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Verbatim Report

[VERBATIM REPORT]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS & DEFENCE

ANNUAL REPORT

2020-2022 Annual Reports

INSTITUTION: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Tuesday, 14th January, 2025

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, SUVA, ON TUESDAY, 14TH JANUARY, 2025 AT 9.00 A.M.

Submittee: Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

In Attendance:

1. Ms. Jeanette Emberson - Secretary-General to Parliament
 2. Mr. Abele Sakulu - Deputy Secretary-General
 3. Mr. Sakiusa Rakai - Head of Legislative Services
 4. Ms. Louis Vakarau - Head of Corporate Services
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DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- *Ni sa bula vinaka*, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. We are going to be live very shortly, if not already, so I just want to welcome all viewers and especially, all honourable Members, Secretariat, Hansard staff and also our submittee from Parliament. It is a pleasure to welcome you all this morning, especially to the viewers who are watching this proceeding.

As you are well aware and for your information, pursuant to Standing Order 111 (2) of Parliament, all Committee meetings are to be opened to the public. Therefore, this meeting is open to the public and the media. Any sensitive information, however, concerning this submission cannot be disclosed to the public which include matters of:

- (1) National Security matters;
- (2) Third party confidential information;
- (3) Personnel or human resources matters; and
- (4) Committee deliberation and development of Committee's recommendation and report.

I wish to remind honourable Members and our invited submittee from Parliament that all comments and questions are to be asked and addressed through the Chairperson. For viewers watching this live on *Facebook*, questions can also be asked via comments, and only relevant questions will be considered by the Committee. Please, note that if there are any questions by Members of the Committee, they may interject, or we can wait until the end of your submission to ask our questions.

This is a parliamentary meeting, and all information gathered is covered under the Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Please, bear in mind that we do not condone any slander or libel of any sort, and any information brought before this Committee should be based only on facts.

In terms of other protocols of this Committee meeting, please, be advised that movement within the meeting room will be restricted and minimise the use of mobile phones. Please, put your mobile phones on silent while the meeting is in progress.

Madam Secretary-General to Parliament, Deputy Secretary-General to Parliament, Head of Legislative Services and Head of Corporate Services, I know I do not need to introduce the Members of the Committee to you, but I would do so, anyway, for the benefit of the members of the public who may be watching.

First of all, I want to welcome our newest Member, the Assistant Minister for Health, honourable Ravunawa.

(Introduction of Committee Members)

Today, is really going to be an informal discussion relating to the Annual Reports of Parliament from 2020, 2021 and 2022. As part of the Committee's request, we will be asking topical questions based on the following items: Parliament technical capabilities, Parliamentary staff and capacity building programme, Members of Parliament capacity building programmes and Parliament's Civic Education and Outreach Programmes. After that, we may have other questions.

However, please, for the public, I will ask you to introduce yourselves, Madam Secretary-General. *Vinaka*.

(Introduction of Officials from the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji)

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Madam Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-General, Head of Legislative Services and Head of Corporate Services. We will go through those lists of four questions first. Perhaps, you may just tell us about Parliament's technical capabilities.

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, we are also very grateful to the Committee for this opportunity to be able to appear before the Standing Committee to provide some clarifications and, perhaps, for this instance, engaging in a *talanoa* session on the Annual Reports that have been tabled in Parliament. You would have noted that the reporting period in question is from 2020 to 2022, and we had, sort of, tried our level best to comply with the reporting guidelines. We were very aware that we were delayed in our reporting back to Parliament, but this is something that the Management had decided to improve upon so that we can report to the taxpayers and for accountability and transparency.

Just to start the discussions, and I will also invite my colleagues to contribute where they deem fit, for this reporting period of 2020 to 2022, yes, indeed, it was an unprecedented time where COVID also struck the globe as a whole and in that respect, had also posed a lot of challenges to Parliament.

So, as you are aware, the Secretariat is the support mechanism to the honourable Members of Parliament (MPs), to ensure that they can discharge their legislative, their oversight and their representative roles. With that in mind, that was what had driven the Secretariat from that time until the end of the reporting period, to ensure that we continue to deliver on our services.

Yes, we have also taken note of the communication or the correspondence that was conveyed to us in December on the technical capabilities, staff building capacity programmes, the capacity building programmes as well for the MPs, and Parliament's Civic Outreach Programmes.

I may start off with the Outreach Programme and then I will invite my colleagues to take a topic each as they feel comfortable. With respect to the Parliament Civic Education and Outreach programmes, yes, this also came to a halt during that period due to the COVID safety regulations and protocols that were in place. But, overall, what we give to the public from the Civic Team is we have a couple of programmes that we undertake for the public.

The first is the Parliament Bus Programme. This Programme involves our team from the Unit that goes out to schools, they also go out to visit villages and other groups that may have shown

interest, and they take information about Parliament, on what Parliament is about.

Over the years from the first term of Parliament, we have noticed that the public or a lot of people are always not aware of the three branches, which is the Legislature which is Parliament, the Executive which is the Government and the Judiciary which is the Courts.

Most of the times when our team is out there, they say that we are from the Government. So, it had to start from there where we had to educate the audience that Parliament is actually another branch of the State. So, the team would take the audience through a 30 to 40 minutes presentation, and then I would open it up for question and answer at the end. That is the Parliament Bus Programme.

The second is the Speakers' Debate. Recently, we have had two Speakers' Debate Programmes which we undertook last year and were hosted at the Grand Pacific Hotel. So, that would have been the sixth and seventh Speakers' Debate.

Previously, from the first term of Parliament, the late Dr. Jiko Luveni had also gone out to undertake this Programme. With the Speakers' Debate Programme, the focus is on the SDGs. There is a team that works on selecting a particular SDG which the Speaker would like to have discussed at such forums. I believe in the last Speaker's Debate that we had, honourable Rinesh Sharma had also participated as a panellist. So topical issues pertaining to SDGs are discussed at these debates.

I do not have my full notes here with me, Madam Deputy Chairperson, but I have it all written down somewhere. Unfortunately, my laptop gave up on me just before we came but we are very much able to provide this written information. I apologise, I have it right here now.

The third is the Mock Parliament Programme. There was a Mock Parliament which we had undertaken last year for the women. This year, we have specifically discussed that we will dedicate it to the youth. So, we are hoping to have a Youth Parliament during the year.

The fourth is the Community Outreach - Meet the Speaker Programme. Since COVID-19, we have had to put a pause to this Programme, we have not taken the initiative to pursue it again, but this is something that has been discussed with the honourable Speaker now, and we will see where that would lead us during this financial year.

