

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 3RD MARCH, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 3rd MARCH, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.32 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All the honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sittings of Parliament held on Friday, 6th December, 2024 and Monday, 24th February, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

I also extend a warm welcome to Mrs Sulueti Rabuka, who has joined us this morning, and I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings.

Australian High Commissioner to Fiji

I wish to also extend very warm welcome to the Australian High Commissioner, Your Excellency, Mr. Ewen McDonald and your dear wife Mrs Wendy McDonald.

On behalf of the Fijian Parliament, I extend to you our warmest gratitude and deep appreciation for your outstanding service and unwavering commitment during your tenure as the Australian High Commissioner to Fiji. Your dedication in fostering strong bilateral relations and advancing our mutual interests has left an indelible mark on our nation and its people.

Your leadership and vision have deepened the bonds of friendship between Australia and Fiji, guided by the Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership. We are grateful to you, your Excellency for your contributions to help enhancing our economy, addressing climate change, and promoting regional security and resilience.

As you embark on your new journey, we wish you continued success and fulfilment in all your future endeavours. *Vinaka vakalevu*, from our people, for being a true friend to Fiji. Your legacy of cooperation and goodwill will be cherished in the years to come. Thank you and safe journey home.

(Acclamation)

Status of Honourable Alvick Maharaj

Honourable Members, please, kindly take note that I have received official notification from honourable Alvick Maharaj of his status. He has withdrawn his appeal that was before the Fijian Electoral Commission on the deregistration of the FijiFirst Party.

Honourable Alvick Maharaj has further informed the Speaker's Office that he shall remain as an independent for the remainder of this Parliament term, and that he will support the group that is being led by the Leader of the Opposition.

Review of Membership for Standing and Select Committees

For the information of all honourable Members, I have undertaken a review of the Standing and Select Committees' membership following the recent alignment of Group of 9 Bloc to join the Coalition Government. A re-organisation of the Standing and Select Committees memberships were necessary to ensure balance representation and effective governance.

Subsequently, there are now three Government Members and two Opposition Members on each of the six Standing Committees. These changes come into effect on Monday, 3rd February 2025, and whilst I am still awaiting confirmation from the honourable Leader of the Government on some of their Committee membership, please, kindly take note of the following appointments:

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

- (1) Honourable Semi Koroilavesau will replace honourable Aliko Bia
- (2) Honourable Ketan Lal - Alternate Member

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

- (1) Honourable Parveen Bala will replace honourable Ioane Naivalurua
- (2) Honourable Shalen Kumar - Alternate Member

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

- (1) Honourable Vijay Nath will replace honourable Taito Rokomatu
- (2) Honourable Joseph Nand - Alternate Member

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Honourable Virendra Lal will replace honourable Viliame Naupoto
- (2) Honourable Ketan Lal - Alternate Member

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

- (1) Honourable Faiyaz Koya will replace honourable Mosese Bulitavu
- (2) Honourable Joseph Nand - Alternate Member

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

- (1) Honourable Hem Chand will replace honourable Naisa Tuinaceva
- (2) Honourable Shalen Kumar - Alternate Member

House Committee

Under Standing Order 126(1)(f), honourable Viam Pillay will replace honourable Naisa Tuinaceva.

Standing Orders Committee

There are no changes to the membership of this Committee.

Privileges Committee

Under Standing Order 127(1)(b), honourable Premila Kumar will replace honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu.

Allocation of Questions and Ministerial Statements

From April Sitting onwards, in case of allocation of Oral Questions per sitting day under Standing Order 42(1), five Questions shall be allocated to the Government, and five Questions shall be allocated to the Opposition, which is now solely the Group of 17 Bloc.

In the case of Ministerial Statements under Standing Order 40(4), the only response will be from the Leader of the Opposition or his designate. The Leader of the Group of 9 Bloc will no longer qualify for a response as the Group has joined the Coalition Government.

Referral of Annual Report

The 2019-2020 Parliament of Fiji Annual Report which had been with the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights has now been referred to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

**DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move:

That this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies, members of the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen in the gallery and fellow citizens; we acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we stand on - *Nadonumai vua na Turaga na Tui Suva* and pay our respect to their chiefs, past and present, as well as emerging leaders, and acknowledge their roles in caring for the *vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, it is my duty as Prime Minister to commend this Motion that this honourable House thanks His Excellency the President of the sovereign democratic Republic of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, *na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, for his most gracious speech that opened this 2025 session of Parliament, the House of Representatives on Monday 24th February, 2025. He reminded us all that this moment also provides us an opportunity to reflect on our collective

vision for our beloved nation, a vision that is focused on progress, prosperity and unity.

As representatives of the people of Fiji, it is our responsibility to shape the future of our beloved nation and its people by continuing to build up a society that is just, peaceful and resilient. As a nation, we must work together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, security, prosperity and sustainable development.

I echo the words of His Excellency, and I quote, “This Parliament is not just a chamber of debate, but it is a house of hope” but I add, that it is indeed the beacon of stewardship, a fountain of progress and amicably of the democratic spirit that bind us together as one people, one nation, with one destiny. This is our solemn responsibility; to serve is to lead with integrity in building a better future for all Fijians. During the past two years, we, in this august House have set directions, shaped policies and enacted laws that has enabled us to turn the corner, drive development, lift up our people and strengthen our resilience in the face of the challenges of our time.

His Excellency urged us to set our sights high; that our vision for the future must encompass inclusivity, sustainability and resilience. We must continue to build a Fiji where every citizen can succeed, where our environment is preserved for generations to come and where we work hand in hand with our neighbours to promote peace and stability, here at home and in our region. In other words, we must never grow weary in doing good, for surely, we and those after us will harvest the manifold blessings of God, the very One in whom we live and move and have our being.

The world today faces rapid changes, economic shifts and existential threats brought about by the climate crisis. Together they will test our resolve to breaking point, but as a nation of God's fearing people, we can boast that we are a nation build on faith, on love and the indomitable spirit of unity. It has been exactly those moments of trials and faith that have inspired our will, hardened our resolve and brought us closer together.

Let us take a moment to recognise the strength and resilience of our people and to pay tribute to our founding fathers, our past leaders and members who have served in this august House. They laid the foundation of this nation and on their shoulders, we stand today. While His Excellency rightly pointed out, the virtues of the late Mr. Nelson Mandela, I want to support that by focusing on our local heroes, the great chiefs who ceded these islands to Great Britain in 1874. The great Chief, Statesman and soldier, Ratu Sir Lal Sukuna; the great leaders who negotiated our terms of independence. The late, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the late Mr. A.D Patel, the late Mr. S.M Koya, the late Mr. Jai Ram Reddy, the late Sir George Cakobau and the late Ratu Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau. Those that played very important support roles in those formative and transitional years. The late Ro Lalabalavu Mara, the late Dr. Ratu J.R. Dovi and Adi Losalini Dovi, and the late Mrs. Irene Jai Narayan.

The noises that became the voices of the voiceless workers – the late Apisai Tora, the late Taniela Veitata, and the late Kavekini Navuso. They would have been thrilled, had they lived long enough to witness the outcome of the negotiations on the Vatukoula miners' grievances and protests that began in 1991.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also pay my respects to my predecessors, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the *Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau Sau ni Vanua o Lau*, the late Dr. Timoci Uluivuda Bavadra, *Na Turaga i Taukei Werekakaca* of Viseisei, Vuda, the late Mr. Lasenia Qarase, *Na Turaga Tui Kobuca* of Mavana, Vanuabalavu, Lau and Admiral (Ret'd) Ratu Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, *Nai Taukei, Nabinivonu*, Kiuva, Bau, Tailevu. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am suddenly aware that when people mention my name in the future, it will be without traditional titles, apart from the one that was

graciously bestowed upon me by the chief and people of Le'auva'a Village in Samoa, recently, which simply means – a fighter of some notoriety!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also remember those that have made the supreme sacrifice in World War I and World War II, especially Corporal Sefanaia Sukanaivalu (VC). Those in the Malayan campaign and in later years, in peacekeeping operations under the banners of the United Nations and the Multinational Forces and Observers. These were men and women who had trodden the paths of leadership in this great small island state of Fiji. We are their successors. We owe it to them, and Fijians of today and the future to lead justly, to love mercy and walk humbly before our God. And that taken from the Old Testament of the Bible, book from the Prophet Micah chapter 6, verse 8.

Let us use the examples left to us by these chiefs, embrace their wisdom, emulate their courage and work together. Only through this, shall we turn challenges into opportunities and transforming aspirations into achievements for all Fijians as His Excellency, the President had underscored.

Because of their service and sacrifice, Fiji can never be classified as a beggar nation as some sarcastic Fijians posted on social media their thoughts when the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Professor Biman Prasad, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Manoa Kamikamica and I visited our development partners. We go with our “begging bowls” and ask whether we have been given gifts or grants for our development programmes. I want to assure all Fijians of today and of the future, Fiji can never be classified as a “beggar!”

Fiji has played its role in global conflicts of the past as it continues to play its part in peacekeeping and conflict resolutions efforts today. It has earned its place as a global player, perhaps, punching above its own weight and rightfully earning its place among nations in the global fight for all humanity today.

We may be classified as a small developing economy, but I must say that we are proud to have stood with other great powers in the past world wars, Commonwealth wars, United Nations peacekeeping and have so rightfully earned our side and place among nations and we are not beggars. We have been reminded by His Excellency the President, that this Parliament must always be a place where ideas flourish, where debates are driven by purpose and where every decision is made with the people's best interest at heart.

Let us commit to a promise to our youths, the future of this great nation, to tirelessly pursue a brighter, wealthier and more peaceful nation. The nation of their dreams, the nation of their ambitions, and in which their hard work will define as the destiny of our nation. Let us be bold in our aspirations, relentless pursuit of excellence and unwavering in our commitment to build a better Fiji that pride through unity and prosperity.

His Excellency, the President noted, and I quote:

“We live in challenging times. The whole world is experiencing the same phenomenon. No one is spared from these challenges.”

Although the benefits of development, particularly technological advancements, are reaching most of us, we cannot deny the fact that many of our people are still left out. Exploiting their plight, particularly on social media is demeaning.

We must be cautious and ensure that information shared on social media is accurate and reflects reality, and is intended for the common good, rather than exacerbating divisions.

So, the use of our freedom of expression, with the far-reaching effects of information technology, can be exceedingly harmful to family and customary relationships. But I echo the words of His Excellency the President that we must use them wisely and without malice. Let us use our words to encourage, not to disparage.

His Excellency, the President reflected on his own journey as a public officer, as a politician, the Parliamentary Speaker and now the President. I thought about what would inspire one to act, particularly at this time of an uncertainty due to the fast-changing environment. He felt that as President and as a traditional leader, he must take the first step in making the necessary adjustments to meet the demands of modern-day Fiji. He urged us here today, including those listening in, on the radio or watching on television or livestream, in particular our traditional leaders, that we must all remain firmly committed to working together to build a vibrant and prosperous Fiji.

I echo His Excellency, the President's words, and I quote:

“It is time for united and collective action rather than just grand speeches, talk and rhetoric.”

We need to plan and then act out our plan. Let us engage in respectful dialogue and constructive debates. As national leaders, we are called for the common good of our people. Our focus must be on our commonality and shared destiny. Together, we can build a better future, one that reflects the aspirations of all our citizens. His Excellency, the President has called on members of the Great Council of Chiefs to do the same. I am firmly committed to transformational leadership.

This, to me, means that we must be compassionate, we must have empathy and focus on equity. Most importantly, we must continue embracing inclusivity rather than assimilation. We recognise that multiculturalism does not exist in isolation. It is based on the originality of the various ethnic groups, for therein lies the rich mix of our diversity, which we must embrace and nurture. This is the premise that undergirds Fiji agency that leads to creative, innovative and new ways of doing things.

These are the catalysts of entrepreneurship, and above all, vibrancy and growth. Through these our long-term vision is within reach. A dynamic nation that will enjoy lasting peace, progress and prosperity.

