdom of Heaven belong to such as this.”

Christ thoroughly cautioned against action that harm little children and lead them astray.

Matthew 18:6 states, and I quote:

“Anyone causes this little one to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

In supporting this Bill, we reflect Christ’s advocacy for every child. Honourable Members of Parliament, let us not forget we serve a nation. A range of individuals and families are depending on us, expecting us to safeguard their precious ones. Therefore, it is directly upon our shoulders to ensure this Child Care and Protection Bill is more than just words on paper.

The spirit of this critical Bill must become our living reality in every home, every school, every online platform, every province, every *tikina*, every village, every settlement and everywhere our children thrive. The Bill represents a beacon, guiding us to uphold the sanctity of childhood and care and to create a society where no child stands at risk. The Bill calls to furnish a safe haven where our children's dream bloom, their abilities are nurtured, their potential are fully realised and their innocence fiercely protected.

Tonight, we have a golden opportunity to affirm our nation’s ethics and societal values. By supporting this Bill, we affirm our commitment to comply with the divine mandate of embracing the invaluable worth of our children. This Bill resonates the *Bible* mandate of protecting the innocent and the vulnerable. It is a testament to our belief, our faith, our culture and our future.

As I conclude, I want to reiterate, it is our sacred duty to support this Bill tonight. I urge each respected Member of this House, irrespective of your political affiliation, stand by our children and by the future of our nation, let us unite and ensure Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 is passed and adequately implemented. Our future depends on our action today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity to contribute to the debate.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024. This is an important Bill because it is about children who are the future of our country. Children are our most valuable resource.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have two Bills this week which are child related. I see these Bills as very important and urgent in nature, since it is dealing with our children. Bills of this nature should be prioritised by Government because children are our topmost priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a few other Bills which were not that urgent but was passed under Standing Order 51 recently, whereas this very important Bill which relates to children took months to be passed in this House. I am glad that this Bill was scrutinised by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill for the following reasons. Firstly, I have carefully looked at the content of the Bill and I can say that the Bill has been well scrutinised by the Standing Committee, and I thank them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, secondly, our children need protection from abuse, violence and neglect. Parents, families and communities play a very important role in protecting children and this Bill caters for that. Parents have the primary role of safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of his or her child, to ensure that the child's basic needs are met, including any special needs relating to a disability.

The other very important responsibility of parents is to protect the child from engaging in

activities that are harmful to his or her health, education and moral development. The Bill also introduces provisions to improve reporting mechanisms for children in need of care and protection, and the Bill provides civil and criminal protection for people who report abuse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children need protection because it can have profound impact on their lives both, in the present and in the future. We have seen so many cases of child abuse. Child abuse can lead to physical injuries, lifelong disabilities, and can impair cognitive and social development. Child protection systems ensure that every child has the right to grow, learn and play safely, and all this is very well covered in the Bill.

This week, I have mentioned in the House that the school dropout has increased in 2023 compared to previous years. The Child Care and Protection Bill will assist in reducing the numbers. This is a very important Bill. I thank the Committee who have worked on this Bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity. I support the Bill.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in support of the Bill.

The Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 is about promoting wellbeing and prevention of abuse. With the rising cases of child abuse and child neglect, the Bill empowers a newly established Department of Children to take necessary action for children in immediate danger, whether in the streets or in their family environment.

We find children on the streets suffering neglect, children involved in drug trade, children as victims and children as perpetrators of crime. The Bill provisions for care of children who are orphaned, abandoned, as well as those living on the streets. Our Ministry did not have specific mandate, but this Bill now empowers the Department of Children to look at the issue of children on the streets.

The Bill will enable our Department of Children to look out for those in harm's way of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. It also allows a child to be placed in safety if a person convicted of offence against a child is in the same household.

Mr. Speaker, in the year 2023, a total of 1,477 child abuse cases were reported. That is an average of four cases a day. Of these, 54 percent of the child victims were girls and 46 percent boys. Sir, 68 percent of these cases involve child neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse and 58 percent of the victims were below the age of 12 - a stark indicator of the vulnerability of younger children to harm.

Disturbingly, 4.4 percent of the victims were below the age of one, which points to the devastating reality of infants being subjected to abuse. The perpetrators of these crimes were in 72.7 percent of cases known to the victim. Among them, 50 percent were immediate family members which is a heartbreaking reality that underscores the need for vigilant child protection efforts.

Police has released figures for the month of October this year, and crimes against children increased by 39 percent in October, in which 64 percent were sexual, 28 percent were assault-related, while 8 percent included other offences. All the perpetrators of the 13 percent cases of domestic-related in crimes against children were male family members and the victims comprised of 90 girls and 78 boys in one month, Mr. Speaker. It is horrendous to note that five children were being abused today somewhere in Fiji. That is reported. There may be many more unreported cases.

To improve on reporting on child abuse, the Bill features mandatory reporting, which will now add a few more professionals to have the duty to report a case of child abuse in the hope to see all children everywhere have someone looking out for them. Mandatory reporter will include childcare services and day-care providers, hostels, in addition to health professionals, teachers, police, counsellors, et cetera. Mandatory reporter who is aware of a child abuse and fails to report now can be convicted and fined. We hope this provision encourages eyes and ears to look out for safety of our children in all spheres.

The Bill also helps the Ministry and our Child Care Department to tighten processes to protect children in the context of their families and communities, as well as those who will need to be under the State care.

The Bill will mandate the registration of those agencies who work and intend to work with children in Fiji. The Bill acknowledges the role of families and communities in promoting the wellbeing and protection of our children and allows the Ministry to work with all stakeholders to ensure that our children are protected.

The Bill also allows a lot more provision for collaboration for the protection of children between Government agencies, faith-based community and traditional leaders, as we have heard. With the concerning number of abuse, it allows all stakeholders to work together to arrest the problem.

More in-depth work will be required in the Bill for referrals, case conferencing and collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, family and community, before reaching a decision for the child's welfare plan. At present, our services to children is almost one way where officers decide on most of the intervention made on behalf the child in State care.