In the past, we have also had Parliamentary Education Workshop, and this was aimed at teachers who are teaching Social Science subjects. These workshops would help the teachers, sort of, review the curriculum for the education sector, and I am glad to say that this had resulted in the Ministry agreeing to amend the curriculum to, sort of, update the information that they now have about Parliament because, obviously, some things had changed from the old Parliament. Since we had the 2013 Constitution, we no longer had the two Houses. We now only have one House which is the unicameral Parliament. So, that is on the Civic Education and Outreach Programme.

On Capacity Building Programmes for MPs, Madam Deputy Chairperson, this is something that is ongoing. The honourable Speaker endorses, nominates and sends MPs to workshops that are being organised by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). We also have affiliation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The honourable Speaker would confirm which of the MPs would be represented at these training opportunities.

We also have other programmes that are being spearheaded by the project that supports Parliament which is the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project, and they organise several workshops

which are very beneficial to MPs. That has involved capacity building for Committee Members on their various roles so that they are able to discharge their functions.

We also have staff capacity building programmes. Similar workshops are held by the UNDP, as well as other counterparts in the Australian and New Zealand Parliament. So, as you are currently aware, Madam Deputy Chairperson, we have a twinning arrangement with the Parliament of Victoria and so they are very forthcoming when it comes to technical needs from the Fijian Parliament.

Those are the avenues that we capitalise on when it comes to providing the relevant training that our staff and our honourable Members would require. There are several other programmes, workshops and conferences that honourable Members and staff have engaged in and we have details of all those.

The good thing about these trainings is that when they return, there is a report that is submitted to the honourable Speaker. Even the honourable Speaker's delegation also comes back and reports back to Parliament. These reports are all contained in the Library and MPs are very much welcomed to peruse those and see if there are any learnings from those workshops or conferences that they have attended.

In terms of Parliament technical capabilities, and I am sure that all Members have been aware and also for the benefit of the viewers who are tuning in this morning, we have continued to improve on our ICT capabilities or capacity within Parliament.

Let me take us back to the reporting period in question. Yes, we had continued to, sort of, advance the efforts that have been achieved thus far, so prior to when there was a complete shutdown, the UNDP had worked very closely with our ICT to ensure that Parliament will continue. We can say that it was evident during the COVID-19 lockdown, that Parliament continued to execute its responsibilities in terms of law making, questioning oversight of the Government and this was visible through the hybrid system that was installed by Parliament.

Whilst the work started in 2018, we are very grateful that leadership then had seen it fit to pursue this avenue. So, when the lockdown occurred, Parliament was able to sit, we had few Members who were in the House, whilst the rest were tuning in from their respective homes or if they were on lockdown at some other venue.

In that respect, the COVID-19 response budget was successfully passed, some other regulations and laws were also passed, and this is testament to the investment that the Parliament Secretariat and the honourable Speaker had envisioned and followed up on. So, we are grateful that as Secretariat, we were able to continue the support to the honourable Speaker and to the MPs. At the end of the day, we would discuss amongst ourselves and say that, "Yes, we can say that we have, indeed, continued to achieve our vision which is a resilient Parliament, responsive to the needs of the people and driven by the ideal of a better quality of life for all Fijians".

Aside from the reporting period which ends in 2022 for the said report, recently, if I may, Madam Deputy Chairperson, we have continued to advance all the other initiatives that we have already undertaken. With last year's financial budget, the Government had approved a \$4.4 million budget increase for the upgrade of our ICT conferencing system. With this new system, it was envisaged that the translation of the vernacular can also be reflected in that project, and we are also finalising and you would have heard from the honourable Speaker in the December Sitting that we are also finalising the captioning, which we are hoping that the public would benefit more from.

There will continue to be works that we will continue to upgrade whatever is required so that we are also in tune with the technology that is in place. As we are well aware, ICT has always evolved very rapidly and we, as an institution, must be strengthened and we also need to keep up with these changes that are rapidly happening around us.

With those few introductory remarks, Madam Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, I will also give the opportunity to my colleagues if they have anything to add on, and we are very much looking forward to your further questions afterwards, please.

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, if I may, just to elaborate on Madam SG's comments on the technical capabilities, during the reporting period, you will appreciate that we really had to re-think our strategies in terms of keeping Parliament relevant. Parliament at the time was the highest decision-making body, so we had to continue our broadcasting to the public that even during this time of lockdown, Parliament was still meeting. So, we really had to dive into MS 365 and our online platforms and, of course, our broadcasting hybrid system, which we had to bring to the fore. We had planned it for the latter two years, but we had to really bring it with the assistance of UNDP.

Whilst other legislatures and jurisdictions were not able to sit, we consider this period, especially the technical capabilities of our ICT Team, as one of the major achievements for this particular period, in allowing MPs to still sit, make decisions on budget and Bills. Then the public, because they voted them in, were able to see that their MPs continued to meet. In the corporate perspective, we consider ICT as our major achievement.

We also had our reporting obligations with regards to the IPU and the CPA. So, we are featured in their magazines and newsletters in punching above our weight. We would really like to clearly say that the capabilities of the staff and, of course, the infrastructure was really a good idea and a good investment as, Madam, had alluded to, and the vision of our leaders at the time, who knew at that reporting period that such an incident would happen. But we are glad that were able to remain relevant, especially assisting the honourable Members and the voters who brought them in to continue to show the public that they were still working, and they were able to sit and discuss.

With regards to our Civic Education, because they were not able to go out, most of the work is having our staff go out, we had to ensure that they and the honourable Members of Parliament were safe. They were not able to engage in the Parliament Bus Programme, so we had to really dive into our online platforms.

You will appreciate in the report that there are large numbers with regards to those who viewed our website at the time, our social media platforms, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, in keeping in touch with our Parliament. So, we really thank the staff at the time who were handling these online platforms, they were able to keep Parliament relevant in those areas - targeting our school children, our staff and the people of Fiji in whatever life that they are in. Those are our achievements at the time.

With regards to our staff capacity, again, we were not able to send our staff out for trainings, so we really used UNDP's assistance in doing online training. We had to do it in groups, at some stages, even the honourable Members of Parliament with the Speaker at the time, also did online trainings. The timing for those online trainings, we had to meet late into the night, which was morning there, and depending on the facilitators. But we just asked our staff if they could just stick to it in order to maintain our targets for our training for our staff, as well for honourable Members of Parliament.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Would Mr. Rakai or Mr. Sakulu like to pick up on any of the four issues that Madam Secretary-General has already covered in terms of Parliament technical capabilities, parliamentary staff capacity building programmes, Members of Parliament capacity building programmes and Parliament civic education outreach programmes?