Economic growth and development. Mr. Speaker Sir, we must acknowledge the socio-economic challenges that we face today as a nation. While the challenges are significant, they nonetheless present opportunities for transformation and growth. Fiji stands at a critical juncture in its history. Our socio-economic challenges are undeniable, yet our resolve to overcome them must remain solid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will continue rolling out measures to stimulate even greater investment, promote sustainable industries, and enhance trade opportunities. The government will continue diversifying our economy to be broad-based by investing in agriculture, tourism and the digital transformation. Special attention will also be given to Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

In addition, Government will prioritise infrastructure development, ensuring that roads, water, ports and energy supply systems support national productivity and continue attracting foreign investments through new policies, but the interests of our local industries and workers will continue to be safeguarded. A nation's progress is measured not only by its economic achievements, but also

by the wellbeing of its people. We will ensure that there is equity to minimise the risk of our people falling into a vicious cycle of poverty. The legislative agenda will strengthen social protection programs, ensuring that vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income families have access to essential services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to appreciate the economic status of our nation, we must consider the reality that we are a very small country with a very narrow base and vulnerable economy. We hardly have control of the supply chain. This can be seen in the cost of petroleum products, which we very much depend on for transportation and to some extent for power generation. Basically, we have very little control over inflation, because we depend on high volume of imports, thus imported inflation. All we can do is to manage ourselves better, yet we have no control over exogenous factors. While our domestic economy has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, there are still many challenges besetting our economy.

In 2024, our growth forecast was revised upward to 3.8 percent from the initial projection of 2.8 percent. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance will have more to say on that. Similarly, growth for 2025 is projected at 3.4 percent, largely driven by the service and related sectors.

A higher growth rate can be achieved easily if we continue improving the business environment for investment, maintain the momentum of economic reforms, ensure political stability, and provide confidence through well-crafted and coordinated macroeconomic policy, and embrace the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world's economy has recovered from the effect of COVID-19. This recovery has been driven largely by the tourism and financial services, and we are committed to broadening the base of our recovery to cushion internal and external shocks. Food security is also very critical, especially under the current uncertainties in the world trade environment. We must therefore protect our local industries and make them more productive. Although the economy has moved beyond the pre-pandemic level of growth, the Government continues to emphasise fiscal consolidation and debt sustainability.

The Government is committed to striking a delicate balance between rebuilding fiscal policies and supporting growth by allocating resources to key priority sectors, particularly the resource-based sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words in the time allocated to me, I leave the specific remarks relating to critical infrastructure investment to the respective Ministers and Assistant Ministers, and Honourable Government Members. I commend the motion to the honourable House and respectfully reserve my right of reply at the end of the debate.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed with our next speaker, I would like to take a moment to remind everyone of some ground rules. The importance of maintaining decorum and order in this esteemed Parliament pursuant to Standing Orders 58 and 70.

Our collective responsibility is to uphold the dignity and integrity of our Parliamentary proceedings. Let us therefore engage in respectful and constructive discourse, adhering to the rules and protocols that govern our deliberation. I kindly ask the Honourable Members to refrain from any disruptive behaviour, including unsolicited interjections and to allow their colleagues the opportunity to speak without interruption.

It is imperative that we conduct ourselves with the highest standard of professionalism and courtesy. Now whilst I am fully aware and appreciate Parliamentary banter can keep the atmosphere lively, the key is to strike a balance between humour and respect, ensuring the proceedings are orderly and dignified. By working together in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation, we can ensure that our debates are productive and that our decisions reflect the best interests of the people we serve.

Now with respect to the speaking times, please kindly take note that all individual contributions are limited to twenty minutes, pursuant to Standing Order 68. First bell will be rung at eighteen minutes and the final bell at twenty minutes. Please ensure that you adhere to the time limit.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka Saka*, and a very good morning to you all. I am honoured to stand again in this august House today to deliver my response to His Excellency's most Gracious Address delivered on Monday, 24th February, 2025 on the occasion of the opening of the 2025 session of Parliament of our beloved Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Leader of Opposition, I intend to deliver my response putting the interests of our nation and the people of Fiji at the forefront. Sir, we are into the third year of the term of the current Parliament and, in those three years, including this year, His Excellency had graced this august Parliament to open the annual sessions of Parliament. His Excellency's addresses were always crafted to foster hope and encouragement to the people of Fiji.

It would be interesting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if some account is taken of the areas of His Excellency's addresses of the last three years that have been achieved, and which ones have not been completed. Because we owe this to His Excellency, and of course to the people of Fiji.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- On the same token, Mr. Speaker, Sir, members of the House had put in an immense amount of effort, in those three years, through research, and other forms of information gathering, to fashion their responses to His Excellency's Parliamentary opening addresses in manners that they see relevant and which are conducive to national-building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how much of those interventions have even been considered in developing our way forward as a nation is unknown, as far as I am concerned. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is demanded of this august House by our people, our electorate, is action! Rather than mere words. Government, therefore, must see to it that discussions and ideas from the deliberations in this House, beginning with His Excellency's Addresses are considered and acted upon.

As an alternative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the House should consider establishing a Parliamentary Select Committee to monitor actions taken on key issues emanating from the deliberations in this Parliament. This Committee will deal with current issues, rather than historical ones. I will expand on this later, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to bring this to the attention of this House as this is part of my responsibility as the Leader of Opposition as a check and balance for Government. As the Leader of Opposition, I will continue to take my responsibilities seriously, and from the perspective of national leadership.

Popular reference to the Opposition in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was almost always derogatory and centred around the view that the Opposition was out of Government and irrelevant. That is far from the truth and must change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the United Kingdom, the Leader of the Opposition is sometimes referred to as the “Leader of His Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition” depicting that the Opposition was not considered an enemy, nor disloyal to anyone, but that they play a very important role in any constitutional democracy. We, the Opposition, are a part of our nation’s official political and governance system, and we intend to remain as that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Leader of Opposition was tested greatly with the events of last year that lead to the split in our membership. For the Members of the G9 who have moved on to join Government and of course assume Ministerial responsibilities, I wish you well in your appointments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those of us that remained in the Opposition, we remain resolute in our collective determination to provide alternative views to Government, and to take them to account on matters of national interest. We will give credit where its due and strongly criticise where necessary.

With our reduced numerical numbers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the road ahead will not be easy, but anything worthwhile never is. We will do our best. We plan to continue to play a constructive role in the national political arena, to advance the interests of our nation, and all those who call Fiji their home.

We will endeavour to work with Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on matters that unite us as a nation, with the hope that they will be willing to listen and implement the alternative ideas that we may propose for the good of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot deny that we have had challenges as a nation. Our past has been marked with political instability and social divisions that had exposed our economic vulnerabilities. But we are fortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we inherited from our colonial masters, and our founding leaders, as the heart of an independent Fiji, the rule of law, racial and religious tolerance and meritocracy. These were the buoys that kept Fiji afloat in the dark days of our historical past, and which we must seek to continue to learn from, to translate our challenges as a nation into opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by embracing the rule of law, inclusive policies and national unity and solidarity, we will be bound to reap greater rewards through the learnings from those challenges of our past that had hindered our progress and development. As a multi-racial country, religious and racial harmony is something we must work assiduously to preserve. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his comments this morning but of course as I have always said in this House, the rhetoric must be matched by the action, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the essence of His Excellency’s message in his Address was “transformation”, in leadership and all aspects of governance. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary, transformation is a “marked change in form, nature or appearance”. Put simply, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency’s Address was a call for change for many things in Government to ensure that the effect of what we do as politicians and as Government positively impacts the nation and the people that we serve.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the core of Singapore’s strategic pragmatism approach that led to its rapid advancement from a small growing economy to what it has become today. Singapore was

always open to adjusting its' strategies based on changing circumstances in the global environment. They prioritised policies and actions that delivered tangible results, regardless of ideology. They were receptive to change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Singapore utilised its geographic location to attract poor foreign investment and trade, and more importantly the government played an important role in driving development through targeted policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are no different from Singapore. We may not be able to grow as rapidly as they did, but we can at least aspire to emulate the steps they had taken to become the business, economic and innovative hub that we can be, at least in the Pacific region.

What Fiji needs is change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we should start with fundamental policies that had worked well in the past but would require a re-examination to enhance their effectiveness in the social, business and political environment of today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we may find in those reviews is the need to redefine many of our policies to enhance our comparative advantage and to ensure that the interest of our nation and the people remain paramount in all programmes, policies and engagements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will offer some specific thoughts on this when I touch on Government's proposed legislative reform agenda towards the end of my discourse.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to speak on the number of key issues that were raised by His Excellency in his address. In respect to accountability and transparency, one of the additional tasks that the Parliamentary Select Committee I had earlier mooted could assume, is the monitoring of current budget utilisation. Latest media reports state that about \$246 million from the National Budget was not utilised. This amount reflects services that were budgeted but not rendered.

It must be noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when the National Budget is passed in this Parliament it becomes law, hence, must be utilised and adhered to as law. If, for some reason, portions of it are not utilised by the end of the current financial year, this House must know the reasons and the adjustments in governance processes are to be recommended by Parliament to Government to ensure that underutilisation of budget does not become a normal anomaly. If it is so, that the underutilisation is due to laxity in leadership, then remedial actions must be taken.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by establishing a select committee for purposes of driving excellent performance, Parliament can play a bigger role in leading the conversation on efficiency and effectiveness in the process of Government.

While on this subject, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will reiterate the call I made on this same occasion last year requesting this House and Government, in particular to ensure that accountability agencies such as the Office of the Auditor-General and Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) report directly to Parliament. That must be done to ensure that the fundamental principles of accountability and transparency are fully embraced in our democratic and governance processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good governance in democratic countries is sourced from its political leadership and that provided by the civil service.

Given our past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of our key challenges of today is to build an honest, stable and pragmatic governance to provide the critical bedrock for future generations to build upon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will take investments by Government to ensure that our civil service and other agencies of the state are trained and equipped to be able to continue provide that level of service in this modern era, that is professional, efficient and equitable.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, calls on the reinstatement of the civil service training courses including the senior executive service and the Permanent Secretaries training programmes that were once an integral part of our civil service. This is critical as civil service systems do not remain static. They must evolve and adapt to changes in the society which they serve. This calls for a continual cycle of training and re-training within our civil service to ensure skills and knowledge remain relevant at all times.

Today's civil service, Mr. Speaker, need leadership and motivation. Indeed, I am always of the belief that the greatest reward in any form of employment is knowing that you have done your job to the best of your ability. But the changing nature of employment today requires that remuneration must be reviewed periodically to commensurate with the workloads, and investments in training and upskilling workers to ensure that they are able to deliver effectively on the specifications of their respective jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, continuous training, and of course political and economic stability will ensure that we are able to deliver good governance on a consistent basis.

A culture of good governance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must be entrenched in our civil service and systems so that it becomes the dominant mode of administrative and political thinking and behaviour. On the same token Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should consider re-introducing the diplomatic training programme that was part of the Government systems to prepare and identify personnel from within the civil service and from agencies outside of Government for diplomatic posting. This is necessary considering the important role that our diplomats play in our development as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as with all developing nations, economic stability is important to support growth and development. What is required are policy priorities targeted at improving capacity constraints within our industries. Structural reforms to make doing business easier, increased productivity particularly in the primary industries sectors and addressing the push factors behind our high emigration rates. We ought now to be looking at ways to boost the nation's economic growth in the immediate and of course the medium, and the long term as well.

In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while inventing new industries, Fiji should look at building on services that are already available, especially in the service sector to enhance economic growth. At the same time, we must investigate new revenue streams to enhance our economic base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, bureaucrats today are more about maintaining the economy than taking the risks to develop the next big thing to foster growth. We must grow as an economy Mr. Speaker, Sir. Growth is very importance to leverage development. His Excellency puts it like economic growth is the backdrop of national prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importance of our primary industries to our progress as a nation cannot be emphasised enough. The potentials that we have in these sectors are huge. What is needed in these areas are innovations and investments in upskilling and mechanisation if we fully realise the potentials they hold. The review of the six agricultural-based public enterprises - Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA), Copra Millers Fiji, Fiji Meat Industry Board (FMIB), Food Processors (Fiji) Limited, Fiji Rice Limited and Yaqara Pastoral Company Limited to improve service delivery on Fiji's citizens is appreciated Mr. Speaker, Sir.

To enhance the growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji must follow a policy regime that supports private enterprises, as they are always a key angel for growth in national economies. It is interesting that Government is now looking at revitalising our shipbuilding industry with a view to establishing a new shipbuilding facility in Fiji. This is the way to go. It is a welcome development and one that will create employment and support economic growth.