Officers do not get significant input from family members on decisions regarding their child. With this Bill, there is expectation to ensure that our practice is more thorough, and family members and community elders have an input on the welfare of our child.

With the passage of this Bill, we as Parliament and as a nation, are declaring that every child in Fiji deserves a safe nurturing environment regardless of gender, ethnicity and geography, and that means that we, as leaders in our Government, together with leaders in our community, must do everything in our power to ensure that wellbeing, development and protection.

We must each commit to responsibility of bringing this legislation to life, across ministries education, health, social welfare and beyond. Together, we can break cycles of abuse and neglect we see everyday, but this effort cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the Government. We need our communities to rise alongside us, community leaders, faith leaders, parents, teachers, elders and youth, everyone has a role to play.

Mr. Speaker look forward to this Bill and I support the motion. Thank, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to voice my strong support for the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024, a vital piece of legislation that reflects our shared commitment to the wellbeing of Fiji's children. At its core, the Bill reaffirms the truth that we cannot ignore.

The primary responsibility for raising and protecting a child lies with their parents and the communities around them. Parents are the first teachers, the first protectors, and the first role models in their child's life. When parents are present and engaged, children thrive, not just in school but in life.

However, this is not a responsibility parents can carry alone. Communities have an equally important role to play. Strong, safe and supporting communities give children a sense of belonging and security. They provide an environment where children can flourish, shielded from harm and surrounded by positive influences.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, makes clear what parental and community responsibility looks like. It lays out the duty of parents to provide for their children's basic needs, ensure their education, protect them from harm and guide them to become good citizens. It also recognises that when these responsibilities are neglected or unmet, the State has a duty to intervene, not just a replacement for families, but as a safety net for children.

However, Mr. Speaker, it is important to stress that State intervention should always be the last resort. By the time the law steps in, the damage has often already been done. This is why our focus must also be on prevention - ensuring parents and families have the supporting tools they need to succeed long before a situation deteriorates to the point of crisis.

This Bill challenge us as leaders to send the clear message. Parenting is not just a personal choice, it is a social responsibility. It is time for all of us, parents, community leaders, teachers, faith-based organisations and neighbours to step up. If we wait for the Police or the Courts to act, we have already failed our children.

Mr. Speaker, the Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 is more than a legislation, it is a promise to the children of Fiji that we will do everything in our power to give them a safe, nurturing environment to grow up in. It is a call to parents and communities to take responsibility for their roles in shaping the future of the children of this nation.

I urge all honourable Members to support this Bill and to reaffirm our commitment in protecting and empowering Fiji's children. Together, we can build a stronger, safer and more compassionate Fiji for the generations to come.

Turaga na Sipika, ni vosota, au kerea me'u cavuta walega vakalekaleka e vica na vosa ena vosa vakaiTaukei ena vo ni gauna se vo.

Na lawa 'go, Turaga na Sipika, e kaciva tiko na i tubutubu me tukuna vua, "Kevaka o sega ni cavaka na nomu i tavi, ena taura na luvemu na Matanitu". Na kena i balebale, na i tubutubu nikua, sa dodonu me solia na nona priority naba dua vua na luvena. Me liu duadua oya qai muri na vo ni veika tale eso. O koya ogo na ka e bibi duadua.

Na vuna ogo, baleta era sa leqa na luveda ni ra sega ni kawaitaki. Kevaka e dua na i tubutubu tiko mai vale, suka yani na luvena na vuli, na matai ni ka me wawa tiko mai na i tubutubu, o tama se o tina. O Ta ni sa lesu mai na i teitei, kakua ni lako la'i gunu yaqona. Waraka na luvemu, cakava nona assignment, raica me donu, qarauna me moce, ni bera ni o la'i raica tale e dua, baleta na kena i vovo, o koya era sa vakavuna tu 'go me sa mai bulia e dua na lawa na Matanitu, me vukea na i tubutubu baleta ni sa sega ni qarava na nona i tavi.

Ia, au kaya tiko e liu ena vosa vakavavalagi, kevaka esa tatara na Matanitu, oya sa bera na vuvale, sa bera na lotu, sa bera kece. O koya gona oya nikua, Turaga na Sipika, au nanuma ga me'u kerea vei keda na i tubutubu e Viti nikua, na Matanitu e sega ni vakasucuma e dua na gone. Na Matanitu e sega ni tama e sega ni tina, e tama ga na i tubutubu, e tina talega na i tubutubu. Kena i balebale, tama kei na tina, qarava na luvemu, kei keda na lewenivanua kei na lewe ni koro, meda

veivuketaka na cakacaka ni veisusu. O koya beka ga oya ena qai sautu kina na noda vanua, era na rawa ni qai tubu vinaka na noda kawa mera sautu mai muri. Vinaka vakalevu, Turaga na Sipika.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Tikodudua for his contribution. We have exhausted the list of our speakers for the debate on this important Bill. I now call upon the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection to speak in reply.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, in my hand, I hold up a hand-held fan that depicts the *senibua* or frangipani. Each of the five petals represent the values to guide us in the wellbeing of our children in this country. It reads, “love, respect, care, protection, trust”.

The speakers before me, Mr. Speaker, have very adequately, aptly and aspiringly shared with us what our vision is for the people’s house when it comes to our children, and we are first and foremost. As we sit here, we are fathers and mothers, and caregivers. So, this is something that we speak from our heart. And we speak with our heart to the people of Fiji, “Please, let us work together for the wellbeing of our children. The Government cannot do it alone. Parliament cannot do it alone.”

Mr. Speaker, in the last week alone, there have been reported cases of three missing girls under the age of 18 years. One is young as 13 years. We have seen an increasing number of cases by the Fiji Police Force of missing girls. What is happening to our society? When these girls are returned home, we do not hear from them.