MR. S. RAKAI.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, just to add on to what Madam Secretary-General and the Head of Corporate has elucidated in terms of the Civic Education Outreach Programmes, this Programme started off in 2014. Knowing the previous Parliament out there, there never used to be an outreach programme like this so, when we started off in 2014, one of the engagements from our parliamentary partners was Parliament of Victoria. They were able to guide us along in terms of how we should handle, and we are thankful to them that we were able to learn so much from them in terms of the other parliaments as well.

Also, when this started off, there were actually some discussions between Members that they also wanted to join the Outreach Programme. I am sure some of you may know that, the previous late Speaker had decided not to allow that because it may be a tool used by MPs in going out and preaching for their political parties.

However, the role of the Civic Education Outreach Programme is just to guide students and also members of the public in terms of how Bills and work of Parliament is done. That was one of the major programmes that was done.

You would know, Madam, in 2022, we also had community engagement strategy that was done. We learned, as we have said, from some of our partners abroad, to connect abroad strategically, as well as provide more opportunities to have access to Parliament, as well as remove barrier participation by the Fijian people, and also to modernize engagement which is being done currently on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. That is something that the team is looking at, even though staff challenges are there.

Even though we have staff challenges, as you know, people started to go for greener pastures but we have been able to hold on to that. During this reporting period, COVID-19 was handled by providing access through *Facebook*, *Twitter* and every other platform online. So, it was trying times, but we managed to get there. Thank you.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Rakai. I do not know if the Deputy Secretary-General has something to add to the discussion.

MR. A. SAKULU.- I would just like to add another important issue which is Parliament staff on the ground. During that reporting period, 2020-2021, we had 11 vacancies.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- 11?

MR. A. SAKULU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, yes, 11 vacancies and from 2021-2022, we had an increase of 14 vacancies. During that period too, the Executive Management had decided to hold back on advertising those vacancies, so we relied on the staff on the ground. We did not have full capacity on the ground, but we still managed to deliver our responsibilities and roles here in Parliament.

At the end of 2022, the total vacancies was 14. We started advertising in 2023 when we opened up our vacancies. Now, we are back to full staffing, we still have few staff coming in and we are still advertising for vacant positions. Also, staff are still leaving, most of our staff are leaving

for overseas for greener pastures or other Parliaments in the Pacific Islands or other organisations, like the United Nations. Very few staff moved across to other Ministries, but most of our staff either moved overseas or to other Pacific Island Parliaments.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Honourable Members, you have heard from the members of the Parliament of Fiji staff who are here - Madam SG, Deputy SG, Manager Corporate Services and Head of Legislative Services. I now open the floor for any questions.

May I remind those who are watching and those who may watch this later that we are speaking about the reporting period of the Annual Report from Parliament from 2020-2022. I hope you will understand, Madam Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary- General, Head of Corporate and Head of Legislature that we also will have questions pertaining to now and how you may have improved or changed, how Parliament works, and you know, in particular, staffing, as you have said Deputy Secretary-General. There are other issues that we will want to bring up.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Through you, Madam Deputy Chairperson, I have one question regarding Parliamentary Education. Did the Parliamentary Education Programme include primary and secondary education level?

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Thank you, honourable Tuiwailevu. Through you, Madam Deputy Chairperson, yes, I can confirm that the target audience for our outreach programmes are always for primary and secondary schools. As I had alluded to earlier, we had also ventured out into the village settings to also create awareness on the role of the Parliament.

However, that had since been put on hold due to the COVID protocols that were in place at that time, something which we have not open up again, but we have, since the reopening of the borders and everything else normalise, to start first with the primary and secondary school roll out.

Also, a pertinent issue, perhaps, as to why that decision was taken was because those who had undertaken or had been exposed to these trainings previously by the Parliament Team had left the school system by then. So, it was pertinent that the Team continues to target from the youngest in primary school and hoping that they will continue to bear that knowledge when they pursue their secondary school level of education.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Madam Secretary-General.

Honourable Members, are there any more questions for the team from Parliament? I have one, on Page 11 of the Annual Report, you talked about one of the significant challenges being faced by Parliament during the reporting period being performance management. So, during this reporting period, especially during COVID-19, how was this Performance Management carried out pre and post-COVID for the staff?

I was in Opposition at that time, and I remember I was asking one of the staff, how are you working from home because so many of us had to work from home? Were staff adequately resourced to be able to work from home? I remember that one staff told me, "We have to use our own data". They were not issued with laptops. They had to use their own phones and data. So, if COVID was to hit again or something was to happen, would you be able to guarantee that the staff would be adequately resourced if they had to work from home?

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Thank you, Madam Deputy Chairperson. I will ask Ms. Vakarau to, perhaps, provide more insight into this. However, I can confirm at this point in time now that we

have learned over the years, we had identified the gaps that we had encountered, particularly during this reporting period.

Yes, I can also confirm that we could not furnish all our staff with the tools and that includes, laptop and even data in some cases, but we had tried as much as possible where we could provide certain staff who were needed mostly, to ensure that the work continue whilst everyone was working from home or remotely.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Chairperson, for those comments. I can safely say, as confirmed at this point in time that, yes, should there be another lockdown, we are in a much better position to provide staff with the relevant tools that they require.

With the rollout of the Office 365 that Ms. Vakarau had also referred to, that allowed staff to work remotely. So, even if we are at home, even if we are on work trip overseas or in another part of the country, we are able to tune in and connect to the rest of our workmates and that ensures that there is continuity of the work.

Yes, Madam Deputy Chairperson, should there be another hit of lockdown or any other adversity that may hit the country, we can say that we will be more prepared and we will ensure that the work and the support to the MPs and honourable Speaker continues so that at the end of the day, they can always discharge their legislative, their representative and their oversight and scrutiny functions.

I will hand over now to Lois if she has any other aspects to contribute to this discussion.

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Thank you Madam and Madam Deputy Chairperson. With regards to the Performance Management System (PMS), we continue to use the MyAPA mechanism which is in place. At the moment, we choose not to stray too far way, or benchmark towards the MCS Civil Service and how they assess staff overall.

However, with regards to staff performing during lock-down during this period, really we also put together our Viber teams and MS teams, as well as our SharePoint drive where all relevant documents are saved in a SharePoint. So, wherever we are, if COVID should hit again, we have access. All we need to have is data, so that we have access to the same documents, we can vet the documents together online, so we will always be in touch in that circle using the 365 platform that we have, in addition to our *Viber* and *Messenger* groups that we had to create in order to stay in touch as leaders, stay in touch as executive management, even as managers and supervisors in their different pocket groups.