For a long time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our port facilities have been neglected. Drive-by King's Wharf on a daily basis, you will note all types of vessels holding out at the Suva Port Bay to await their turn to berth due to the limited capacity at our main wharf. This is a cost to shipping companies which negates their efficiency as service providers. I hope that this will be taken into serious consideration, and work needs to be undertaken on it as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately for these ships, they had to wait out their turn to berth for days at the bay. This calls for action, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If Fiji is serious about becoming the transshipment and economic hub for the Pacific, then we must address the issues at our seaports. Whilst our airports are doing well, we must fix the capacity constraints in our seaports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority of Fiji was established by an act of Parliament in 1955 and commenced operations in 1958 with the objective to provide rental flats for Fiji citizens. This function was transferred to the Public Rental Board when it was established in 1989, while the Authority transited to lot development and provision of finances. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is about time that Government revisits the objectives of the establishment of operations of both the Housing Authority of Fiji and the Public Rental Board especially the latter.

Mr. Speaker Sir, drug abuse in Fiji has risen exponentially in the last few years, much of which centred around our housing estates. It is unfortunate that when these happens, we tend to lay the blame squarely on the shoulders of our youth.

Mr. Speaker Sir, to mitigate the issue I would like to see that the Public Rental Board flats are developed as midway housing to provide transitional living spaces for families before they move to dwellings of their own. Mr. Speaker Sir, housing as a midway housing concept should ensure that all support is provided to tenants to prepare them to move into independent living. These facilities should have sporting, training and awareness facilities, and job search programmes, to ensure that children and our youth in these estates remain informed and engaged to prepare them to become productive citizens, whether it be in gainful employment, business or sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the more our younger people are engaged, the less idle they will become and the lesser inclined they will be to turn to drugs for enjoyment. After all, it should be appreciated that our children and our youth have talents and skillsets that, when duly harnessed, should become the source of livelihood for them and their families. The Ministry of Youth, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, and other such entities, will have a major part to play in these arrangements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President rightly stated in his address that "a nation's progress is measured not only by its economic achievements but also by the wellbeing of its people" and that "we must ensure that there is equity to minimise the risk of our people falling into the vicious cycle of poverty."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that the poverty figures have been hanging around the 30 percent mark over the last few years and may be the honourable Minister of Finance will have some words on this because he used to disagree with figures when we presented it in this august House.

I must say to reduce poverty levels, we need to prioritise infrastructure development in rural areas which may be the case of pointing an arrow at the wrong target. This was the comment made by the honourable Minister of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management most recently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the need for infrastructure for rural areas is important, what our rural communities need is empowerment and capacity building programmes in areas akin to their resources, to equip them with the skills and knowledge to be able to translate those rich and bountiful resources to tangible wealth.

As shared by President Xi Jing Ping in his book, *'Up and Out of Poverty'*, a new concept of education needs to link education to economic and social development - a concept that is localised in the different communities, suited to and promoting the development of our local economy and society.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Government's legislative agenda, I acknowledge Government for initiating the efforts on the review of the Code of Conduct. I noted in Section 156 of the 1997 Constitution, it talks about the Code of Conduct and it was highlighted in the State of the Nation and Economy Report which is long overdue and needs to be looked into it.

I also acknowledge the call to review the Illicit Drugs Control Act and, of course, the Police Act as well, because of the significant role that they play in our security architecture. I know that some of the members are into the Lent fasting observance and Ramadan is also coming up. I wish them all the very best and we are all with them in this religious observance. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have now heard from the leaders of the two sides of the House and this would probably be the appropriate time to have recess.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.28 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.00 a.m.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and all those tuning in live on the Parliament *Facebook* page. *Ni sa yadra vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has been running for two years and two months now. I had served for 18 months as a Member of Parliament and Assistant Minister and now on to my eighth month as a Cabinet Minister. I look back and I can testify God's faithfulness over the years. I am reminded time and time again, of His word in Proverbs 19:21 that we have many plans in our hearts, but it is His purpose that always prevails. For that, I acknowledge God's wisdom and guidance and His love that has never forsaken or leave me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to extend greeting to the people of Ra, who have honoured me with their votes and ensured that I have a seat in this august Chamber.

Ni sa yadra vinaka lavo kai, 'ako kai, lovara kai. Au vayadra i yani ena nomuni vei delaniyavu va`uraga, ena loma ni `ikina cokova`a o Saivou, vua na Gone `Uruga na Ra`u ni Na`awia; Rakiraki, vua na Gone `Uruga na `Ui Navi`ilevu; Nalawa, Nacobicibici vua na Gone `Uruga na `Ui Nalawa; Nakoro`ubu, Valelevu i Nakoro`ubu vua na Gonesau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to acknowledge my maternal ties in the *vanua o* Naqorovarua and the *vanua o* Noa, and all those whom I might have failed to acknowledge but have invested their confidence in me. I would also like to thank my family and extended family for their endless support and prayerful hearts. To my dear husband and my beloved children, thank you for journeying and bearing with me. What an experience it has been for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with the profound sense of responsibility to respond to the Opening Address delivered by His Excellency the President. His words have set a clear direction for our nation's development, calling for transformational leadership, sustainability and unity. In this journey, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry stands ready to play its part in protecting our natural resources, supporting our people and strengthening our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his foresight and vision for a united Fiji; a Fiji that is now seeing a new dawn. Our fisheries and forestry sectors are not just economic drivers. They are the lifeblood of our communities, the foundation of our culture and the key to our environmental and economic sustainability. They provide jobs, put food on our tables and safeguard our future. It is therefore imperative that our work in these sectors is driven by a commitment to sustainability, prosperity and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, 2024 was a landmark year for the Ministry for Fisheries and Forestry, with major policy advancements, legislative reforms and economic growth. We delivered key milestones to enhance governance, sustainability and economic growth in our fisheries sector. The National Fisheries Policy of 2024 to 2028 was launched, providing a strategic roadmap for fisheries management, conservation and industry development. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, we completed the Aquaculture Development Plan 2024 to 2028 which expands sustainable aquaculture opportunities to improve food security and economic diversification.

Mr. Speaker, Parliament passed Fiji's first ever Aquaculture Act of 2024 which now regulates aquaculture growth, environmental responsibility and best practises. This is a historic achievement that will empower local farmers, attract investments and ensure the long term sustainability of

aquaculture in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, on the global stage, Fiji successfully hosted the 21st Annual Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission in Suva reaffirming our leadership in regional fisheries governance and sustainable tuna management. The fisheries sector remains a cornerstone of Fiji's economy contributing \$207.1 million in 2022, accounting for 8 percent of our national export earnings. Of this, 70 percent came from our offshore fisheries primarily in tuna harvesting and processing. Inshore fisheries contributed 25 percent while aquaculture though still emerging accounted for 5 percent. This figure, Mr. Speaker, demonstrate the significant role of fisheries in supporting the livelihoods of thousands of Fijians particularly in coastal and rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, in the forestry sector, we have made remarkable progress. In Kadavu, the *vanua* Waikatakata benefitted from over \$500,000 in income earned through a successful three-way partnership between the Government, Fiji Pine Limited and local landowners. These initiatives not only created economic opportunities but also demonstrated the power of sustainable forest management in delivering tangible benefits to communities.

The Nadarivatu Community Forest Park that was recently opened represents a model for eco-tourism and environmental protection, generating income while promoting awareness of nature conservation.

Mr. Speaker, we also refresh our Strategic Development Plan ensuring an alignment with national priorities and focussing on sustainable forest management, forest landscape restoration and expanding economic opportunities for landowners and communities.

Mr. Speaker, the national tree planting programme is now in its sixth year with over 19 million trees and mangroves planted across 16,500 hectares. This brings us closer to our national target of 30 million trees in 15 years. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, biodiversity conservation efforts have been strengthened with 10,000 seedlings ready for planting in forestry nurseries. Fiji has also advanced its global climate commitment through the REDD+ Initiative in partnership with World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) ensuring that our forests continue to serve as carbon syncs and contribute to climate resilience.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that the forestry sector's contribution to Fiji's economy now exceeds \$140 million reinforcing its role in job creation, rural development and value added industry. As we move forward, the Ministry is committed to delivering tangible outcomes that will enhance governance, sustainability and economic opportunities for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, in Fisheries, we will continue to implement the National Fisheries Policy and the Aquaculture Development Plan ensuring continued growth in the sector. We are currently reviewing the Inshore Fisheries Management Bill and the Offshore Fisheries Management Act of 2012 to address the emerging needs of the fisheries and to strengthen coastal fisheries governance, compliance and sustainable management. We hope that one or both of these legislations will be finalised and passed in Parliament this year considering its importance to our coastal communities, the industry and Fiji's economy.

Mr. Speaker, additionally, the Aquaculture Regulation of 2025 will be finalised soon providing a clear regulatory framework for businesses. Later in October this year, Fiji will host the Pacific Tuna Forum bringing together global industry leaders to advance innovation and sustainability in the tuna industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in forestry, we will finalise the review of the Forest Act 1992 soon and

table it in Parliament for endorsing, ensuring our laws reflect modern forestry management principles. Our efforts to increase protected areas will see forest reserves expand from 17 to 19, securing 17 percent of our landmass for conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also restore 50,000 acres of mangrove ecosystems, protecting coastal communities and enhancing biodiversity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also assisting in work related to the review of the mahogany legislation, namely the Mahogany Industry Act of 2010 and the Mahogany Industry Licensing and Branding Act of 2011. This is also an important piece of legislation that will be reviewed and structured to capture the best interest of our landowning units, our people and the industry as a whole.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to increasing employment opportunities in the forestry sector by supporting women and youth-led businesses, ensuring inclusive economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry remains steadfast in its commitment to sustainable development. We will continue to empower local communities through resource management programmes, capacity building initiatives, and economic development opportunities. We will strengthen enforcement and compliance mechanisms to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and unsustainable logging. Our goal is to ensure greater accountability and long-term sustainability of our resources. Enhancing climate resilience will remain a top priority. We will continue efforts to protect forests, oceans and marine ecosystems to safeguard food security, biodiversity and climate adaptation for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my staff and I will work towards fostering economic growth by unlocking new value-added opportunities in both fisheries and forestry, ensuring more Fijians benefit from these industries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the staff of the Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Forestry. All these achievements would not have been possible without their hard work, perseverance and team effort.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has reminded us of the importance of unity, sustainability and responsible leadership. The Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry stands ready to deliver on this vision. We will ensure that our oceans and forests are managed wisely. We will support sustainable livelihoods and secure prosperous, inclusive and climate resilient future for all Fijians. As we embark on the 2025 legislative session, let us work together, government, communities, private sector and development partners to build a stronger, greener and more resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to wish my children's paternal grandfather, Sakiusa Tuicakau Bainivalu a very happy 70th birthday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the motion before Parliament. May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am sure the House joins me in wishing Mr. Bainivalu best wishes.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to totally acknowledge and embrace sentiments expressed by His Excellency the President in his opening of the parliamentary session. He has call for unity, inclusivity, progress and transformational

leadership which is timely and much needed for our beloved Fiji, indeed, a Fiji where no one is left behind, where democracy flourishes and where leadership is driven by integrity and compassion should be our shared goal.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me first congratulate His Excellency the President for being appointed as the President of Fiji. Secondly, I would also like to remember all those who have been affected by the recent cyclone and flooding, and I urge Government to assist all Fijians who are in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Address by His Excellency the President outlined ambitious targets for economic recovery, social protection, security and sustainable development. And then he envisioned a Fiji built on fairness, respect and opportunity for all. However, while we fully support these ideas, we must ask whether this Government has lived up to these promises since taking office in 2022. Fiji is more divided than ever before.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, despite the grand words of unity and progress, the reality on the ground paints a much weaker picture. Fiji is more divided today than it has been in years.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hogwash!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Instead of fostering inclusivity, this Government has fuelled political polarisation, racial division and public distrust. This Government took office with the promise of transparency, fairness and national healing. Yet, they have done the exact opposite. They have failed to unite the people, and have instead used selective justice, targeted political revenge and institutional bias to drive their own agenda. The talk of house of hope that falls flat when the very foundation of unity and fairness are being eroded. Mr. Speaker, Sir, unity and solidarity has never been so greatly the need of the hour as it is now.