This Bill makes us responsible to find out where these girls are and why they are going missing? If you are listening and watching, if an adult is using our children, especially our girls for illegal means, this is a warning to you. You are committing an offence, and we are coming for you. And for the community, if the neighbour or anyone who knows what is happening to these girls or to our children, please report it, first and foremost for the love of that child.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the speakers who have spoken. I thank you, honourable Members. I thank the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for their hard work, just like the previous Bill, to bring these Bills to Parliament today. I thank you for your support in passing the Bill today. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 (Bill No. 5/2024) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. 19 of 2024)]

AQUACULTURE BILL 2024

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 3rd December, 2024, I move:

That Aquaculture Bill of 2024 be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and all those tuning in live on Parliament Facebook page. It is with great urgency and optimism that I present the Aquaculture Bill of 2024 before this Parliament today.

This Bill represents not just a piece of legislation, but a pivotal moment for Fiji's economic, environmental and social future. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a strategic move that will formalise and regulate our aquaculture sector unlocking its tremendous potential to drive food security, create jobs and contribute to economic growth. As we know, Fiji's fisheries resources are vital to our people contributing to food security and livelihoods, particularly for our coastal and rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sector has been operating without a comprehensive legislative framework to govern the rapidly changing aquaculture industry. The Aquaculture Bill of 2016, which was tabled in Parliament in 2016 and was initiated by the former Permanent Secretaries and former Minister for Fisheries, laid the groundwork for this transformative legislation. Unfortunately, that Bill lapsed when Parliament prorogued in 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we certainly cannot afford to let this Bill suffer the same fate. Globally the aquaculture industry is experiencing unprecedented growth. According to the State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture Report of 2024, for the first time in history, aquaculture production has surpassed that of wild caught fisheries. This is a turning point for global food production, and Fiji must act now to ensure we are part of this global movement. We are already seeing increasing demand for seafood, with aquaculture offering a sustainable solution to feed a growing population and to mitigate the strain on wild fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill provides a solid framework to regulate and support Fiji's aquaculture industry in a way that promotes sustainability, biosecurity and responsible resource management. The Aquaculture Bill of 2024 outlines the creation of designated aquaculture zones where both marine and freshwater aquaculture activities can be conducted sustainably without causing environmental degradation. This approach will protect Fiji's unique marine and freshwater ecosystems, while fostering economic growth in communities across the country.

The Bill categorises licences into commercial, semi-commercial and subsistence food security types, ensuring that aquaculture enterprises are registered, monitored and met by security standards. Through this licensing system, aquaculture enterprises will gain legal recognition, empowering them to access financial support, be it loans or grants, which will fill further growth and innovation in the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the licensing will ensure that only those meeting proper standards will operate, safeguarding our resources and preventing harm to the environment. It also means that it will track and monitor aquaculture activity, ensuring compliance with environmental laws and international best practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the establishment of the Licensing Committee, the Scientific Committee and Advisory Council, as part of the Bill, is integral to ensuring effective governance of the sector. These bodies will work to oversee licensing, guide the sustainable management of the industry, provide scientific advice and recommend policies. Their roles will ensure that decisions are based on scientific data and best practices, while also promoting transparency and public trust in the aquaculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill empowers land owning units and communities to better utilise their

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill empowers land owning units and communities to better utilise their land for aquaculture, particularly in areas affected by saltwater intrusion, where agricultural activities are no longer viable. This under-utilised land cannot be converted into productive aquaculture zones, for oyster farming, seaweed cultivation and freshwater fisheries, without the risk of environmental degradation. This will create income and food security for rural and coastal communities and contribute to the overall economic resilience of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, every year the Government allocates substantial funding to support aquaculture initiatives such as pearl farming, seaweed projects and the development and maintenance of aquaculture hatcheries. This sustained investment demonstrates the Government's commitment to this sector. However, to truly maximise the potential of these investments, we need a strong and enforceable legal framework that ensures sustainability, biosecurity and long term success.

The Aquaculture Bill of 2024 will provide just that, creating a foundation for growth, innovation and resilience in the sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Aquaculture Bill of 2024, is not just an opportunity. It is a necessity. It is a comprehensive solution to the challenges facing the aquaculture industry from environmental protection to food security and it will lay the foundation for a prosperous and sustainable future for Fiji. I urge this Parliament to support the passage of the Bill today and to ensure that we do not miss this critical moment to transform Fiji's aquaculture sector for the benefit of our people and future generations. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to speak.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Minister Bainivalu. Honourable Members, before I open the floor for debate, just go back to my initial comment about there being no time limitation on the debate. I have to retract that and in fact, because before me a list of five speakers that are allocated to speak on the debate, there are two from the G16-bloc, two from Government and one from G9-bloc. Each speaker therefore will have only 10 minutes to speak on the motion. So I will ask first, the honourable Semi Koroilavesu to deliver his statement.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker Sir, for giving me the opportunity to speak on the Aquaculture Bill 2024. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the discussions in the last two days has been long within our group. In my effort to convince our group for us to accept and endorse this Bill, and basically, the response that I had was that, they were not happy with the way the Bill was brought in, and I think the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka is not here, but the word they said is that "tyranny of the majority."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the background to the Aquaculture Bill has been long overdue and I wanted to highlight a few issues because the honourable Minister has indicated what the Bill implies and what it will do to the aquaculture industry within the fisheries sector. The pearl and aquarium clam breeding has been very difficult, and this Bill will maximise potential economic benefits of supporting pearl and aquarium clams. This has been practised in Laucala and Northern Taveuni by a company called Civa Fiji.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of about 5,000 aquarium clams had to be destroyed because the legislation did not give any clear indication, who the authority was, to give the okay for the export of aquarium clams. So, basically it was a decision between the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Fisheries. I am glad that this Bill will clarify that issue. The sustainable aquaculture practices that the clam and pearl breeding operations will ensure that they are environmentally friendly and would not harm our marine ecosystems. We need to support our investors that come from overseas.

Civa Fiji had spent a huge amount of money with the hotel owners in Laucala and Northern

Taveuni, but to see their aquarium clams to be completely destroyed. The addressing of invasive species, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we think that tilapia is quite a good species, it is an invasive species. Whenever tilapia is introduced, it eats everything else that were naturally Fiji species. There is another species that is called barramundi. Investors wanted to bring it into Fiji. It lives in streams and rivers and it also lives on the reef. We tried very hard to fight against it because it would destroy every other fish in Fiji, but this Bill will be able to regularise and give the system that will stop this from happening in the future.