This period really brought that forward, and we continue to manage those platforms, connecting our communication platforms to this day, and it has been very effective from then until now, especially the SharePoint programme which is an application of the Office 365. We are still moving into that slowly with regards to encouraging our staff to use that platform, but I would say that we are around 60 percent or 70 percent ready should COVID-19 hit again or any other act of God, so to speak.

With regards to hardware that we have, currently, it is only supplied to our senior managers right up to the top and we encourage our staff below senior level, if they have a laptop they can use it, but we had further discussions with regards to data. We can always move around the hardware that we have with regards to pocket *WiFi*. There is always an avenue in that area but for this reporting period, we just want the secretariat for the Committees too, as well as MPs, to have access to that

where they can continue to meet as a committee and as MPs so that they can be in touch with the public, as well as their own staff and as MPs as well.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, through you, I would like to thank Madam SG for mentioning that the Youth Mock Parliament would take place later on this year. I think, as a strong youth advocate, this gives hope to the youth to take part in the legislative process for decision-making and their voices to be heard and any youth who looks at nation building.

The second point in this is there is a question related to probably last year that Parliament went through renovation and yet, we find technical glitches happening during our Parliamentary process. Could you, please, elaborate on this, has it been rectified, or where are we right now?

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Thank you, honourable Sharma, and Madam Deputy Chairperson. Yes, I can confirm that in the December Sitting, which was the last Sitting week for 2024, we had encountered some glitches as well. If Members can appreciate that the honourable Speaker had also provided communication to clarify the situation and what was happening behind the scenes.

Yes, there is no perfect system, we can only hope that we get a near perfect system but, obviously, we will always encounter some glitches along the way, but this is something that we will pay more attention to - these issues.

When those issues arise, we would expect honourable Members to report them immediately and upon receipt of such reports, we would convey them to our IT who will look into it immediately. So, a lot of communication is also happening during the Parliamentary Sitings.

Yes, I understand that a lot of these issues tend to come up when the Parliament is in session. There is a lot of communication between the Secretariat so we ensure that the system is up and running, whatever glitch they may have been, that we are always trying to address immediately. We would encourage Members to continue to tell us as soon as something is wrong.

We believe that after the December Sitting, we should not be encountering any more of such that happened in December that was clearly clarified by Mr. Speaker, stating that that was the last test for the final phase of the \$4.4 million upgrade which was to do with the captioning and broadcasting. So, the only time that it was going to be tested was during the live Parliament sitting.

Yes, those issues were detected, taken back to the consultants who were also on site and connecting remotely and connecting to the Sitting as it was unfolding. As alluded to by Mr. Speaker, we are hoping that in future Sitings, we will not be seeing any more of those glitches.

Nevertheless, Madam Deputy Chairperson, as much as we can hope for a perfect system, we do expect that there may be glitches - not that we expect them and not that we want them to occur, they may just happen but I can assure you that the Secretariat Team will continue to do all that it can within the means that it has to ensure that these are addressed immediately at the most effective time. Also, to ensure that there is no disruption to the work of the MPs, especially during Parliament Sitings.

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, if I may, they come under Corporate Services, so I just thought I would like to mention here that there are several platforms that are operating during a sitting week or even a sitting day. We have the FTR which is For the Record which assists our Hansard Reporters, we have audio visual and, of course, our broadcasting in hybrid mode. Those are the platforms that we use in a sitting week or in a sitting day.

At the moment, to strengthen that, we are currently advertising for staff with regards to technical engineers and broadcasting specialists. We have a staff who has started on broadcasting this week, so these are the areas that we are trying to make improvements on, and we hope that in the coming years, there is a certain percentage of glitch that we will accept which I have talked with the staff on. Once we exceed that, then we need to look at staff capabilities or the infrastructure that we purchased, et cetera.

With the investment that we have currently made to the House and in the Committee rooms eventually, we stand firm on that infrastructure, and we will back it up with capable staff which we are currently advertising, and we will be recruiting in the near future.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Through you, Madam Deputy Chairperson, just a follow up question, since you mentioned that you are recruiting new staff. Is Parliament in the capacity to have these staff on board not as interns but going forward, rather than having interns and renewing their internship and eventually, we lose out on these young talents?

MS. L. VAKARAU.- In the last financial period, the Ministry of Finance has approved new positions for Parliament ICT staff in the understanding that the infrastructure that we have purchased, as I have said, we need to back it up with capable staff. Our posts were confirmed by Ministry of Finance, so we are currently undergoing recruitment and selection process for those technical staff. They are permanent positions, and we look forward to them starting so that we can maintain and may be improve the infrastructure that we are currently using.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I have a question and we are talking about staffing and adequately resourcing Parliament. From the two Committees on which I serve, we have had some delays in having our reports coming back from Hansard – the verbatim reports. I understand that when a committee goes out on public consultation, there is one or two Hansard Reporters who go with them which means that the other Committee Hansard Reporters are heavily depleted. Is that going to be part of the ongoing recruitment?

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, we sincerely apologise with regards to the later submissions of Daily Hansard, but you will appreciate that straight after the Sitting week, we have Hansard Reporters who need to produce their stints. In most cases, some Committees sits straight after the sitting week and so the workload continues to be piled upon them.

The Multi-Language Translation and or Captioning (MLTC) System is supposed to assist with the load with regards to Hansard. This is the area in which we are investing in to assist Hansard in delivering more effective and efficient Hansard reports. So, most of the time they are working extended hours. So, one Committee sits this week and the next week and just those extended sittings from the sitting week on to Committee week sitting, going out and coming back, we sincerely ask the Committee Members just to appreciate and allow them to have their time to return and, of course, their desk work that they have to undertake as well.

We understand that they have timelines with regards to Committee work. In getting more staff, Hansard Reporters will probably not be effective at this time. We will just need to improve on the infrastructure. Maybe the captioning system will allow for more efficient work on their part in giving the Committees' timely reports. We anticipate that when we do allow the MLTC project, that will really help with regards to timely reports. We sincerely apologise and appreciate the Committee's understanding in allowing the women time to return and then get on their work with regards to their desktop office work that they also need to produce for the Secretary-General.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, first of all, I thank the Committee for the report that is before us and we thank all the effort put into the difficult time during the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe there are lots of lessons learnt during that period.

Moving forward, I believe Parliament is an exciting place. You can make this place the best employer for the Pacific and you can make yourselves ambitious in trying to do that because Parliament is a unique place. I have worked in the education sector and in the private and public sector, and I sensed that Parliament is totally different.