I applaud the thought-provoking sayings and proverbs in His Excellency the President's Address. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fail to see how it connects the dots. Sentiments are great, as it is with this saying, but when it does not connect to the material realities on the ground in Fiji, then we as a nation are failing ourselves as leaders and failing the people we are leading. That is why we all have to work towards a shared vision, with an understanding in all of us that the best way to resolve and develop solutions to national issues that divide our communities is through dialogue and consensus building.

We cannot rise with the tide, when we have different boats, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for different people. The Government has its own set of speedboats for their chosen people. The rest of us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we do not belong to the party, then we are put into a sinking ship and many relegated to the HMS never comeback. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be foolish to ignore the problems that we have.

His Excellency the President spoke of economic growth, yet the reality is that the ordinary Fijians are struggling more than him. The cost of living has skyrocketed, businesses, especially small and medium enterprises are suffering under high cost and lack of governance.

The imposition of 15 percent VAT on goods and services, including a wide range of government services, essential to investment and productivity is crippling our people. The Government is making a lot of noise on the latest collection figures, including my friend the

honourable Minister of Finance, but the people are asking, “what is happening to all these figures, why is life not any better now than it was three years ago?” The simple answer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is they have a greedy and selfish government.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Bala, please, take your seat.

When I spoke at the beginning that when your intervention is specific to the Address of His Excellency the President, it has to go to policies or intention of the Government for legislative reforms, et cetera. You cannot use this occasion to generally speak of issues that are not in His Excellency the President's Address. That is the issue of the specific response to His Excellency the President's Address. It must be specific to the policies and outlines of legislative reforms that has been put before the House by the President.

Please, proceed, but keep to the narrow path that I am referring to. It is not the time for generalisation of a statement. It has to be in accordance with the ground rules, that is, for addresses to be on specific issues and policies. Honourable Bala, you may continue.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I was talking about the economic growth which His Excellency had spoken about.

On public service in decline, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people rely on the public service for their basic needs. Yet, the state of these services is at its worst. Healthcare, His Excellency the President spoke about, patients are being turned away from hospitals due to medicine shortage, and I do not think that they can blame the previous government. Medical professionals are leaving due to lack of incentive and poor working conditions. Lights go out during surgery, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Infrastructure, roads, water supply and transport services are deteriorating (you either go King's Road or Queen's Road, you will see all the potholes) with little to no action from the Government. People in rural areas continue to be neglected, while development is concentrated in selective areas. When the honourable Leader of the Opposition raised this issue about the road condition, the line Minister calls for his resignation. It is a joke.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, crimes, drugs and public safety. Fiji is facing a growing crisis in crime and drug abuse. Every day we hear reports of violent crimes, housebreaking, these are the concerns of the people that I bring here to the people's House, and the of hard drugs in our communities. We urge the Government to treat this subject as a top priority and introduce plans and provide peace and security for its citizens. Public safety, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should be a top priority, as this Administration has chosen to focus on a political destruction rather than tackling these issues.

It is time for real leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Opposition is ready to provide an alternative vision for Fiji, one that truly upholds inclusivity, integrity and service to the people of Fiji.

The people of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, deserves a government that delivers results. Now, I am coming to that, Sir, as we have highlighted. We must take urgent action to -

- restore unity and fairness in governance;
- revive the economy through innovative policies that support businesses and job creation;
- strengthen our health and education systems for future generations;
- Combat crime and drug abuse to ensure public safety; and

- hold the Government accountable for its promises and failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji deserves better and, we, in the Opposition, will continue to fight for a government that truly serves all Fijians and not just a privileged few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all understand, recognise and respect the *iTaukei* of this country. We must acknowledge that the 2013 Constitution has specific provisions for their protection, apart from protection in the Bill of Rights that covers all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Coalition Government mandates itself as a protector and promoter of the *iTaukei*, it has not progressed the means to better their lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has failed to provide the basic services that every Fijian deserves. And if I were to stand here and go on with some of the Ministries, not all, we will be here for a very long time. But do not worry, concerned Ministers, because each time there is a failure of service delivery, a Fijian is taking note of it, Sir, and keeping scores for the near future when they decide on their next government. Real life examples of Government failures, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

You want to know why you are sitting next to honourable Prime Minister? Do you want me to reveal that?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bala, I have warned you already. I am going to stop you from delivering your statement in a minute, if you continue this behaviour. You are not to do that, personally addressing a Member of Parliament in that way. Thank you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to list specific examples that shows the failures of leadership and governance under this Administration, as follows:

- (1) The cane farmers are being threatened with eviction if they fail to produce a set tonnage of cane, despite their struggle with high costs and poor returns, instead of finding solutions given the poor state of the sugar industry.

The honourable Minister is shifting the blame on the poor farmers and their families, despite the many highly publicised trips by the honourable Minister of Sugar and his Board Chairman to many countries. They do not have anything to show on the ground.

- (2) We are told that the mine workers are being told to vacate their houses at Vatukoula to make way for the Chinese workers. And lately, we have heard reports of containers of gold ore that have been taken out of the mine compound. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the line Minister to investigate and table the report in Parliament.
- (3) Introduction of a new tax on *suki* has left many Fijians wondering what will be taxed next. These are money grabs.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think the honourable Member is giving misinformation.

MR. SPEAKER.- What Standing Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will read the Standing Order 74.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Give him the opportunity to address Standing Order 74. This Standing Order is a door that opens it for you to address it, but you have to go to a specific Standing Order, which is the issue that you are raising, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 60(1) and (2) - relevance. The honourable Member is saying that the Government is considering a tax on *suki*. The discussion on *suki* tax...

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Let me hear his Point of Order first, then I will address your Point of Order. Is it directly on the issue of relevance of the Point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, the Standing Order 61 says that a Member must not refer to judicial proceedings.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is Standing Order 60(1).

HON. J. USAMATE.- My apology, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is alright, thank you. Proceed, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Member is saying that the Government has said that it is going to put a tax on *suki*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very clear reference and answer was given by me publicly, covered in the news media, that the Government has no intention to put a tax on *suki*. This issue has been raised by tobacco companies in the past, and the question that was raised at the Employers Federation breakfast was very clear about the tax on these blended pall mall, which the tobacco company is manufacturing, and we are putting a tax on it and they wanted a reduction in that tax.

At the same time, they wanted a tax on *suki*. We very clearly said that the Government has no intention of putting a tax on *suki* farmers and to those who are consuming *suki*. That was made very clear, it was in the news. But here, the honourable Member comes and lies in Parliament that the Government is planning to put a tax on *suki*. This is the kind of lies they tell.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

I have listened to the Point of Order being raised; the Point of Order is upheld. Honourable Bala, you may cease reference to what you were talking about when the Point of Order was raised.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, people of Fiji knows whose telling lies and truth.

(4) violent attacks on students in Nabua, Suva, shows the Government's failure to ensure safety in our communities. Each week, a new video emerges that only serves to underline fear and threats under which everyday Fijians are now living their lives, and I hope the honourable Minister will respond to in his speech.

- (5) Employers are concerned about the Employment Bill, asking why the Government has abandoned its commitment to prioritise negotiations. The Employment Bill which make it seem like it is only from one side of the table, is going to be another nail in the coffin for future investors or for business expansion.
- (6) The cost of living is sky rocketing, yet the Government remains silent on meaningful wage increase. The living conditions and food choices for our growing poor gets worse and worse. The wage earner only goes so far in filling no longer shopping trolleys or even baskets but what can be held in one hand.
- (7) Businesses are shutting down. Now, do not ask me where! Garment factories in Ba have closed. Fletcher Higgins are contemplating terminations and local civil contractors are downsizing. Yet, our leaders are taking centre stage and standing behind promised investments or showcasing local investment bodies, such as the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF).
- (8) Workers are asking when will the minimum wage be increased to offset the current rising expenses.
- (9) Crime is on the rise. Robberies and house break-ins, livestock theft and drug related crimes are increasing. These are not make-ups; these are the real facts! Our social media is full of reels of violence, robberies and open intimidation of people.
- (10) Informal settlements continue to grow, yet the promise of development programmes have not materialised in some areas.
- (11) The residents of Toko are deeply concerned about their further, while landowners worry about the security of their millions in investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government can draft National Development Plans and policies, but let me tell you, without political stability and confidence, they will achieve nothing. Investors and businesses need certainty, and the people of Fiji needs a government they can trust. Instead, what they see is division and mismanagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a badly managed and led Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which is nothing more than window dressing at a great cost. There is no assurance that the TRC will lead to a better and more truthful Fiji...

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- ...a Fiji where justice and national honour is protected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will finish in a few minutes time.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have no more minutes left.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President emphasised that this Parliament is a House of hope, yet this Government has replaced hope with fear. Coming months are critical and we are truly at a crossroad. The decisions that we will make, will decide the future of this country, and that is why, Sir, we will all have to work together to build this country into a

truly multiracial nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has to be done because really, there is no other way. The Opposition will continue to fight for a government that delivers real results, restores stability and puts the people first. With those few words, I thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Bala for his intervention, though I must point out, this is not a model for response which I was addressing. In a special occasion for response to His Excellency the President's Address, it must be specific and linked to His Excellency's Address. It is not one of a general statement. Please, take note of that, honourable Members of Parliament in your speech.

HON. A. BIA.- The book of Isaiah 41:10 states, and I quote:

“So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. And I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, and fellow honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in this august House, giving my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, for his most Gracious Speech in opening the 2025 Parliamentary Session on Monday, 24th February, 2025.

In the Westminster Convention of Parliamentary Democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the term ‘most gracious’ symbolises reverence, dignity, honour and benevolence - qualities, that in my view, encapsulate everything His Excellency the President spoke about. I was particularly struck by his wise counsel when he urged us, the elected representatives of the people of Fiji, to reflect on our collective vision for our beloved nation, a vision that is centred on progress, prosperity and unity.

His Excellency the President quoted the profound words of the Lebanese-American poet, artist and philosopher, Khalil Gibran, who said, and I quote: “Progress lies not in enhancing what is, but in advancing towards what will be.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I found so much inspiration in those words. It is now our responsibility, each and every one of us, to work towards building a Fiji that is, in the words of His Excellency, just, equitable and resilient. Our people expect nothing less. This, Sir, was a key reason I stepped forward when the heavy responsibility of serving in the Coalition Government, was extended to me. For this, I pay tribute to our Heavenly Father for His grace and blessings. I also wish to acknowledge and thank the honourable Prime Minister for the honour of serving with him as the Assistant Minister of Information.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year will be a year of delivery for the Department of Information and the National Archives of Fiji. Exciting developments are already underway, and as the honourable Prime Minister has alluded to, I will outline some of the key initiatives of these two critical Government agencies.

Starting this month, all national television and radio services will feature content that is public service oriented. These programmes, while costly to produce, are vitally important, some even lifesaving. They serve to educate, inform and inspire, and when done well, they have the power to

drive positive and behavioural change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Government's Public Service Broadcast (PSB) Grant Agreement with Fiji Television and MAI TV, and very soon with Communications Fiji Limited, \$4 million has been allocated to fund public service programmes for 2025 and 2026. Under these agreements, these television and radio stations will run public awareness and campaigns and produce programmes on public health, education, culture and sports, drug prevention and law enforcement, gender-based violence, child protection, poverty alleviation and social protection, housing and urban development, rural and outer island development, micro, small and medium enterprises, financial literacy, and many more.

The beauty of these initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that they are in addition to the many public service programmes already being delivered by the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) over the years. As demonstrated during *Tropical Cyclone Ray* and *Tropical Cyclone Sara*, FBC has proven to be an essential tool in disaster preparedness and management. Its six radio stations and free-to-air TV channels play a critical role in broadcasting weather alerts and ensuring that our people are informed and prepared. The services, they and other media broadcasters provide, literally do good for the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, complementing the PSB Grant initiative is an intensive training programme for officers of the Department of Information in key areas, such as:

- Social media content generation and management;
- Public relations and media crisis management;
- Photography and videography;
- News and script writing;
- Translation; and
- Radio podcast production.

In partnership with the Fiji Learning Institute for Public Service under the Ministry of Civil Service, the Department has invited local trainers to spearhead this major capacity building initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the National Archives of Fiji, the Archives serves as the legally mandated national deposit library. Its functions are defined in the Public Records Act and the Deposit of Books Act of the laws of Fiji. Alongside the Department of Information, the National Archives falls under the portfolio of the honourable Prime Minister, as the Minister of Information. The mandate of the National Archives of Fiji is to acquire, preserve and administer the permanent public records of Fiji, ensuring that these records remain accessible to the Government, the people of Fiji and the public at large.