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species or CITES. This is an issue that I think for the benefit of our honourable Members such is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Mr, Speaker, Sir, would know this very well. What this Bill will do, will basically make sure that there is no trade or exchanges that will destroy our ecosystem within our reefs and waters.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conversion of sugar cane land affected by sea-level rise as we convert all this land that have not been cultivated along the coast that has been affected by climate change. Coastal areas from Nadroga right to Ra, coastal areas in the west coast of Vanua Levu, warm water, beautiful and pure, but we need to develop something so that we can energise this industry, and this Bill will give us that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the event that the Bill will be passed, my friends from my group have agreed to support the Bill. So, the benefit is quite far and wide and it will benefit Fiji in the long run.

The regulatory framework, the proportion proposed National Aquaculture Bill establishes a clear regulatory framework that governs the industry, ensuring that operations are conducted in a sustainable and responsible manner. It promotes sustainable practices by setting environmental standards and guidelines for aquaculture operations, helping to protect aquatic ecosystem and biodiversity.

By supporting the aquaculture industry, the National Aquaculture Bill can stimulate economic growth trajectory of increased production and export opportunities creating national food security. Aquaculture can significantly enhance food security by providing a reliable source of protein and other nutrients, especially in regions where wild fish stocks are declining. A clear and legal framework can attract both domestic and foreign investment in the aquaculture sector leading to technological advances and improved production methods.

Consumer protection includes provision for food safety and quality standards ensuring that aquaculture products are safe for consumption and meet market demands. Community engagement - the proposed National Aquaculture Bill can promote community involvement, support local aquaculture initiatives, foster social acceptance and participation in the industry. Disaster preparedness, it includes guidelines for disaster risk management, helping the aquaculture sector to better prepare for and respond to natural disasters or disease outbreaks.

Coordination and collaboration, the Bill will facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders, including Government agencies, industry players, research institutions and local communities, leading to more effective management and development of the aquaculture sector.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, international compliance, the National Aquaculture Bill can help align our country's aquaculture practice with international standards and agreements, enhancing its reputation in global markets. I support the Bill before the Parliament.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; today, I rise to support the

Aquaculture Bill 2024, a piece of legislation that I believe will be transformative and impact Fiji's economy, food security and environmental sustainability. The Bill addresses the critical area, which has always been focussed here on discussion in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will focus my contribution to specific areas where the Bill will greatly address the needs in those sectors. One is strengthening food security. As our population grows, the global climate challenges escalates, ensuring food security becomes paramount. This Bill emphasises sustainable practices that protects and enhances our marine ecosystem, while increasing fishing and seafood production for local consumption. By investing in aquaculture, we reduce our reliance on imports, making Fiji more self-reliant and resilient to external shocks.

Second is the economic potential on aquaculture. Aquaculture represents a growing global industry, and Fiji is uniquely positioned to benefit from this growth. With our pristine waters, diverse biodiversity and strategic location, we have the resources to establish ourselves as a leader in sustainable aquaculture. This Bill creates a robust regulatory framework, providing clarity and stability for investors both, domestically and internationally. By fostering innovation and providing support to small scale farmers, it ensures that the benefits of this sector will be widely distributed across our population.

Third, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is environment stewardship. We are the custodians of our environment, and this Bill will underscore our commitment to sustainable development. It sets stringent standards for waste management, habitat protection and the use of resources, ensuring that aquacultural activities do not harm our marine ecosystem. It promotes the use of modern, environmentally friendly technologies, balancing economic growth with ecological preservation. The Bill ensures that methods adopted are based on best science evidence. It also ensures that precautionary approaches are followed where scientific evidence is not available.

Fourth is supporting local communities. Aquaculture offers immense opportunity for our rural communities, providing capacity building, creating jobs and uplifting livelihood. Training programmes and access to resources outlined in this Bill will empower our people to participate in the growing sector. Strengthening local communities provides an opportunity to reverse urban drift and promote self-sufficiency and sustainable resource management. Women and youth, in particular, stand to benefit as aquaculture creates inclusive employment opportunities.

Fifth is global and regional leadership. By passing this Bill, Fiji sends a clear message that we are ready to lead sustainable aquaculture development in the Pacific. This legislation aligns with our commitments under international agreements such as SDGs and the Climate Action Framework. It positions Fiji as a model for other Pacific nations' seeking to balance development and environment stewardship.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Aquaculture Bill is not just about fish, farms or economic metrics, it is about securing a brighter, more sustainable future for Fiji. It is about creating opportunities, protecting our environment and enhancing the wellbeing of our people. I urge my fellow Members of Parliament to support this Bill. Together, let us unlock the vast potential of aquaculture and set a new course for the sustainable development of our beloved Fiji.

Finally, I wish to thank the Committee and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry for their hard work. I also wish to thank honourable Koroilavesau and his team for the initiative and effort throughout the process of this particular Bill. I support the motion before the House.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to lend my support, and I have been instructed to inform Parliament of the support of the G9 Bloc also to the Bill that is before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just look at the bigger picture of what this Bill will do, in 1940, tilapia was introduced into Fiji and in 1967 grass carp was brought into Fiji to help keep our rivers clear from the *bekabeka i raga* and all those weeds that clog our rivers. Now, grass carp thrives as a source of protein. Tilapia from being brought way back in 1940 is now cultured. The species that is now cultured is very much the species that is widely exported from Thailand, the biggest exporter of Tilapia. Way back in 1940 and today, we can culture sand fish (*dairo*), I have seen it. We culture milk fish, there is a farm in Vitawa.

All this time, Mr. Speaker, aquaculture piggybacks on other legislations - piggybacks on environment legislation and piggybacks a little bit on fisheries legislation. In Fiji's fisheries, the coastal fishery is well-regulated, offshore fishery is well-regulated, aquaculture until today, when we pass this Bill will now be regulated.