I want to thank the Executives who are here with the report and the work that you are doing but then, it was mentioned about the staff who are resigning and moving abroad. My question is, what are some of the retention policies that you may have to try to retain our good capable staff who have been well resourced through your orientation and capacity building in developing them into the parliamentary process? My question basically is your retention policy, and if ever there was a Job Evaluation Exercise done, when was it? Perhaps, it is time that you inform the Committee whether there is a need to have another one, make it current to suit the market that it is out there?

MS. J. EMBERSON.- I will just give some brief remarks, Madam Deputy Chairperson, and then I will hand over to Lois as she looks after our Corporate Services Division and HR falls under that Division.

In terms of staff having to leave and pursue greener pastures, mostly overseas, we have also noted some who have been absorbed by other Parliaments within the Pacific. There is always a question of which workplace will be offering more to the officer. So, as you can appreciate, Madam Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, we have certain grades that staff are pegged on in terms of remuneration and we cannot totally deviate from that because any deviation or any vast deviation from that would then incur audit queries from the Ministry of Finance and other bodies that are tasked to look into our books.

As much as we would like to maintain and retain staff who we have, sort of, provided training for and capacitated over the years, we really cannot compare and hold anyone back if another opportunity is being accepted by the officer. However, we have some measures in place in terms of trying to keep as many staff as we can.

Yes, we fully agree with you, honourable Assistant Minister, that Parliament is a totally different institution which entails a different kind of work to the other sectors that are around us, but we have also tried our best to ensure that staff do not leave. We become family, and I think that is something that we have always encouraged under our leadership from the previous terms and from the first term.

Yes, we have a lot of arguments and disagreements between the staff but at the end of the day, we have tried to remind ourselves that we are a family, and a family must always function to provide further support to the rest of the extended family which includes our honourable Members. But I will ask Ms. Vakarau to perhaps highlight a few of the specific retention measures that we have currently.

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, you are correct in mentioning that Parliament is a unique place to work and a unique employer. We wish to maintain that, but it will really depend on the good leadership vision to continue in that direction so with the staff and leaders, we wish to continue to maintain that culture.

With regards to the Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), it was last done in 2018, if I recall. It is overdue, I think we do need it for the Fiji Parliament, and we had written that in our Budget submission for the current financial year. However, at that time, it was not supported by the Ministry of Finance because the salary adjustment was already in their plan. So, we have, sort of, retreated in this area and allow the Ministry of Finance to do that for the Civil Service as a whole.

With regards to retention measures, we did receive a Circular from the Ministry of Civil Service on some retention measures, some suggestions that we could apply in regard to our policy. Off the top of my head, one that since we have reviewed is the recruitment and selection policy to include one or two of those measures, which is internal advertisement. We will do our best but that is, of course, at the discretion of the Secretary-General. If she wishes that, that post be advertised internally to give our internal staff the opportunity to apply first, then we will go in that direction. Otherwise, if we cannot find a suitable officer, we will advertise externally in terms of broadening our pool of applicants so that we can get the best officer recruited into the Fiji Parliament. *Vinaka.*

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Lois. I have got a couple of things to mention, one was on inclusivity of the work that we do in Parliament – outside and inside Parliament, in the Chambers, and I was just wondering if you would consider a presentation to visiting groups in the vernacular. I know that it is difficult, for example, children coming in from Vanuabalavu to understand English being spoken to them. It is a different level, and it is in a language that they do not often speak, so I was wondering about that – inclusivity.

Speaking of inclusivity, I do not need an answer – advertisement on Standing Committee meetings, we always advertise for public consultations when we go out to the field but for a meeting like this one, for example, yesterday, we had the BAF here and we had, perhaps, 14 members of the public watching because there was no advertisement about it. We only advertise when we go out to public consultation.

Also, orientation for MPs, I was just discussing with staff of Parliament. How many of us know what the Secretariat go through – what Hansard go through, what you all go through? We come into Parliament, do our debates, but then we do not know what happens in ITC, I do not think anyone has sat in with the translators when they are translating, so I would just like to suggest that inclusivity of language when two groups come into Parliament and second, an orientation for MPs about the work that you all do because we need to understand what you go through.

The one that I would really highlight is the major challenges that we are facing in Committee is just to do with the Solicitor-General's Office in drafting. Is there any consideration for Parliament to establish its own independent Legal Counsel that can provide services to Committees in future as per the practice of many of the other Parliaments that we work with?

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Madam Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, with respect to inclusivity of language for tours, we try as much as possible to get both our team from Civic and Media Unit, that is, Tarun and Bale, to be present. So, if it is a group from Vanuabalavu Primary School, Bale will be there to also engage in the vernacular, to explain about the role of Parliament and the presentation that they usually take the groups through. That is something that we can strengthen, Madam Deputy Chairperson, we will definitely look into this with Bale and the Team so that we can also improve on this aspect.

On advertisement, I would also ask that you allow us to have another debrief session with Bale and the Team and our IT, to see how best we can also improve on this aspect.

With respect to the orientation to MPs about the work that the Secretariat does, in my humble opinion, we may have, sort of, touched on this during the last induction. Perhaps, you may require further details, so that is something that we can also try to organise for the interested MPs. So, we can also appreciate that maybe, a couple of MPs may be interested or maybe not, or we see what the mode is with the MPs and then we can always organise accordingly.

With the major challenges regarding the opinions returning from SG's Office, yes, I can say that there have been some ongoing discussions with respect to Parliamentary Counsel, or the need for an inhouse Parliamentary Counsel. With the former Speaker, there was already a move and there were already discussions happening between Parliament and the Ministry of Finance, to see how best we can, sort of, achieve this.

I can admit though that the discussions at hand at that point in time were more suited for the long term, and that was trying to capacitate our inhouse staff to obtain, sort of, some legal training to be able to undertake these tasks. But we believe and we note that that maybe, in order to fully realise and to fully achieve the objective of that plan, it would take years for it to actually become fruitful. So, we have taken note of the immediate concerns now. We are still having ongoing discussions on this issue, and this is also something that I can confirm that the honourable Speaker is keen to, sort of, see through during this financial year. So, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Chairperson and honourable Members, we ask that Parliament be allowed to undertake further discussions on this so that we can see how best we can provide this service to MPs.

We do have a Senior Legal Officer who is already with us but the position description for the officer is not to provide legal opinion to the Committees, it was more for the Office of the Speaker and the Executive because of the fact as well that we did not want to overstep into the critical and important role that the Office of the Solicitor-General provides. But as I had alluded to, we will revert, Madam Deputy Chairperson, once we have something more concrete from our end.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, just a very quick one; there are two questions framed into one. If you can highlight if there is any technology software, audio to text, or AI possibilities looking into making the Hansard work easier, especially for our staff and also for our MPs?