The valuable work carried out by the Archives often goes unnoticed, but under the Coalition Government, a key capital project for the National Archives is set to be completed this year. This involves the acquisition of a new server and the retrieval of data from the old server which, as you would understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, contains decades of valuable footage and information. Unfortunately, this server crashed and was left abandoned since 2017, and we are now working to restore access to these critical historical records of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the outset, this year would be a year of delivery for both, the Department of Information and the National Archives of Fiji. Just last week, we successfully convened the first of many consultations with the representatives of the media organisations in the country.

The purpose of this meeting was to explore collaboration between Government agencies and the media in combating the spread of illicit drugs. We convened this meeting at the invitation of the honourable Minister of Policing, who is keen to engage the mainstream media in implementing the national strategy to reduce the supply, demand and harm of illicit narcotics.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to place on record my appreciation to the media companies in the country for their support and endorsement of this crucial initiative, the Coalition Government moving forward, this is the kind of collaboration and partnership that the Department of Information will continue to pursue and promote with all its stakeholders, both in the public and private sector.

This brings me to a very pertinent point in His Excellency's Address, the responsible use of social media. As the Assistant Minister of Information, I share the *Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau's* concerns about the toxic and divisive discourse, if we can even call it that, that we witness daily on social media platforms. The Online Safety Commission cannot fight this battle alone. It is the responsibility of all of us, each and every one of us to ensure that social media becomes a space that builds people up, rather than a platform for tearing others down. No one benefits from spreading toxic and inflammatory speech. There is no medal for being a source of misinformation and fake news.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency made an earnest appeal to us as national leaders - to set the example in promoting proper and responsible media etiquette. He urged us to advise our voters and supporters to, and I quote, "refrain from inflammatory commentary or trolling with lies for political point-scoring." This perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an area that we at the Department of Information, the Online Safety Commission and the mainstream media can collaborate to promote and encourage the proper and responsible use of social media.

I am aware that one or two media organisations have a robust social media moderation oversight of their content, while a few others can do much better. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to conclude with a very profound statement by His Excellency, the President from his Address and I quote, "As leaders and members of this august Parliament, we need to sacrifice our ego, ambition and greed in order to serve the people's collective interest."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, please allow me to remind everyone sitting here today, that our progress is not measured by what we say as politicians or Members of Parliament, but what we do for the people of Fiji. The people should not in any way be made servant to us. We, as Members of Parliament and as a government, we need to be a servant to the people.

We should not impose our rule to the people but let the people of Fiji impose their voice on the way we want to rule of our beloved nation. We need to put a stop to the narrative, that far too long people should work for the government, when in fact, we as government and Members of Parliament should work for the people. We should not expect them to deliver when we ourselves are not prioritizing the welfare and collective interest of all Fijians at every levels of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I commend and fully support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President, *Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau* for his most gracious Address. May God continue to bless the people of Fiji.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise to respond to some of the key features of the statement made by His Excellency the President of Fiji at the opening of the new session of Parliament on 24th February this year. His Excellency had briefly touched on the focus and future development direction that the Government will embark on or continue to pursue in this parliamentary session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned that we need to focus on development and be people centric. It is now more than two years since the Coalition Government took office, promising an improved quality of life for ordinary citizens, jobs, economic recovery and good governance. Mid-way through its term, we have seen little change in the lives of our ordinary people, no marked change in governance with care and compassion for the ordinary people. Contrary to its promise to curb the rising cost of living, this government increased VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, thus imposing greater hardship on low and middle income families, sending more of them into poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last few months, I had the opportunity to meet vegetable farmers, cane farmers, teachers, market vendors, garment workers, factory workers, taxi drivers, civil servants, people living in rural and very remote areas, residents of outer islands and many other groups of people. They shared similar concerns about VAT increase, and they feel that the VAT increase imposed by the Coalition Government in 2023 is unfairly punishing the poor and causing more hardships for the families. All or most of them expressed their disappointment over the rising price of food. They fear that more adults and even children will end up on the streets because of the high cost of living and rising poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 15 percent VAT imposed in 2023 is still intact and this VAT hike is having a great impact on Fijian's livelihood. This decision directly affects the bread and butter issues of the Fijians, and the Government has shown a blatant disregard for the cost of living they were promising to address during election campaign.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address that the Government will prioritise better roads, jetties and basic infrastructure including bridges, seawalls, electricity, water, drainage, transportation and communication. The Coalition Government is in office for more than two years, with just over one and half years before the election, but what have they done so far to improve road conditions and other services in rural and remote areas?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the general public including students from Viseisei Back Road, Saweni, Vuda Back Road, Dreketi, Vuda Point, Vaivai, Saru, Navula, Wairebetia and some other parts of Lautoka have raised serious concerns regarding bus service to their areas and very poor road condition. Two elderly citizens aged 80 and 81 years reside at Viseisei Back Road, and they are both sickly. They have to hire a taxi at least twice a week to go to Lautoka City or the health centre and they pay \$30 per trip. They spend \$60 a week on taxi only because of poor bus service in the area since 2023. Is this the new way of punishing the elderly and sick people? This issue was brought to the attention of the honourable Minister of Transport and Infrastructure. This matter has not been addressed by him since it was brought to his attention twice last year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to concerned citizens, a reminder letter by the people of the area was sent to LTA and the honourable Minister's office in January this year. I hope the honourable Minister will address the pending issues with some urgency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address Government's new town development programme. The idea is good, but the current state of towns and cities need to be looked into first before adding more towns for the sake of it. The state of infrastructure in many towns are in a terrible state, such as bus stand ceilings falling apart, market leaking, waste disposal and drainage issues, et cetera. We currently have 13 Municipal Councils which are hardly equipped with the right resources to manage the affairs of their towns and cities, as growing concerns are raised by ratepayers

and citizens of towns on the lack of services, maintenance and infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address that healthcare will continue to be at the forefront of our policies. The Coalition Government has been in office for almost 26 months, what has it done to improve healthcare? Everywhere you go, people are complaining about the poor state of our healthcare service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are things that need to be addressed urgently and immediately. A month ago, one of the *dailies* highlighted the critical state of the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH), which was facing a shortage of essential basic medical supplies. Patients are suffering, and in some cases, dying daily at CWMH for lack of proper facilities, treatment and drugs. Safe and affordable healthcare is one of the basic duties of a caring government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem is that the Coalition Government neither has its priorities right, nor is it sensitive to the plight of the people.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Chand, there is a Point of Order raised.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 62(1) states, and I quote: "When speaking a member must not impute improper motives to any other member". Generally speaking, when we are hearing that speech, he is imputing that the members are directly responsible for those.

MR. SPEAKER.- Which members, honourable Member?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The Minister of Transport.

MR. SPEAKER.- It has to be specific to a particular Member.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Minister of Health, and that we are directly responsible. He is saying that we are the direct supervisors of that specific issue. So, what I am saying is, he is imputing a motive on us that we are intentionally mismanaging resulting in these issues.

MR. SPEAKER.- I take your Point of Order and I will make a ruling later, honourable Minister.

This, I will address again, honourable Chand, as I had done to honourable Bala. This is not the End of Week Statement where you address everything that is under the sun. If that was past practice, then that is not in accordance with the Westminster system. The Westminster system says, after the Address is given, the response is in respect to and limited to what is covered under the Address. It is not for you to go and address every other issue. That can await the End of Week Statement as we proceed on our way. So, please bear that in mind. Honourable Chand, please proceed.

HON. H. CHAND.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Hospitals in Fiji are struggling with the provision of healthcare services delivery due to the shortage of nurses. The little pay rise for nurses is not enough to cushion the high cost of living and many nurses are leaving for jobs abroad particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Last week we visited CWM Hospital and Nadi Hospital. Many biomedical equipment in the Radiology and Haematology Department at CWM and Nadi Hospital are not working for the last six to eight months. If the issue remains unaddressed, Fiji's

healthcare system will continue to operate in crisis mode.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address that leadership is not about holding power, but about empowering others. It is about lifting those who are struggling in life and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an alarming data by the Ministry for Education last year on school dropouts has exposed the high number of students dropping out of school before completing year eight. In the past five years, the highest number of students dropped out of school in 2023 and in that same year, more than 1,000 students dropped out of school before completing year eight. There is a huge increase in school dropouts compared to previous years and this is of great concern to Fiji's education sector. To counter the school dropout problem, the Ministry for Education should come up with innovative initiatives without delay. Increase in dropouts despite investment in education indicates that something is seriously wrong. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should invest in assessing what is the root cause behind the spike in school dropouts. This must be Government's top most priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future. Children are the future of our country, and we want to see all of them educated and no one is left behind as always advocated by our former Prime Minister Bainimarama. If the Coalition Government fails to address the issue, we will see an increase in youths on streets committing crimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can already see children who are supposed to be in school begging on the streets of cities and towns. The Ministry of Education should use effective and qualitative approaches to reduce school dropouts. His Excellency in his Address mention that education will continue to be a priority. The G17 on this side of this House, fully endorses that education should be of top most priority. Education and more importantly access to education is the cornerstone of individual and societal development. It plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of individuals and societies and it assists those individuals and societies to thrive in an ever-evolving world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President spoke about Government's commitment to health and safety of our children. Last week, tonnes of methamphetamine was burnt at the Dignified Crematorium in Davuilevu. According to the residents including students and teachers of Davuilevu and nearby areas, there was lack of communication regarding public safety against the destruction of 4.15 tonnes of methamphetamine. Schools and residents near the Dignified Crematorium in Davuilevu, Nasinu have raised serious concerns over the destructions of 4.15 tonnes of methamphetamine. We are deeply concerned about the wellbeing of our residents, students, teachers and vendors who are directly exposed to the toxic air.

Schools in the area have reported health issues among students and staff with claims that they were the effects of thick smoke emitting from the burning process. Government should come up with better disposal planning and communication in future operations to ensure public health is not compromised. We need a government which cares about health and safety of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency spoke about commitment to accountability, transparency and good governance practices. I agree with His Excellency, but people do not believe that the Coalition Government is practising good governance.

Mr. Speaker Sir, people are deeply concerned by the Government's decision to expand the Cabinet to an unprecedented size of 34 Ministers and Assistant Ministers. Never before in Fiji's history has such a high proportion of MPs held Ministerial portfolios. It is higher than those in some developed countries. Mr. Speaker Sir, such a huge Cabinet is neither justified by the size of Fiji's population of less than a million nor the size of its legislature. The expanded size of the Cabinet has

created the biggest ministerial salary bill in Fiji's history. Who will foot the bill? Definitely the taxpayers will be footing the bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is happening at a time when ordinary Fijians have been subject to severe hardship, including increase in VAT. The rationale for such a large Cabinet is unclear. This raises questions about the Government's priorities and whether this expansion is truly in the public interest.

Mr. Speaker Sir, at a time when critical issues such as poverty, high cost of living, escalating crime, deteriorating infrastructure and inadequate healthcare services demands urgent attention and financial resources, the Government's focus on expanding its Cabinet appears misguided. The Government should prioritise these critical issues over political convenience and to adopt a more rational and responsible approach to governance.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker Sir, the past year has highlighted the pressing challenges our nation faces - challenges that demand leadership with vision, courage, and the ability to deliver real solutions. The struggles of our people - from the rising cost of living to a lack of clear strategies to address economic and social issues cannot be ignored.

Mr. Speaker Sir, while promises have been many, solutions have been few. Yet amid these difficulties, the resilience and strength of our people have been steadfast. Let us remain hopeful and determined. We, in the Opposition will continue to advocate policies that prioritise our people's needs, protect the livelihood and safety of all Fijians, and build a future that leaves no one behind. Together, we can create the change our nation desperately needs. God bless Fiji and its people. Mr. Speaker Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think we have time for one more intervention before we take our lunch break.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious Address at the opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament. This was His Excellency's maiden Address as Head of State. It was delivered with dignity, wisdom and a unifying spirit. He spoke as the Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Military Forces upholding its role as a pillar of national unity. He spoke as a high chief, being the head of the Tovata Confederacy and a direct descendant of one of the signatories to the Deed of Session on 10th October, 1874. His words reflected not only deep historical significance, but also a vision for the future, one that transcends politics and calls us to a higher purpose.