Aquaculture transcends from the marine aquaculture to brackishwater in the middle, to freshwater aquaculture, hence the danger that has been mentioned tonight in those ecosystems, if it is not managed properly. So, the bigger picture of this Bill, I heard mentioned tonight is the fact that we are creating history and for the first time now, aquaculture as an industry, is a fishery that will now have an Act on its own. It is now a regulated industry and when it is a regulated industry, it is a catalyst for growth. Investors will come if they want to come in and invest in this part of our fisheries in Fiji.

I thank the Ministry for picking it up and bringing it now to the House. I thank those who have started the move to get aquaculture fisheries regulated and I fully support the Bill that is before the House.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I wish to thank the Natural Resources Committee on the development of this Bill, particularly the Ministry. Most of what I wanted to say has been shared as well by the speakers before me. I had very limited time in the Ministry from 2012 to 2014, and I saw the huge potentials in aquaculture. That made us join INFOFISH in Malaysia so that we can piggyback and gain from the experiences of, particularly, countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Cambodia, who are well ahead of us in the aquaculture industry, not only in terms of the technology development, but it is about the whole value chain.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity to visit India and through the then Dean of the College of Agriculture and Forestry in Koronivia, we made arrangements if I can visit a farm in India. I have forgotten the name of the place, but it is easy to get there because it is next to the National Dairy Research Institute which is about a one or two hour's drive from New Delhi. I was privileged to be introduced to the largest fish farmer in India, a Nobel Peace Prize earner, because of his contribution to food security. But unfortunately, the arrangement did not continue because he trains officials from almost every developing country and we were in the process of sending our people and I moved again to another portfolio, Sir. I am always ready to assist where needed.

We had discussions. We decided to support it, he initially opposed in which it came in, particularly under Standing Order 51. I was particularly interested in Standing Order 51 because in the definitions of the terms or the interpretations, it talks about the aquaculture industry. Although most of the Bill focuses on production right through to marketing, I have talked about the whole value chain.

Processors and manufacturers of equipment and feed and individuals - I think these are some areas where probably, later on, we can revisit. I know that we attempted to bring in a nutritionist into the Ministry of Fisheries back then to help us develop nutrition for feed for aquaculture, because in Fiji, unfortunately, the feed that we have are produced by livestock feed producers and there is no

one doing specialised aquaculture feed.

When aquaculture feed is thrown on the water, it must float because the fish, prawns will come up and then have a bite. Otherwise, it all sinks to the bottom of the sea. That is one of the reasons why I was interested in this and, of course, as alluded to also by honourable Viliame Naupoto, I saw the definition of “freshwater”. It means natural water.

Most countries that I visited including China, probably Fiji needs to go into that area as well where they have freshwater laws on how we use freshwater? There is a law. In Fiji, we have an abundance of water, we have a shortage of water, and we do not utilise this water well. Of course, it is linked to the environment. That is another story, but we will look into it, as we come to the operationalisation of this document.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was also interested, as alluded to by honourable Koroilavesau in Clause 40 of this Bill which covers the trade of aquaculture product, and also the issue about Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). I have always argued that there is a difference between wild harvest and farmed or cultured production, because CITES is about endangered species and protection, particularly in the export of these commodities in terms of wild harvests.

The clam farm in Taveuni, unfortunately, were not allowed to export clams which would have brought us millions of dollars. The good thing about that clam farm, he worked closely with the *qoliqoli* owners. He supplied the clams (young ones) to the *qoliqoli* owners and when it is ready for harvesting, he buys it again from the landowners and then he is the one that does it. I hope that this, honourable Minister, will be taken care of in this Bill because, unfortunately, back then when it was under the Ministry of Environment, it really made things difficult for the Minister for Fisheries. We had long discussions, even in Cabinet, but when it comes to the technical people on the ground, sometimes it is hard. That is the reality. This is something that will bring us a lot of potentials economically.

Clause 42 is on the restrictions on the import or introducing to Fiji a live aquatic organism for aquaculture without the written authorisation of the Permanent Secretary. When I was Commissioner Northern, one of the big challenges in the North was the iguana in Qamea and Taveuni. I was told that it was just brought in as a pet, and then it was out of control, and it became a nightmare to the local population. I know at one stage, they requested the RFMF to come and shoot the iguana but then, all those animals have rights as well, now under international law. So, that became a big issue.

Lastly, we will pass this law today. One thing that I learnt, Sir, from IPU meetings is the role of Parliament. It is not only about making new legislations, but Parliament has that responsibility to ensure that these laws be operationalised, they are given the resources and Parliament will also continue to provide that oversight and scrutiny so that it is implemented. I hope that this Parliament in the new direction that we are taking, will also take this responsibility in ensuring that honourable Minister for Finance provides the funding, so that the honourable Minister for Fisheries can have extra staff according to the organisation that she is going to come up with, and then we ensure that there is proper capacity development, so that it will bring the benefits that we have.

Honourable Tunabuna has particularly talked about food security. Our triple burden of malnutrition in Fiji, when we were developing the body, I was arguing with Fisheries, “please, let us just concentrate on upper Namosi, upper Naitasiri, because we need to replace *rourou* and *ota* with fish.” Let us not only look at income but let us look at food security as well. I support the Bill, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the

Aquaculture Bill 2024. Before I do that, I just thought I would reflect on a couple of things. Yesterday, we made history in this House and today again we are making history because we are passing some Bills that have taken a long time to get to fruition.

I was actually going to pick one the other side of the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the delay of the Bills coming into the House. I think, on reflection, there is a message to all of us in what we did today, in that, if we work together, we can actually make a big difference in these years, probably that is left in our service for our country.

The second thing I thought I just reflect on, in the discussions that we held with the Speaker of the Senate of Australia, she mentioned that they passed 35 Bills using the equivalent of our Standing Order 51. They did so by negotiating between the parties before they got into Parliament.

It is something that perhaps going forward we can think about because:

- (1) We will increase the number of Bills we bring into the House which is our job.
- (2) We will not be using Standing Order 51 like a weapon in terms of passing of the legislation.