The second question is more of a recommendation, I recently visited the New Zealand Parliament. When I walked in there, I saw New Zealand's history, culture, heritage, you name it. And I think that is a recommendation for our Parliament because the world visits this Parliament, the biggest or most prominent leaders and officials visit this Parliament, so this Parliament needs to show what Fiji is about. We remain unique in the world, and I just feel like every space, pillar and wall should represent who we are, where we come from and where we are going, as a nation. So, that is just the recommendation, but the question for the *Hansard*.

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Thank you, honourable Member, for the question. Just speaking with the regards to the ICT who come under Corporate Services, the Multi-Language Translation and Captioning System that we will be launching soon, which is part of the upgrade that you had mentioned in the Parliament, is part of our investment in improving the work of *Hansard*.

To support the system, we are also advertising for the position of Captioner. GENCOM which is the vendor, the company that is currently installing the system, managed to install the system, we had tested it in the last Sitting and it is basically audio to text, as you had mentioned.

At the moment, some of the installations are still pending, and we will inform you as to when we can launch the system, but that system is basically audio to text. The captioner - we are just trying to recognize the tone of the speaker, the Member speaking and the language that we use often. At the moment, the system is trying to pick up on that so that if a soft-spoken MP stands up to speak, the system is still able to recognise, or if a passionate speaker stands up to speak, the system can pick up the Indonesian or how he or she pronounces the word.

However, the captioning system is live and will be like, correcting, especially if you speak in a vernacular or correcting the term. We anticipate that this system that we have invested in will certainly improve the Hansard work and then reporting, and we wish to bring that in as well with regards to Committee meetings, and this also achieves our inclusive mechanism in translating for the members of public. They can tune in to audio as we speak in English, they can tune into Fijian, and the translator's voice will be on television, et cetera. So, we really anticipate that this will improve our systems and processes in regard to Hansard and ICT.

MR. S. RAKAI.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, just on the second portion of honourable Rinesh Sharma's comments in terms of what he felt when he entered the New Zealand Parliament, in terms of bringing in all the pictures and photos of what New Zealand is all about, we do the same here as well.

We have a small gallery, and I know it is not in a very good position at the moment because it is quite small. What the Civic, Education and Media Unit have done was just to try and make an extension up at Level 3. When we do have space, then probably, Madam Deputy Chairperson, we would probably do a good gallery where we will show all pictures of the when and the previous. I think we still have some of those pictures of the previous Governments and the previous photos taken, as well as the ones that we have down here. Hopefully, once we have space, Sir, we will be able to get that organised and get it going again.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just for your information, speaking of ICT, we are no longer live on the *Walesi* platform or on *Facebook* either.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, I have two questions and I will just put them into one. First is the food that we are consuming in Parliament if that can be reviewed due to the NCD rise in our country and we, as a Parliament, should be leading by providing healthy food to our MPs and our visitors.

Secondly, I have been around for over 24 months now in the Parliament premises, I see a lot of furniture, old equipment that are lying around. How effective is your writing-off process for non-expendable items of Parliament?

MS. L. VAKARAU.- Madam Deputy Chairperson, if I may, with regards to food, we certainly understand where you are coming from and it was also an issue with regards to the previous two terms.

When we go into providing just healthy, we also receive complaints from MPs, so we left it to the MPs to choose. We will give you what you want - both options, and it is up to you and your choice because providing healthy food, of course, is an expensive endeavour with regards to the caterers as well in providing just healthy because we can have juices, the wraps, and that is a different cost to what we can afford at the moment.

So, the best move that we had agreed on was, we give it to you, maybe a healthier than option than the other one, the Member of Parliament will choose. It is the strength of their capacity to choose healthy than the other option. So, that remains, and we can still stick to our budget and then we leave it to MPs to still choose.

However, we can definitely refer back to our caterers and maybe get more healthy options or cut down maybe on the deserts probably, that we provide for you during the lunch option, or we can remove lunch altogether but then that will another issue with regards to the House Committee when we sit eventually in the year.

With regards to furniture, Sir, yes, indeed, it is an eyesore but at the moment, we really do not have space where we can store furniture on its way out. With regards to our Board of Survey, it is currently up to date. Before we purchase new furniture, it must be reflected in the Board of Survey that it needs to go out. So, we beg your indulgence, honourable Members, just to allow us to, sort of, store it in whatever little space we can because our containers in the old Parliament are currently filling up. So, when we undertake the Board of Survey on our furniture on its way out, we need to ensure that there is space to store it because the process would have to be passed by Ministry of Finance in order to clear that. So, we appreciate your understanding.

In the last two financial years, the response from the Ministry of Finance was, to use the furniture until you cannot use it anymore. May be, they were trying to save money in that area. It does not only go for furniture but for our equipment as well in terms of printer. Until it cannot work anymore, then we can board it. That is where we are at the moment.

However, our Board of Survey is currently up to date, and we can now purchase our new furniture for MPs and for staff, but it will take some time to clear the old furniture that is on its way out. We are trying our level best to create more space, but we are confined to this space at the moment and a little bit of a corner of the old Parliament which we can currently use and access when we need to.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a follow-up question, using the furniture and equipment until we cannot use them anymore, but some of those filing cabinets and tables can be put out for auction or any other means of removing them from the Parliament premises. Otherwise, just keeping them, collecting dust like you said, is an eyesore. It is not a good picture. If something else can be done, it can be recommended to the Ministry of Finance to have them auctioned off, or donated to schools or charity organisations so that we can keep Parliament clean and safe.

MR. A. SAKULU.- Point taken, Sir, we will look into it.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Just a follow-up question on that, when government leaders or prominent leaders visit our Parliament and what we see during breaks is they get served with the other MPs cold fried food, which is a very bad reflection on all of us and we all take accountability for that. If that could be looked into. Someone said to me, "Can you not buy a microwave?" I was just looking at that officer, but he said it as a joke, but I clearly got the message.

The other point I guess is that no photograph should be allowed in the break room because an incident had once occurred and I brought it to the attention of Madam SGP, and I would like to thank you for that. Someone is now at the door who monitors people when they come in and out, but I thought I would put that across.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- If there are no more questions, I think it might be a good time to just maybe have some closing remarks from the Executives of Parliament and then we can let them go. I am sure they have a lot of work to do.

MS. J. EMBERSON.- Thank you, Madam Deputy Chairperson and thank you honourable Members. We are, indeed, grateful for this opportunity. It has been a while since we appeared before any Standing Committee. Previously, the report was usually referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights but due to the workload, and as the Speaker had alluded to, that is the reason for the sharing of Annual Reports that are coming in now to Parliament.