His Excellency the President's service to the nation is a testament of duty and conviction. He has been a public officer, a politician, Speaker of Parliament, yet beyond those roles he stands among those who are called by destiny to serve. His journey is reminiscent of leaders, like the late Nelson Mandela, the man who endured hardship, rose above adversity, and emerged with a renewed commitment to their people and their nation.

His Excellency the President reminded this august House of this important *iTaukei* idiom, *sa i doko na karikari*, a phrase deeply understood by our ancestors, the great voyagers of the Pacific and it is now familiar with those with an intimate knowledge of the ocean. Translated, it aligns well with the saying, and I quote, "A rising tide lifts all boats." This wisdom is particularly relevant to leadership. The challenges we face today affect us all, whether we acknowledge them or not, but we cannot afford to be paralysed by fear, like Mafatu, who feared the sea due to a childhood tragedy. Instead, we must adapt, innovate, and take decisive decisions and actions.

His Excellency the President also invoked two *iTaukei* metaphors, highlighting two essential

tools. The *i doko*, used to cultivate land before planting *dalo*, and the *karikari*, an integral part of the *drua*, the traditional Fijian canoe that connects the mast to the main boom and secures the sail. Although they serve different purposes, both are essential to their own right. If the *i doko* breaks, we do not abandon the task of planting, we find another tool, perhaps, even the *i karikari* can get the job done. This metaphor speaks to the resilience we must embrace.

The rising tide of challenges - economic, social and environmental, threatens our communities. We cannot solely rely on external assistance. We must find ways to endure and adapt. Likewise, as leaders, we must be willing to change our strategies and methodologies to keep our nation afloat. His Excellency the President reminded us of the fundamental truth - the change we seek must start with us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am fully aware of the critical cross Government efforts required to ensure our development trajectory is not stunted by the impacts of climate change and the threats to our environment, particularly our rich biodiversity. Today, the impacts of climate change are evident across society, imposing additional burdens and creating new and emerging threats - from farmers facing reduced crop yields to communities experiencing more frequent flooding, from coastal erosion to accelerated infrastructure deterioration due to climate extremes, the challenge before us is insidious and growing.

However, as His Excellency the President reminded us, we must rise to meet these challenges. In this context, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has a mandate to support the broader efforts of Government to deliver and protect the delivery of our National Development Plan.

Our work is to secure external finance to address the incremental costs borne by the impacts of climate change and associated environmental degradation, increase data and monitoring, and coordinate cross Government action in service of existing national priorities and ministerial mandates, whether in relation to health, education, social welfare or private sector development.

In 2025, the Ministry is tasked to increase those services, support policy coherence and the need to deliver development outcomes that are robust, future-proof, and are fit for purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji bears the unjust burden of global inaction on climate change. Despite contributing a mere 0.006 percent to total global emissions, we stand on the frontlines, facing escalating climate threats, rising seas, intensifying cyclones and economic shocks that jeopardize our people's future.

While large economies delay decisive actions, we, in Fiji, are already paying the price. Our commitment remains unwavering. We will continue to lead in adaptation and resilience building, to protect our communities, our economy and our way of life. But adaptation alone is not enough, the fight against climate change demands global responsibility. Our emissions reduction targets grant us conditional access to climate finance, yet accessing these funds remains a challenge.

His Excellency has rightly called upon us to pursue concessional and grant-based financing, the kind of support that developing nations like ours rightfully deserve, not as charity, but as climate justice. We must secure investments that drive emissions reductions while delivering multiple co-benefits, fostering sustainable development and safeguarding our nation's future.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change will continue advocating for improved access to resources that will propel Fiji toward its net-zero transition by 2050, as set out in our Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). But let us be clear, we cannot do this alone. The international community must step-up, uphold its commitments, and ensure that Small Island

Developing States (SIDS) like Fiji, are not left to battle this crisis alone.

This year, we are required to update our international climate change commitments made under the Paris Agreement, and we will soon commence work to develop our third NDC. The revised NDCs will not only reflect our commitment but also our expectations in terms of the financing we need to adapt and mitigate the impacts of climate change across all sectors.

On matters related to adaptation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reaffirm our Government's unwavering commitment to building climate resilience and ensuring the protection of our communities in the face of the worsening climate crisis. One of our most pressing priorities is the relocation of our vulnerable and at-risk communities. The Nabavatu Relocation Project stands as a significant milestone in our efforts, being the first community relocation project to be funded through the Climate Relocation of Communities (CROC) Trust Fund; and the first to implement robust climate policies such as the Standard Operating Procedures on Planned Relocation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many continue to ask about the Climate Change Act 2021. A significant step forward in the maturity of Fiji's national framework for addressing climate change is the commencement of the Act. I am pleased to announce that we will soon be in a position to announce the entry into force of over 60 percent of the Climate Change Act. This legislation will support the coordination and commitment to collaboration called for by His Excellency and through the operationalisation of its provisions, further contribute to the realisation of Fiji's contribution to the "Ocean of Peace".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to intensify our efforts to secure more significant allocations of climate finance to support adaptation and resilience-building efforts. Just last week, two of our regional Green Climate Fund (GCF) projects were approved by the GCF Investment Board. This is a historic achievement for the Coalition Government, as one of these projects was developed in a record time of 18 months. It is our vision to equip Fijians with the resources and tools necessary to face the climate crisis through innovation, the leveraging of social coherence, and approaches that protect cultural and traditional value, as well as economic assets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji also secured FJ\$27.5 million in flexible financing for climate principal projects under the Duavata Partnership with the New Zealand Government, as well as an additional FJ\$31 million in direct support from the European Union to support the implementation of the Climate Change Act 2021. My team and I will continue to advocate for simplified and improved access to climate finance across negotiations, and parallelly focus on strengthening national capacities.

On matters related to oceans, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains a global leader in ocean-climate action. We are honoured to be appointed as Co-Chair of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Oceans and Climate Change Dialogue, a role that ensures the voices of Pacific Island nations are heard and amplified on the international stage.

In this regard, we extend our appreciation to the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his steadfast leadership during COP meetings, where he has consistently championed the recognition of oceans as an official agenda item. We look forward to his continued guidance, as we work to advance this shared vision.

Fiji stands firm by its 30x30 commitment which calls for the preservation and protection of 30 percent of our ocean by 2030. We are convening a national dialogue this month to explore the most effective ways to move forward.

We are currently developing Fiji's first Blue Economy Framework to provide a clear roadmap for integrating economic growth with environmental sustainability in the marine sector. By developing a robust framework such as this, we are not only securing economic opportunities for Fijians but also ensuring sustainable use of marine resources to support our future generations and further articulating a key dimension of the vision that is imperative to create an 'Ocean of Peace'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Department of Environment oversees a similarly complex mandate to uphold the principles of environmental sustainability. We are working diligently to revise our environmental laws and regulations.

To improve the efficiency of our Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) processes, we have been working closely with the RESET Taskforce, as well as the Ministry of Trade, to streamline and digitise the EIA process. A detailed review of the EIA processes has been completed, with plans to launch the digital platform by October 2025 through the Building Permits Approval Systems (BPAS) Project. This would be the first, amongst many other services, that we plan to digitise, which would significantly eliminate the bottleneck processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Environment has also been actively increasing awareness and compliance through various enforcement trainings across all our environmental regulations. For example, the Department recently concluded all its committee meetings, including the Natural Resource Owners Committee Meeting, mandated under the Environment Management Act 2005.

Further, multiple enforcement training sessions have been facilitated for border control officers on the protocols and procedures for enforcing compliance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and the Endangered and Protected Species Act 2002.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is grappling with escalating littering challenges. To foster civic pride and promote collective responsibility, the Ministry in January 2025, launched the 'Do the Right Thing' Campaign, encouraging every Fijian to take ownership of caring for our surroundings.

Under that Campaign, the Ministry has held Litter Prevention Officers (LPO) trainings for civil servants across all the four Divisions. The LPOs have the responsibility to not only enforce the Litter Act 2008 by issuing fixed penalty notices to individuals and businesses found in violation but also advocate for a culture of environmental responsibility that we desperately need to address the litter crisis.

The Ministry is also in the process of finalising its two important waste management related policy documents. First, the Container Deposit Regulations (CDR) and, second, the National Integrated Waste Management Strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me address some of the frequently asked questions by the public. My loyalty has always been to my voters and the *vanua o Macuata*. If my chief, traditional leaders and the *vanua* believe that a particular political path will serve them and Fiji better, I will listen to them. My allegiance is not to a particular party for the sake of politics, but to the will and wellbeing of my people.

In 2021, as the only Opposition Member of Parliament from SODELPA who voted for the *Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata* as President of Fiji, I stood by my conviction, despite disagreement from my Party colleagues. At the time, I told them, and I quote; "*Me yacova ni waqa na cina mai Bolatagane*", referenced to the song, "Till the lights of London shine again". That phrase holds deep meaning, as the chiefly household of the *Turaga na Tui Macuata* is known as *Taukei Bolatagane*. Many did not understand my reasoning then, but time has revealed its significance.

After the 2022 Elections, His Excellency, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, as President,

carried out his duty with integrity, facilitating a peaceful transition of Government in line with the will of the people. As the former Head of State, his leadership in that moment reflected the true spirit of service and respect for democracy. As a loyal subject of Macuata, I believed then, and still believe now, that if my *Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, as President at the time, had sworn in a government, it was my duty to respect and support it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order!

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 60, the speech must be relevant. I think what the honourable Member is talking about now has no relevance to the debate on His Excellency's Address.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I take his concluding statement as paying homage to his Chief and that is quite acceptable to me.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- This is not about switching parties, it is about upholding the values of service, respect and duty to the *vanua*. Just as His Excellency has set aside politics to ensure national stability, I too, must act in the best interests of my people and of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, before I take my seat, I must acknowledge that we, the independent members of this august House, still owe His Excellency a great deal, especially the 17 of us who were terminated by the now-deregistered FijiFirst Party in May-June last year. At that critical moment, His Excellency, in his capacity as Speaker, made a decisive and bold decision not to vacate our seats.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bulitavu, I think you are going beyond the ambit of your intervention. Please, conclude, honourable Member.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Sir, I am coming to the point where we should work in unity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, carry on.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Those who sought to remove us later abandoned ship, fearing the rising tide. And when they did, they left behind not only a broken vessel but a debt that no one was willing to take responsibility for.

Members of the G16 plus one bloc, who did not support the Emoluments motion last year are now benefitting silently, despite the principal stance they took from the advice of those who were remote controlling from outside of Parliament, but we should not blame them.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- I will take another Point of Order from honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- On the same Standing Order 60 on relevance, you have advised the Members of the Opposition.

MR. SPEAKER.- I did advise the Members of the Opposition, the same applies to the Government Members.

HON. J. USAMATE.- But this is not applying to this one, Sir. He has now gone completely off the content of the value....

MR. SPEAKER.- He was concluding in his remarks. You are finished now, honourable Bulitavu, are you?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I am coming to the conclusion, Mr. Speaker. That is part of the conclusion.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- No, it is no laughing matter. Let us be serious for once. I am asking for order so that every Member has the opportunity to speak and address issues that were raised by His Excellency the President.

You deviate every now and again on issues like allegiance which I can take into account, but other than that, it will be in the same class as I had intervened in respect of the other two Members I spoke about. You keep to the straight and narrow. Your speech, Members of Parliament, to the Address by His Excellency the President must be confirmative with those ground rules which I am setting to you.

Honourable Bulitavu, please conclude.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Back to the conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and my good colleague, honourable Bala, a fellow veteran politician have announced their plans to form a new political party. Many who supported the FijiFirst in 2022 are now closely supporting and following the new brand of leadership, to walk across the floor. They have had enough of the two men rule over the last 16 years.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as we turn the page to this new chapter, it is important to recognise the transition in leadership. We acknowledge the service of the former President, His Excellency, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, who led with integrity and skillfully navigated complex challenges during his tenure. Now, His Excellency, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, assumes the solemn duty of uniting us, guiding us towards a meaningful collaboration on national priorities.

This is our moment to embrace bipartisanship and work together on critical national issues - the Ocean of Peace, honourable Bala, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Review of the 2013 Constitution. For instance, should a Constitution Amendment Bill be introduced for its first reading, we have the opportunity to work across the floor. Before proceeding to second reading, we can invoke Standing Order 129 to establish a special Parliamentary Committee to conduct public consultations and report back to Parliament, if the honourable Leader of the Opposition is really genuine in talking about across the floor bipartisan this morning through the legislative framework that he talked about. If honourable Bala had talked about unity and walking across the floor, this is the pathway, and I am challenging them to take that path.