I just thought I would share that, Mr. Speaker, just to start off with my contribution today. As a Minister responsible for Trade and MSMEs, this Bill is quite important and is a significant step towards establishing a comprehensive framework for an industry that, we all agree, has significant potential for our country.

The Bill ensures, Mr. Speaker, that we sustainably develop the aquaculture industry while at same time protecting marine ecosystems, promoting biodiversity conservation and addressing the challenges of food security and environmental stewardship. The framework provided in this Bill will stimulate economic growth by encouraging investment in sustainable aquaculture practices and supporting small scale producers which in turn would boost domestic production and exports.

Fiji's aquaculture apparently began in 1937 with a common carp which was introduced in Fiji from New Zealand. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 87 years later we are here in Parliament to discuss an Aquaculture Bill, a framework that will regulate this important industry and safeguard its future. Aquaculture is contributing to nation building by creating employment opportunities, encouraging investment in sustainable aquaculture practices and stimulating economic development in coastal and rural areas. It supports small scale farmers, which is quite exciting, and plays a critical role in addressing the challenges of overfishing and food security, as mentioned and is a healthy source of protein for our people. The current aquaculture production is currently valued at \$11 million, with the right policy investment mechanism and resources, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is potential and a suggestion that we can even grow this industry to over a hundred million at least by 2030.

The Aquaculture Bill introduces a comprehensive framework to regulate and support the sustainable development of Fiji's aquaculture industry. It establishes mechanisms such as the Aquaculture Advisory Council and scientific committee ensuring expert oversight and evidence-based decision making. The Bill defines aquaculture areas, mandates environment impact assessments and introduces a streamlined licensing process to support compliance while fostering investment and innovation.

Importantly, it safeguards Fiji's marine ecosystems by prohibiting harmful practices such as the introduction of genetically modified species and enforcing robust biosecurity protocols. These provisions collectively empower small-scale farmers, encourage private sector investment, and ensure that the industry aligns with international standards. By supporting sustainable practices, the

Bill enhances food security, reduces reliance on seafood imports and creates opportunities for rural communities.

It is no secret Mr. Speaker, that the Ministry I have been honoured to lead, is guided by five general objectives; two of which are economic diversification and MSMEs and co-operatives, just pathways out of poverty. The Ministry is currently in discussion with several local farmers and financial institutions to develop and expand the aquaculture industry and support local players.

I have had the privilege to meet two young, exceptional young men, Mr. Apenisa Maracava and Mr. Laisiasa Cavakiqali who are rising stars in the aquaculture industry. Mr. Maracava was one of the three recipients of the first ever Pacific Agri-Innovate Competition Fiji at the SIDS Forum in Nadi last month. This farmer is excelling in his business venture of shrimp farming by combining innovation, science and sheer hard work. The Ministry has not only provided financial support but is also building capacity to support MSMEs and their business operations.

I thank the Ministry for Fisheries and Forestry in recognising the critical role that cooperatives play as a vehicle to change communities. Through the formation of cooperatives, members can enhance their skills and develop their resources together, and flourish. We have cooperatives that are engaged in seaweed and *nama* farming, creating employment for our women and youth.

I recall when our country came to a standstill during the COVID-19 pandemic, all Fijians recognised the need to diversify the economy so that we discontinue the practice of overreliance on one sector. We, the Coalition Government, made a promise that we would look at developing our primary industries and, Mr. Speaker, the passing of Bill No. 21 of 2024 is one of the many ways we intend to keep that promise.

Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat, I urge all the honourable Members of this august Chamber to reflect on the conversations the years to diversify our economy, create alternative sources of income and empower our local businesses. Passing the Aquaculture Bill of 2024 is an opportunity to turn those conversations into action. Let us come together to ensure this Bill is passed, so we can lay the groundwork for a sustainable, inclusive and prosperous aquaculture industry that benefits all Fijians.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank all the honourable Members with their constructive and supportive contribution on the debate and the motion before the House. The Aquaculture Bill is one of the two Bills of the Ministry of Fisheries under the 2024 legislative agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the former Ministers for Fisheries, Permanent Secretaries for Fisheries, the former Director of Fisheries, former Fisheries Officers. I also would like to thank the current staff of the Ministry of Fisheries for their hard work and continuing to push for the tabling of this Bill. We did it. *Vinaka*, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Aquaculture Bill 2024 (Bill No. 21 of 2024), passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. 20 of 2024)]

BANK OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC BILL 2024

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday 4th December 2024, I move:

That the Bank of the South Pacific Bill 2024 (Bill No. 22/2024) be debated, voted upon, and be passed.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said yesterday, this is a pretty straightforward Bill and I hope that we will be able to get through this very quickly.

Just by way of background, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank of the South Pacific (BSP) Financial Group Limited formerly known Bank of South Pacific Limited, is incorporated and headquartered in Papua New Guinea with branches operating in the Pacific region including Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and Vanuatu.

The BSP Fiji Branch is registered under the Companies Act 2015 as a foreign company. In line with the global corporate financial structure and, indeed, some of the trends to gain operational efficiencies, the BSP Group Board resolved and approved the restructure of its operations in Fiji from a branch to a subsidiary structure. On this note, to the new entity for which the name has been reserved with the Registrar of Companies as BSP Financial Group Limited (BSP Fiji) will be incorporated as a company under Fiji's Companies Act 2015 with 100 percent shareholding of its parent company BSP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the restructure of this nature of a commercial operation has implications for customers, employees and other persons in legal relationships with the banking entity. And without an enabling legislation of this kind, numerous and complex legal steps would be involved to substitute, in this case, BSP Fiji for BSP legal security documents such as mortgages, debentures, general and specific security agreements, and the like. This could potentially involve a lot of transaction costs and, indeed, an inconvenience to customers, the acquiring bank and other persons dealing with the transacting banks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said when I moved the motion yesterday, this legislation has precedence. The Australia-New Zealand Banking Decree 1991 successfully proceeded day two of the takeover by ANZ of the operations of Bank of New Zealand (BNZ). Many of us would remember the BNZ. The National Bank of Fiji Limited Act 2011 also facilitated the acquisition by BSP of the operations of National Bank of Fiji in 2011.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank of the South Pacific Bill 2024, therefore, seeks to facilitate the restructure by the vesting of BSP's banking businesses in Fiji to be BSP Fiji by law, and this Bill is actually modelled on the 1991 and 2011 legislation. Those who are familiar with banking, such as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications would attest to this, that there are some of the justifications on BSP Fiji to be restructured into a subsidiary company.