We have taken note of all the points that we can improve upon, and we are taking it up on ourselves to look into these issues, discuss further with our staff and, hopefully, come to an amicable solution where we can also then improve so that our services are not disrupted, and the MPs can continue to function properly.

As I had alluded to earlier, whilst we are in the catch-up phase for our Annual Reports, I am very happy and pleased to inform the Committee that we should be tabling our next report in the March Sitting. That is something that we are working hard to finalise with our staff and with clearance by honourable Speaker. It will then be provided further to Parliament. We realise that this is something that should have been out in public, which is something that we now want to pursue very strongly.

I have no further comments, except if the Committee deems that there may be further issues you may find in the Annual Report for the reporting period, we ask that you convey your queries through our Secretariat, so that we can also provide responses to the Committee to help with your deliberation and finalisation of your reports.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you very much, Madam SGP. On behalf of the honourable Members and our Secretariat, I would like to say 'thank you' to you and the Executives of Parliament for your time today. Thank you for offering to answer any further questions we have on this Annual Report. I call this meeting to a close.

The Committee adjourned at 10.52 a.m.

Written Responses



PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

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Ref: PARL 7/15

13 February 2025

By email delivery:

Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua

Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
Parliamentary Complex
Government Buildings
SUVA

Dear Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua,

RE: Responses to the Queries by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence – Fijian Parliament's 2019-2020 and 2020-2022 Annual Reports

1. Reference is made respectfully to the above subject and your letter of 06/02/2025.
2. I have duly taken note of the Standing Committee's additional queries pertaining to the Parliament's 2019-2020 and 2020-2022 Annual Reports and in that respect, please kindly see attached as Appendix 1, the substantive responses to the queries by the Standing Committee.
3. Should the Standing Committee have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned directly.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Jeanette Emberson (Mrs)
SECRETARY-GENERAL TO PARLIAMENT

Attach:

Appendix 1

Brief: Queries of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on 2019-2020 and 2020-2022 Annual Reports of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Date: 13 February 2025

To: Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

From: Secretary-General to Parliament

Subject: Response to Queries of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on 2019-2020 and 2020-2022 Annual Reports of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Purpose of the Brief

This brief provides responses to queries raised by the Standing Committee on the Parliament's 2019-2020 and 2020-2022 Annual Reports.

Background

The Senior Executives of the Parliament appeared before the Standing Committee on Tuesday, 14 January 2025 at 9.00 a.m. This entailed a *talanoa* session on the 2020-2022 Annual Report of the Parliament which had been referred to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on 6 December 2024.

On 29 January 2025, the Hon. Speaker re-assigned the Parliament's 2019-2020 Annual Report from the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. This Annual Report had been referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights on 24 May 2024.

- 1. The Committee notes the disparity of figures in the 2020-2022 report on pages 9 and 10 on the number of committee meetings. Can Parliament update the Committee on the exact number of committee meetings for 2020-2022 period?**

At this humble juncture, I kindly submit to the Standing Committee that there is an error on our part and that the correct figures are reflected on page 9.

With reference to figures on page 10, I kindly confirm that the total and correct number of Committee meetings for the 2020-2022 reporting period is 853 (307 + 546), and the total number of virtual sessions is 542 (216 + 326).

- 2. Can Parliament update the Committee on the number of Bills that were referred to the Committee during 2020-2022 and how many Bills were passed through SO51?**

The following table provides the breakdown of the number of Bills that were referred to the Standing Committees and the number of Bills that were passed through Standing Order 51 –

	August 2020-July 2021	August 2021-July 2022
No. of Bills tabled	51	55
No. of Bills referred to Standing Committees	9	3
No. of Bills passed through SO51	50	54

- 3. How do you assess the effectiveness of MPs attending overseas training and study visits?**

The Fijian Parliament is a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union ('IPU') and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association ('CPA'), two major parliamentary bodies consisting of more than 180 parliaments and legislatures globally. There are other parliamentary associations that the Fijian Parliament is associated/affiliated with/to for professional development to capacitate our MPs and staff.

Since 2014, the Fijian Parliament has actively participated in the IPU, CPA, and other parliamentary meetings. These meetings connect parliaments and parliamentarians around the world. It ensures that our participation fosters dialogue, networking, and learnings between Members of Parliament globally.

Inter-Parliamentary relations is a key part of an MP's role as it allows them to develop knowledge of global issues and parliamentary practice, and influence policy and legislation. It also prepares Members to engage on the global stage as they progress in their careers. This enhances Parliament's ability to hold the Executive to account whilst also ensuring that MP's are connected internationally.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a training or study visit is crucial for Parliament to ensure that the time and resources invested are yielding positive outcomes. The following are some of the methods that the Parliament uses to assess these trainings or visits –

1. **Follow-Up Reports:** Members and staff who attend the trainings/visits are required to submit detailed reports outlining what they learned and how they plan to apply this knowledge;
2. **Interviews and Discussions:** De-brief discussions/sessions with the delegation are held and these can provide qualitative insights into the effectiveness of the training or study visit; and

3. **Monitoring Implementation:** Observing how the participants implement the new knowledge or skills in their roles can help measure the visit's effectiveness. This is reflective in the work of the Standing Committees through their consultations and reporting, and the quality of debates in the House. For staff, this is reflective in the improved service delivery.

By using these methods, Parliament can ensure that the training or study visits are achieving their intended goals and contributing to the overall development and efficiency of our Members and staff.

4. **Can Parliament provide the annual breakdown of Speaking Notes, Information Briefs, and Bill summaries produced for 2020-2021 and 2021-2022? What indications are we getting from these breakdowns whether library services were well utilised by Members of Parliament? What would be recommended to MPs?**

The table below shows the breakdown of Speaking Notes, Information Briefs and Bill Summaries–

Year	Speaking Notes	Bill Summaries	Information Briefs
2020-2021	2	8	49 (including Annual Report Summaries)
2021-2022	1	Not undertaken	7

- **Speaking Notes** are provided to Members for inter-parliamentary engagements or external events where MPs are representing Parliament and Committees. These include conferences, workshops and related events, local and overseas. The Unit does not provide Speaking Notes for MPs for their debates and statements in the parliamentary sittings. It can only assist MPs by providing research content to support these through the provision of information or research briefs.
- **Bill Summaries** are summaries of Bills that are provided to MPs or Standing Committees. A Bill summary is a summary overview of a Bill outlining key points, objectives, and important provisions of a Bill. It is intended to assist MPs to have a quick understanding of a Bill before or when reading the entire document in detail. The team had ceased providing Bill summaries in 2020 due to a reduction in staff capacity. This is being slowly revived by the team as capacity is being revamped.
- **Information Briefs** are information and research papers provided by the Unit either on request by MPs or proactively (by the researchers). These include summaries of annual reports and briefing papers for inter-parliamentary engagements. MPs can make information brief requests directly with the team or through their caucus staff. These are also available for Committees of Parliament.
- The low numbers recorded for Speaking Notes for the two financial years above was due mainly to reduction in the number inter-parliamentary engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Library Services