That approach ensures national interest takes precedence over political division. The Government is also open to genuine dialogue with the Opposition at any venue comfortable to them. These are matters that transcend party lines and demand our collective commitment as leaders entrusted with Fiji's future.

We can relate to this call of unity by His Excellency, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau's* reference to the powerful African proverb, and I quote, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for 16 years, the FijiFirst's ship sailed fast, but sailed alone. That is why it

ultimately ran aground. And when it did, its founding members abandoned the wreckage, leaving the crew in disarray. It was His Excellency, as Speaker, who threw us lifejackets, enabling us to reach ashore.

Under the FijiFirst two-men rule, there was no true bipartisanship. Opposition Members were included in delegations but were never allowed to lead them. Power was centralised and cross-party collaboration was deliberately avoided. In contrast, the Coalition Government values inclusivity.

Last year, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the G9 Bloc joined the former President....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, that is exactly where I had stopped the other two from going. It is beyond the matters that I had said to be addressed with intervention. Please wrap up your statement.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am just wrapping up and into my last paragraph.

What I was trying to infer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this is the first time that the Government, through the Coalition Government, has walked across the floor where Opposition Members were also part of Fiji's delegation to the UNGA, COP29, and also most recently, parliamentary delegation that has been led by the honourable Rinesh Sharma to Brussels on the 3rd Global Council for Political Renewal Forum. This is a new standard where national interest takes precedence over political divisions.

Let us not forget this lesson because if we move together, we will go far. This is an opportunity to create a new legacy, one built on unity, shared purpose and commitment to national progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity and I fully support the framing, intent and direction of His Excellency's Opening Address in Parliament. I fully support the honourable Prime Minister's motion, *vinaka vakalevu*. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, obviously, my plea to refrain from disruptive behaviour, including unsolicited interjections has fallen on deaf ears. Please, I will continue to address that in the coming days. But for the moment, honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.33 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we continue with our responses to His Excellency's Address, let me elaborate on the issue I raised this morning on the relevance and appropriateness of responses by Members of Parliament to be addressed of the Head of State. *Erskine May*, the authority on parliamentary practice is very clear on the parameters by which a speaker may respond to the Head of State and in this case His Excellency's Address.

One confines himself or herself to the Government policies including proposed legislative reforms as contained in the Address in their response. It is not, as I had repeated this morning, End of Week Statement under Standing Order 35.

I also believe that it would be extremely discourteous to His Excellency for Members of Parliament to go off on a tangent and not to relate to His Excellency's Address and its contents. In fact, if the general rules or rule of thumb I have outlined are openly flouted and not adhered to, it is quite clear that the Chair can consider termination of the intervention under Standing Order 67(1) and that is termination of speech on the ground of irrelevance. So, whilst I do not wish to interfere with your rights to respond to His Excellency's Address, I do nevertheless hope that you will bear this in mind for those Members yet to take the floor.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will begin with the quote from a revered saint, Sadhguru, "democracy means command by the people, if we want a great nation, whatever our role, we must take charge and do our best." His Excellency expressed similar sentiments in his opening Address for the third Session of Parliament. We must all respect and adhere to his ideals.

Honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and esteemed Members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to respond to His Excellency's gracious Address delivered on Monday, 24th February, 2025.

I extend warm greetings to everyone present today, those at home and those listening through other channels. His Excellency clearly articulated the critical issues that the Coalition Government seeks to prioritize this year, the sustainable development, national security and economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to underscore that economic growth is the cornerstone of any development strategy. Any credible economist will affirm that meaningful development cannot occur without significant economic growth. Relying on growth rates between 2 percent to 4 percent limits our ability to address the myriad demands from institutions and various segments of our community. We possess vast untapped resources that give us the potential to achieve annual growth rates of 7 percent to 9 percent.

However, this requires us to set aside our differences and unite behind a common vision aimed at improving the standard of living for all Fijians. Without such a unified approach, we will struggle to reach those ambitious growth targets, leaving a substantial portion of our population to continue facing hardship. Therefore, I implore all Members of Parliament to keep the wise words of His Excellency the President and prioritize the needs of our nation. Together, let us work towards a prosperous future that benefits every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also noted the issue of security. The security of our nation stands as the foremost responsibility of any government, embodying the moral duty to protect our citizens and maintain peace. National security is not just about safeguarding our borders, it encompasses the wellbeing and safety of every individual in our community. As such, it should be the first priority of every government. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a troubling increase in crime

and drug-related issues across our nation.

The surge in drug abuse represents a significant and multifaceted challenge that threatens the very foundation of our society. It affects not only the individuals directly, but also their families and communities at large. The proliferation of illegal substances leads to a cycle of addiction, crime and social disintegration. If we do not address these issues with urgency and decisiveness, our beloved nation is at risk. The consequences of unchecked drug abuse will reverberate through our society, undermining public health, increasing crime rates and destabilizing our communities.

Families are torn apart; youth are led astray and our collective future hangs in the balance. We must act now to implement comprehensive strategies that include education, rehabilitation, and community engagement to combat this crisis effectively. Moreover, it is essential to recognise that a secure nation is a prerequisite for sustainable development and economic growth. Only by ensuring the safety and security of our citizens can we create an environment conducive to investment, business development and the flourishing of our economy.

A harmonious society is the bedrock upon which our progress relies. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to confront these challenges head-on, to protect our current and future generations from the dangers posed by drugs and crime. However, I have full confidence in our newly sworn-in Minister of Policing and the recently appointed Commissioner of Police, who diligently work with their teams to tackle these pressing issues and not forgetting the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Commander in helping the Fiji Police to ease drugs in our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I turn my attention to land issues, I would like to remind the honourable Ministers for Lands and Mineral Resources, as well as Housing and Local Government, that we, as the Opposition, remain steadfastly vigilant and deeply committed to ensuring accountability and good governance in the management of our land resources. Our duty is to safeguard the interest of the people, and we will not hesitate to speak out if policies are not adhered to or if procedural integrity is compromised. It is our responsibility to hold the Government accountable and ensure that every decision made in this essential area prioritizes the wellbeing of our citizens.

Recently, I became aware of a concerning practice known as “deferral” which allows the conditions for subdivision approvals to be postponed until the building stage. This troubling approach has resulted in land titles being issued without the necessary infrastructure in place, such as access roads, proper drainage and essential reticulated services like water and sewerage. This scenario is not only irresponsible but also undermines the principles of responsible governance and effective urban planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this leaves buyers in precarious situations, acquiring land under the misconception that essential services will be provided only to discover that they are left with inaccessible or unliveable properties. Picture the frustration and hardships of families face to invest their hard-earned money in the dream of home ownership, only to find they cannot effectively reach their properties or connect to basic utilities. How can they build a future without the fundamental services necessary for a safe and healthy living environment?

Moreover, this situation ignores the broader implications for community development and social cohesion. Without proper infrastructure, these subdivisions risk becoming isolated, exacerbating social disparities and hindering local economic growth. We must establish and rigorously enforce policies requiring developers to fulfil all infrastructural commitments before any land is sold.

As honourable Members of Parliament, we must collaborate to ensure that our land use

planning reflects the realities of our citizen's needs. By doing so, we can prevent the emergence of informal settlements and guarantee that all Fijians have access to quality living conditions alongside the services they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a grave concern, and some investors are placing profits above community welfare. By allowing developers to sell lots without fulfilling their development obligations, we risk creating informal settlements that burden our communities. Who will ensure the outstanding work is completed if these developers leave the country? I urge the responsible ministries to uphold development conditions and ensure fairness and compliance among all developers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we assert that Fiji is resource rich yet income-poor, this disparity arises from inadequate resource utilisation and public awareness. To achieve sustainable development and economic growth, we must incentivise our citizens in agriculture, tourism, manufacturing and related sectors while also enhancing our infrastructure standards – roads, piped water supply, EFL and communications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should devise policies that create opportunities for citizens to build wealth and elevate their quality of life. We cannot continue to blame past governments, we must learn from our honourable Prime Minister who strives to improve our nation without casting blame. Furthermore, I believe it is vital to amend our national Constitution to ensure that every Fijian has a voice in the revision process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution must guarantee equal rights for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, race or colour, fostering a society where everyone can thrive. It should empower every citizen to live in peace and harmony, side by side, reinforcing our unity as a diverse nation. Additionally, our Constitution must comply with international standards and agreements, reflecting our commitment to human rights and democratic principles. A constitution that aligns with these global benchmarks not only enhances our nation's credibility on the world stage, but also safeguards the rights of all citizens, promoting a just and equitable society that upholds the dignity and freedom of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before concluding my speech, I must inform the honourable Minister of Infrastructure that residents in the Tacirua area have been without reticulated water for longer days. I request the honourable Minister to address this issue as His Excellency emphasised the Government's commitment to ensuring access to clean drinking water for all citizens. Witnessing a large section of our population deprived of such a basic necessity is disheartening and the irregularity of cartage exacerbates the situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I originate from Marasa in Nadi, I often tour our settlement and neighbouring settlements in Nadi, Lautoka and Sigatoka including those in Marasa, Tunalia, Korovuto, Nabitu and Buabua. The common issues raised by these settlements are water provision, better roads, and poor-quality bridges amongst others. Mr. Speaker, Sir, work on a new water reservoir in Nawaicoba, Nadi, is on hold. If this gets connected, households in Nawai, Uciwai, Nalovo, Savusavu and Momi can connect to piped water. Furthermore, I urge the honourable Minister to address the dire condition of roads in Nabitu, Sigatoka, Marasa, Nadi and the bridge at Buabua, Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I would like to speak to on subject matter close to my heart, our tradition and culture. Today, I stand before you in this august House to emphasise the importance of preserving our native culture which shapes our identity as Fijians. Our rich cultural heritage is not

only a treasure that defines who we are but also leaves a lasting impression on visitors who cherish their experiences in Fiji.

We must protect and nurture this legacy for future generations. I urge the Government to allocate more resources to our Ministry for iTaukei Affairs and provincial councils, enabling them to support our villages directly. By engaging our elders to teach and train our children in our cultural traditions, we can ensure that the spirit of our heritage continues to thrive, enriching the lives of our young people and strengthening the fabric of our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must unite under a vision of a strong, secure, peaceful and prosperous Fiji where our people are educated, healthy and managing sustainably. We aim to reduce poverty, promote equal opportunity and foster prosperity and enhance peace and stability. This vision can only be achieved if we create meaningful opportunities for our younger generations who are the future leaders of our nation rather than allowing individuals to return solely for personal gain. In this journey with the above outlined objective, I stand ready to serve the people of Fiji!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. May God bless this nation and all of us.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, I rise in this august House to lend my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address in the opening of the 2025 parliamentary year on Monday, 24th February, 2025. His words challenge us to lead with integrity, unity and resilience as we work together for the progress and betterment of our beloved Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our collective resilience as a nation depends on our ability to work together. His Excellency the President's call for unity and transformational leadership is a timely reminder that we must set aside our differences and focus on our shared vision for Fiji.

The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management remains committed to working hand-in-hand with all stakeholders - government agencies, provincial councils, non-government organisations, religious organisations, development partners and community leaders to drive progress in rural and maritime communities. We strongly believe that by working together, we will turn challenges into opportunities ensuring that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note with appreciation the announcement made by His Excellency the President about Government's proposed legislative agenda, policies and programmes for this year. This marks a crucial step forward in our nation's progress and development.