I want to highlight the following financial market regulators preferred financial institutions within their markets being incorporated into that particular jurisdiction. Secondly, it complements the existing subsidiary approach in Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, and signals to the Fiji market that it is a local bank. But it also is about confidence in the country and confidence in the market in which the branch is located.

Additionally, having a locally incorporated subsidiary allows for greater local board participation with consideration of a local operating environment. It allows for the segregation of Fiji market activities to a Fiji entity which, in turn, should allow for greater economic efficiency - things such as head office costs and other rationalisation that normally takes place.

A subsidiary operation provides limited liability protection, shielding the parent company from the legal and financial risks associated with the subsidiary's activities. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, subsidiaries often have a degree of autonomy in decision-making, allowing them to adapt more effectively to local market conditions and regulations. Operating through subsidiaries can help mitigate risks by segregating operations and assets, thereby, protecting the parent company's overall financial health.

There are also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, expansion opportunities that subsidiaries can facilitate, such as expansion into new markets and new industries, providing a platform for growth separate from the parent company's core corporations. So, there is an element of independence with a local board participation, and a local operating environment. Local presence also enhances the parent company's local presence, subsidiaries will add to that, fostering better relationships with customers, suppliers and stakeholders in different regions. Subsidiary also may comply with local regulation, which can streamline regulatory compliance and reduce the parent company's administrative burden.

Through this Bill, Mr. Speaker, BSP Fiji will install its own board of directors here in Fiji and further enhance its current structure by having other subcommittees, requisite policies and procedures where required pursuant to RBF's (Reserve Bank of Fiji) supervision guidelines and any legislative provisions. So, as I have said yesterday, as the consultations were held. The Cabinet had provided approval for stakeholder consultations. As I said yesterday, they were face-to-face consultations held at the BSP Fiji branch conference room. Generally, the Ministry of Finance received overwhelming support on the proposed restructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As I have said, this is important for BSP and Fiji. BSP is a number one bank, and I will probably, in my right of reply, provide more details as to where BSP is in terms of the whole banking industry. As I said the other day, the urgency of this Bill contrary to my friends on the other side, the financial year ends on 31st of December, and once this Bill is passed, BSP will be able to move on. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I open the floor for debate, there are three speakers on my list and each speaker will have 10 minutes to speak.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is actually quite late in the day, and I think I did mention yesterday that this particular Bill is (I see the honourable Deputy Prime Minister smiling), is not thorny, but there is one question, which I ran by him earlier just to give him a heads up. It is just some clarity with respect to one or two issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the two transactions that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister referred to were, when ANZ outright took over BNZ, and I think also when BSP took over Colonial's operation. If I remember correctly, subject to be corrected by the honourable Minister, I think those were purchases, but this is an assignment, that is being done in-house. So, in terms of purchases and assignments, what is interesting, is within this particular Bill, and I think if I can refer to Section 18. That particular Clause reads:

“No liability is created or is deemed to be created under any tax law for BSP or BSP Fiji by the divesting by BSP of the BSP business and BSP property and the vesting of the BSP business and the BSP property into BSP Fiji.”

So, you are looking at, this is going into a new entity for one, and then the vesting of BSP capital in the assumption of BSP Fiji or of the BSP liabilities. We all understand what is actually transpiring here, but what we would like to know from the honourable Minister is that, in other previous transactions, would they also be given a waiver of any tax liabilities? Because bear in mind, these are foreign-owned companies that make a large profit out of Fiji. So, is this transaction being treated as one where it is so important that they are being told that they do not have to pay any liabilities tax on this particular change of ownership, so to speak? Because it is a divestment and divesting all of its business into another one? If it was done with a private company, where you are divesting your shares, et cetera, there are taxes and things that you may be liable for. So, there may be a quicker explanation when he is going to respond, to say why is that being done, or is that a normal practice, and was that done when BSP purchased Colonial Bank and when ANZ purchased BNZ?

Again, the difference here is also that that was a purchase, but this is just a clear divestment. We understand the reasons why this is being done; basically, to create operational efficiencies, et cetera. We understand that it may be a huge quagmire of difficulties involved, because you are talking about pieces of property and liabilities that are involved. We understand the operation of the particular clause in it where there is a waiver and I am talking about Clause 4(4) where it says: "no further consent, permit, notice, certification, ratification, charges, registration fees of any kind, filing fees, lodgement fees, or fees of any kind whatsoever is required to be given in respect of any instrument sought to be registered for the purpose of evidencing, recording or effecting the matters referred to in this Act. So, anything that is being done in order to facilitate this, no fees will be applicable. Basically, it's being done for zero. The state does not collect a penny.

My question here and behalf of all of us is please just give us reason why? Why is the state not collecting a penny, especially in light of the fact this is not one of our Fijian institutions like HFC or FNPF or one of our other institutes like Vodafone, etc? If it's to facilitate because they are one of the largest operators, we would like to know. Is it to facilitate because they have so many customers in Fiji, we would like to know.

We do not have an objection to this happening, Mr. Speaker, we just want an explanation from the honourable Minister as to why that is happening or what is actually happening with respect to this exemption from any tax payable. If there isn't any tax liable, that's understandable, but I'm not privy all of that. The honourable Minister might be able to explain to us, whether there is a liability and that's actually being waived by virtue of that particular clause being put into the law. That was the only query that we had Mr. Speaker, I notice late in the day and I actually that's the that's something for the Minister to answer. I think that's a genuine query from all of us so that we do know if we do get asked, we can always respond to that. I thank you Mr. Speaker.