- The work of the Unit comprises two services – a research and library service. The research service provides research and analysis on various thematic areas, legislation and issues that MPs seek information on. The library supports the work of MPs, staff and some approved clients. The library houses parliamentary papers, current legislation (law books), reports, *Hansard*, journals, periodicals and other resources for the use of Members. The library can also assist MP's access information from other libraries both locally and overseas. Increasingly, the library has moved away from the provision of hard copies

(photocopies) of materials, towards digital or e-copies of documents that MP's request. The library also provides a quiet space for MP's to do reading, research or meet with parliamentary colleagues for their parliamentary work.

- The Fijian Parliament Library has played a crucial role in supporting MPs and Standing Committees by providing essential research materials, legislative updates, and guidance on accessing parliamentary resources. The library is being utilised by most MP's mainly for archival research, legislative updates, previous Parliaments' *Hansards*, past parliamentary reports, journals and related information. Most of the library services are being provided via email communication between the librarians and MP's. There are some Members who regularly visit the library to do research or have a quiet space to prepare their speeches, statements, and so forth.
- During these reporting period, 16 sets of Laws of Fiji were updated. The library has a current subscription to LexisNexis for the updating of the Laws of Fiji texts; these are undertaken when laws are amended or new laws enacted. The updating of the law books is a tedious undertaking that often requires the assistance of other staff, especially from Committees.
- The library also continues to sort historical documents from the old Parliament. It is important to note that the Parliamentary library is not an archival library as this is undertaken by the National Archives; however, it maintains copies of historical documents for the convenience of MPs and other users.
- As of August 2024, the team had developed and continues to progressively improve a SharePoint site (Research & Library Help Desk) for Members of Parliament who have @legislative.gov.fj emails (Microsoft 365 access). MP's and their staff can go to the site to make information/research requests or access *Hansard*, past information briefs, data and other information resources to assist in their parliamentary work. All MP's with a @legislative.gov.fj email can access the site on: <https://legislaturegovfj.sharepoint.com/:u:/s/ResearchHelpDesk/EVnJSj4GnrZDIm-c7H3UpBIBui7QD6-wBOGP2969lwY73g?e=zc8dyr>

Recommendation to MPs

MPs are encouraged to use the research and library services to assist them in their parliamentary work whether it be their contribution to debates in the sittings or Standing Committee work. MPs are encouraged to discuss their information and research needs with the team which will allow more efficient and effective delivery of services. The team is always prepared to have one-on-one discussions with MP's when they seek information or research support towards their parliamentary work. The team reassures MP's that this service is done in confidence as is the practice in all parliamentary libraries.

Other comments

The Research and Library Services provides crucial support to MPs and Standing Committees in the fulfilment of their parliamentary roles and functions. It is hoped that further improvements such as digital accessibility enhancements, training sessions for MPs and committee staff, and proactive research support could further strengthen the services' effectiveness. The team is utilising available digital tools available such as MS 365/SharePoint to make its services accessible and timely for MPs.

5. Can Parliament update the Committee on how they measure social media engagement?

Statistics are automatically generated on all our social media platforms. The professional dashboard has the breakdown of views, reach, content interactions and follows. Each post has its own views, reach and interactions.

These are the statistics that we use to gauge the effectiveness of our posts and how we can improve our style of posting by creating more content that continues to attract our followers.

We have also noticed that the engagements on our platforms depend on the events that take place in Parliament and on the topics that are being discussed, together with the Standing Committee events.

The Civic Education and Media Unit depends on other Units to advise on their events so that the Unit can create relevant content to create more awareness for our followers.

6. How does Parliament decide where to organise educational workshops? How are rural and maritime areas covered under this programme?

The Civic Education and Media Unit is responsible for educating the public about the role and functions of Parliament through its community engagement programmes.

From 2015 – 2019, the Unit conducted six educational workshops for teachers with the support of the UNDP's Fiji Parliament Support Project. The workshops were held in Labasa, Savusavu, Lautoka and Suva and about 150 teachers were trained. Each workshop had its own specific objectives, however, it generally focused on the following broad topics –

- To educate the teachers on the roles and functions of the Parliament according to the Constitution and basic knowledge of the procedures and traditions of Parliament;
- To train the teachers on how to use the Parliament Educational Resource package (Cards, Modules and Role Plays); and
- To review the Parliament Educational Resource package to identify gaps and further develop relevant resources so that teachers are fully equipped with the knowledge and information required to teach Parliament education topics as per their class syllabi.

Teachers and students are an important target group for the work of the Unit. The Parliament education component is in the Social Studies and Social Science Syllabi covered by Year 10 students in schools. The Unit works closely with the Curriculum Advisory Services of the Ministry of Education and schools to strengthen the teaching and learning of Parliament topics in the school curriculum as well as brings awareness on other aspects of the Fijian Parliament concepts that is not covered in the school curriculum.

These workshops are currently on hold until full staffing-capacity and funding is secured.

7. The Committee notes that during the 2020-2022 period, the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Compliance Unit reviewed certain policies and procedures by benchmarking against Civil Service policies and other legislation in place. How can Parliament operate independently? What are some of the factors that can contribute to its independence?

The Fijian Parliament will continue to benchmark against the Civil Service, where necessary. At times, we will also benchmark against policies from regional parliaments, as well as independent bodies. This practice ensures that Parliament remains aligned with best practices and standards.

Our journey towards an independent Parliament or of full autonomy will be made clearer once we adopt the Parliamentary Autonomy legislation which would aim to provide the framework of how we are to operate and make decisions regarding HR, finance, procurement, infrastructure,

and so forth. This legislation will outline the roles, responsibilities, and powers of parliamentary staff, ensuring that Parliament can function autonomously and effectively. The Monitoring, Evaluation, and Compliance Unit can further develop policies to ensure that the Fijian Parliament operates independently and effectively, aligning with the principles that will be outlined in the legislation.

A standalone building, well-fenced and marked, will ensure that Parliament remains respected and relevant to the people. This dedicated infrastructure is crucial for maintaining the independence and dignity of the legislative body. Developing and implementing our own procurement plan will contribute to a more efficient and customer-friendly service, further enhancing the operational independence of Parliament.

-ENDS-