HON. N. T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise to support Bill No. 22 of 2024. These are BSP Fiji Bill 2024, it's a very important one to the organisation and to Fiji as well. It is simply to provide for the transfer to BSP Financial Group Fiji Ltd of the undertakings of the BSP Financial Group Ltd in Fiji for related purposes as already been mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, as also mentioned by the Deputy Prime Minister, this is an important business decision moved by BSP as it seeks to be aligned with global financial structure and try to gain operational efficiencies. What we are looking at, at the end of the day, it will mean innovative and cost-effective financial services to customers. However, it is also important to bear in mind from the explanatory notes on page 13, item 1.3, that there will be implications of this kind action as being questioned by honourable Koya. There could be tax implications that can be clarified by the Deputy Prime Minister.

It is also mentioned by the Deputy Prime Minister, the BSP Fiji Bill 2024 has precedent. We all know that the *Australia-New Zealand banking Decree 1991* successfully facilitated the takeover by ANZ and so the operations of the Bank of New Zealand. And also mentioned by the Deputy Prime Minister the same case also happened in the Bank of the South Pacific Limited's acquisition of the operations of the National Bank, back in 2011.

Mr. Speaker, the business restructure of BSP will need the enabling legislation. This Bill is a necessity. BSP's financial year begins in January, and they will definitely need the law to get the transformation work done. So, I want to thank you Mr. Speaker for the opportunity, and I support the Bill that is before the House.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Bill relating to BSP. I was just reflecting over the last few days when Colonial Bank started saying that it was going to leave Fiji. I remember quite vividly reflecting on what would happen to the assets of such a wonderful bank that had done a lot for the country, and what that investor would do for the future of the financing system in Fiji? It was the first time I heard about Bank of the South Pacific, then we all discovered they were from our brothers and sisters from Papua New Guinea and they wanted to come to invest in Fiji.

Fast-forward now to 2024, they are one of the largest single investors in Fiji and will be up there in terms of lending funds. They are number three certainly in terms of institutional investment through BSP Life. They cover life insurance for quite a number of our people. And I have to say Mr. Speaker, Sir that they have done well. They have of course have their own property in the country and they are wonderful corporate citizens. I turned a celebration for them recently, the honourable Prime Minister as well.

In terms of regionalism, in terms of regional corporation, BSP has been one of the agents of regionalism in the South Pacific. They continue to move around the Pacific and have become a central part of the financing system in the Pacific. So, I guess I am saying Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you reflect on that and the importance to Fiji. Of course, when they decided to become a subsidiary and no longer a branch, and some of us especially for me, who have worked in the banking system, there is a major shift when you are a branch and becoming a company.

Because the proper system of governance perhaps is a bit lighter in terms of footprint over a branch, the full extent of corporate governance gets imposed in a subsidiary. So, full corporate governance structures are imposed on the entity. I have always reflected on when foreign banks setup as branches and when they decide to become subsidiaries as in the case with BSP, it is actually a signal that they are in the country to stay. That they want to part of the fabric of the country, they have confidence in the country, and they wish to participate not only as a branch but a fully-fledge corporate citizen.

Just on those reflections alone Mr. Speaker, Sir, alone when this came to Cabinet, I certainly welcomed it because it is the right thing to do for the company. I am sure the honourable Finance Minister will address the questions by honourable Koya. But just look at it this way, they are signalling to Fiji that they are here to stay, it really just the left hand passing over a bottle to the right hand, and in that simple process if they are any liabilities of course.

As a country we should welcome the decision to change over to a corporate entity, because it does enhance its overall standing and also creates greater signal certainly from my perspective in terms of their participation in the banking and financial sector of our country.

Mr. Speaker, on those few notes I fully support the Bill before Parliament and hope we all do

as well. *Vinaka saka.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I give a little bit more on BSP's footprint enrolled in the banking industry in the country. Let me just respond to honourable Koya I think that is a very good question. Let me say first there is no new third-party involvement, so that is the first thing which essentially means that the ownership does not change. If you look at the Value Added Tax 1991 legislation, which provides exemption for financial services and zero-rating of taxable set supplies of sales for business as a going concern, that is another point. Section 18 of the Bill which you referred to honourable Koya, that is related to tax consequences of the BSP transfer. We have checked with Fiji Revenue and Customs Service) as well, it is satisfactory.

Really in terms of tax, nothing changes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, BSP is one of the largest corporate taxpayers and your point about profit of BSP, in fact, BSP has 6,000 shareholders and FNPF is the largest shareholder. So, what that means is that the more profit BSP makes, the better for FNPF members, but let me just give some information for our people and for Parliament.

Sir, BSP offers a full range of business and personal lending products, international trade and payment services, transactions, savings accounts, plus electronic banking services across the ATMs, EFTPOS, internet, phone, and SMS banking services. It offers a full range of business and personal lending products, international trade and payment services, transaction and savings account plus electronic banking services, ATMs, you have internet, phone and SMS and banking services.

In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, BSP is the number one bank by market share, having the largest loan deposit portfolio, the loan portfolio is about 26.9 percent almost 27 percent and the deposit is about 25.5 percent. They have about 398,412 customers, a network of 17 branches, 548 fulltime employees and 40 part-timers, and attachment staff. They have about 122 ATM and 319 EFTPOS. They actually offer a very significant volume of rural banking services through their partnership with postal agencies, and they have the farthest outreach right up to Rotuma. There are also about 58,736 social welfare customers who bank with BSP and are not charged any monthly service fees, and they get 4 free transactions per month. This is the nature of BSP's banking business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank all the honourable Members for their contribution and support for the Bill. I want to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Haroon Ali, the Country Head for BSP; the man with 40 years of banking experience. And our staff within the Ministry of Finance including the Permanent Secretary for having the consultations and getting this process sorted out. We had two options; we could have done this through transfer by agreement and the other option is legislation. We preferred the legislation which is easier than the transfer by agreement option.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion to the honourable Members. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now proceed through vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Bank of the South Pacific Bill 2024 (Bill No. 22/2024) passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. 21/2024)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that bring us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your contributions and if I may say so I think that we have done remarkably well today, considering the seven Bills and their importance to the country that have gone through and passed.

Wish you well tonight and Parliament stands adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.02 p.m.