I acknowledge His Excellency the President's emphasis on strengthening integrity and accountability in the public office. The long overdue implementation of the Code of Conduct is an important step in ensuring transparency, ethical governance and public trust in our institutions. As leaders, we must uphold the highest standard of integrity and be accountable for our actions. A strong accountability framework will not only reinforce confidence in public service but also promote a culture of responsibility and good governance, which is essential for national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the call for responsible leadership and the need for unity in our national discourse. It is disappointing to this day that we still witness some honourable Members of Parliament blatantly disregarding the laws in place and using social media as a platform to gain political mileage rather than promoting constructive discussions. Leadership comes with responsibility, and we must hold ourselves to the highest standards, ensuring that information we

share is accurate, factual and serves the common good. Social media should be used as a tool to inform, educate and unite our people rather than to mislead, divide or create unnecessary intentions within our communities as some honourable Members on the other side are fond of doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as leaders, we must lead by example and demonstrate integrity in all that we do. This means setting aside personal and political interests and focusing on the broader goal of national development. Our people look to us for guidance and reassurance, especially in times of uncertainty. You must not betray that trust by engaging in reckless and inflammatory rhetoric in the pursuit of political point scoring, that only serves to weaken our democracy. Instead, you must embrace dialogue, inclusivity and transformational leadership to bring about positive change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has rightly emphasised economic growth, national security and sustainable development as fundamental pillars of our national agenda. As the Minister responsible for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, I reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that development reaches the most remote and vulnerable communities. Our rural and maritime regions are the backbone of Fiji's economy, rich in natural resources and cultural heritage. However, they continue to face infrastructure gaps, climate vulnerabilities and economic disparities. To address this, the Ministry is prioritising the following areas:

- (1) Infrastructure development - strengthening rural roads, jetties and energy supply systems to enhance connectivity and productivity.
- (2) Water sanitation access - expanding access to clean water and improving sanitation facilities ensuring that all Fijians enjoying basic human rights.
- (3) Digital transformation - expanding digital access in rural areas to bridge the technological divide and enhance economic opportunities, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President's call for inclusivity, sustainability and resilience resonates deeply within our Ministry's core mission to empower rural and maritime communities, strengthen disaster preparedness and build a Fiji that is safer, more prosperous and better equipped to withstand future challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment to ensuring inclusive development aligns with His Excellency's vision of a nation where every citizen has an opportunity to succeed. We recognise that rural and maritime communities face unique challenges including limited infrastructure, access to essential services and economic opportunities.

To address this, we are accelerating investment in rural infrastructure, improving roads, bridges and water supply systems to enhance connectivity and access to essential services, especially for our rural Fijians. Through strategic partnerships with government agencies and development partners, we will continue to implement projects that provide sustainable livelihoods, increased food security and empower our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the current financial year, one of the highlights of the Ministry's programme, in terms of enabling access for our rural communities is the groundbreaking of the Saliadrau Bridge. As we witnessed last month, the joy of the people of Saliadrau and surrounding villages in the interior of Namosi on the momentous occasion when they realised that one of their long-held wishes, of having a river crossing to their village, was finally coming to fruition to ease their travel and access to other essential services. In a few months' time, no longer will the school children and the elderly have to wade across the chilly waters of the Wainikoroiluva River in the mornings or the evenings when they return. I must acknowledge the support of the Government of Japan in joining the Government of Fiji in committing to and implementing this most worthy project.

In addition, the Ministry is working on almost 50 projects to utilise the \$2 million allocation for our Community Access Road, Footpaths and Footbridges programme for the current financial year. Furthermore, the Ministry is also working on completing 34 projects, with a total funding of \$3 million in this current financial year under its Rural and Outer Island programme. This programme includes farm road access and land cleaning for agriculture purposes, granting farm implements and food processing equipment, providing market access, as well as helping provide and maintain an incubating function for our rural farmers to ensure that they can thrive throughout the value-chain process in the future, and achieve self-sufficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as for rural water and sanitation programme, the Ministry continues to receive an annual budget of \$1 million to assist our rural communities having access to clean and safe drinking water, and the construction of better sanitation facilities. For the current financial year, the Ministry is working on completing 11 water and 11 sanitation projects across the four Divisions. The sanitation projects includes ablution blocks for individuals and communities, and even a school, and a trading centre along the King's Road that is a transit point for travellers and our local women who sell their produce alongside an existing supermarket. Our Ministry complements programmes provided by other agencies to achieve our common goals for the benefit of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also prioritising its offices in rural and maritime areas with the progressive installation of Starlink communication equipment before the end of the current financial year. The District Offices in Rotuma, Tukavesi and Saqani in Cakaudrove, Lekutu and Kubulau in Bua, Kavala in Kadavu, Koro in Lomaiviti, Namarai in Ra, Dada in Namosi, and Nadarivatu in Ba will finally manage to access the internet in their offices. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must acknowledge the support of the United Nations Development Programme, Governance for Resilience (UNDP Gov4Res) Project for providing this funding support to assist the Ministry in improving our communication network in the rural remote areas, particularly during disaster operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency emphasised, good governance and transparency are critical to our nation building process. The Ministry of Rural and Disaster Management is committed to strengthening governance structures, ensuring that resources allocated for rural development are utilised efficiently, equitably, and effectively. We will continue our efforts to decentralise service delivery, empowering our Divisional Commissioners and District Officers to respond effectively to community needs. We will also enhance community participation in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies reflect the realities faced by our rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thankful that the honourable Leader of Opposition has realised that the Civil Service Training and Exams that seems to have been discontinued during their time in Government should be brought back. Our honourable Members on the other side should reassured that this was recognised earlier on by this side of the House and is now in train and will be implemented shortly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is no stranger to climate-induced disasters, as emphasised by His Excellency. Our rural and maritime communities are among the most vulnerable to cyclones, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events. To help address the issue, the Ministry is strengthening the implementation of the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF) to ensure that all development initiatives are risk-informed and sustainable overtime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to work closely with the Fiji Meteorological Service, the National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO), and our regional and international partners to enhance early warning systems, improve disaster preparedness at the community level, and strengthen our response and recovery efforts. Our goal is not just to rebuild after disasters but to build

back stronger, better and more resilient.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is required to work very closely with the Ministry for Environment and Climate Change under the ambit of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Planned Relocation for the country. The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, as the lead agency for the implementation of the SOP, is determined to ensure that this is performed efficiently and effectively, noting that relocation will be the last resort for vulnerable communities due to the complex issues associated with displacement, especially when it is a permanent one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while there is progress in the relocation project for the village of Nabavatu in Dreketi, the construction of the 37 houses has been slightly delayed by the recent *TC Rae*. This will begin tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we firmly believe that community resilience starts with empowerment. Our Ministry is intensifying efforts to strengthen community-based disaster risk reduction initiatives. Through targeted training programmes, we are equipping local leaders and community members with the knowledge and skills to respond effectively to disasters.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to prioritise the pre-positioning of emergency supplies in high risk areas, ensuring swift response and support to affected communities when disaster strike. Our collaboration with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the private sector and faith-based groups is vital in reinforcing the whole society approach to disaster management.

For the current financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry was allocated a \$1 million budget for the retrofitting of 20 existing Evacuation Centres (ECs) and construction of two new ECs. This is in addition to the construction of four newly built and four retrofit ECs with the budget of \$12 million under a project that is funded by the Korea International Co-operation Agency (KOICA) and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The Ministry will be building a multipurpose EC in each of Fiji's four Divisions and, similarly, retrofit ECs to meet humanitarian standards. The Ministry has already retrofitted an EC in Yavusania, Nadi, and work is ongoing across all four Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Rural Housing Assistance Programme, there is assistance for retrofitting of rural and maritime houses, in addition to construction of new houses, or completion of existing houses, assistance for our senior citizens, and even cartage of material to the maritime islands. A budget of \$3 million allocated for the current financial year is being utilised for 143 projects across the four Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the renewed emphasis on the Rural and Outer Island Development reflects our commitment to ensuring that no Fijian is left behind. The review of the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF) and the formulation of the National Rural Development Policy to uplift rural households and improve access to essential services cannot come at a much better time. The review work is already underway, and the Ministry acknowledges the support it has received so far from stakeholders in the consultations that have already taken place across the country.

It would be remiss of me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not to acknowledge the continuous support the Ministry is receiving from the UNDP Gov4Res Project towards these important activities for the Ministry. There have been a lot of statements made about the whole of government approach in various initiatives across the public sector. I must highlight here that the IRDF is essentially institutionalising the whole of government integrated approach, given the limitation of the current 2013 Constitution, and ensure that planning and allocation of resources is better coordinated,

integrated and holistically managed by all Government agencies and, thus, should lead to an improvement in the quality of public service delivery in the rural areas.

I fully support the Government's commitment to prioritising healthcare and education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as these are two fundamental pillars of national development. Expanding access to quality medical services and modernising healthcare facilities is a fundamental objective for our rural and maritime community development, where distance and limited resources is always a challenge. As Minister of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, I will continue to work closely with relevant Ministries to ensure that quality healthcare improvements must extend beyond urban centres, reaching those in remote areas who need them most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rising prevalence of HIV in Fiji is a grave concern that must be addressed with urgency as it threatens the health and wellbeing of our people, particularly our youth age group. Sir, HIV is not just a health issue, it is a societal challenge that requires a collective response from all sectors. It is everyone's concern, whether we live in the bustling urban centres or in the most rural remote areas and maritime islands.

As the Minister responsible for rural and maritime development, I am particularly concerned about the growing intersection between HIV transmission and the use of illicit drugs, which is becoming increasingly prevalent among our young people, even in rural and maritime communities. Drug used by our young people, particularly the sharing of needles, significantly increases the risk of HIV transmission, and many of our communities lack the awareness and resources to adequately address this threat.

The Government's 90-day HIV Outbreak Response Plan and the HIV Surge Strategy are timely interventions, and their success will depend on coordinated efforts from all stakeholders. We must ensure that awareness campaigns and healthcare services are not confined to urban areas but reach every village and island, where misinformation, stigma and lack of medical facilities make the situation even more challenging.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry stands ready to work with the Ministry of Health, development partners, civil society and faith-based organisations to ensure that no Fijian is really left behind in the fight against HIV and illicit drugs. This is a battle we cannot afford to lose, and we must act decisively and immediately. We must act now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the initiative to implement a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme for street kids and youth. My Ministry is also committed to work with relevant agencies on the implementation of this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is a foundation upon which our nation's future is built, and I fully support the Government's commitment to enhancing our education system at all levels to meet the evolving demands of our globalised economy. For our rural and maritime communities, this review of the Education Act 1966 and related policies must ensure that education remains accessible, inclusive, and relevant to the realities of our people. Too often, students in remote areas face challenges such as limited access to qualified and experienced teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of digital learning facilities. The nationwide consultation process must give special attention to these communities, to ensure that their voices are heard and their unique challenges addressed.

I welcome the prioritisation of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), which will provide practical skills and employment opportunities for our youth. Many of our rural and maritime students may not be able to pursue the common academic qualification pathways but

through TVET, they can acquire the necessary skills that can contribute to the local economies and national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government's commitment to youth empowerment and sports development is critical to fostering a resilient and self-sufficient Fiji. The Ministry strongly supports initiatives such as the Mobile Training Programme, which will provide the much needed technical and vocational skills to our rural and maritime youth, ensuring they have access to opportunities that can contribute to the improvement of their respective communities.

A notable initiative is the investment in rural sports and sports tourism. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will bolster the commitment of this Coalition Government to recognise talents of young people in the rural and maritime communities. These will, obviously, be an incentive for young people to be occupied and remain in their communities instead of being attracted to the urban areas for reasons such as employment, tertiary education purposes, and others.

It is public knowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that one of the challenges that derails development in bigger countries around the globe and impact on people's livelihood is maintaining law and order. Sir, public safety and national security are fundamental to the wellbeing of citizens and the sustainable development of our nation.

I commend the Government's commitment to strengthening law enforcement, modernising our legal framework, and working closely with regional partners to combat transnational crimes such as drug smuggling and human trafficking. I would like to reiterate in this august Parliament that our Ministry stands ready to support these efforts, in our bid to ensure that rural and maritime communities are not left behind in the pursuit of a safer and more secure Fiji.

We live in a global community, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that necessitates that we build stable relations to support each other. We recognise that broadening Fiji's trade and economic partnerships must be inclusive to ensure that rural and maritime communities also benefit from these advancements. The review of the Trade Policy Framework must take into account the realities faced by resource owners in these areas, ensuring they have equal access to markets, receiving regulatory support, and sustainable financing opportunities.

The endorsement of the E-Commerce Strategy 2024-2028 is particularly encouraging, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as digital transformation can bridge the gap between urban centres and remote communities.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reaffirm my commitment, as I am sure we all do to serve with humility, integrity and dedication. As His Excellency the President graciously stated, leadership is not about holding power but about empowering others. I urge us all to lead by example in making the necessary sacrifices and decisions that will uplift the lives of all Fijians.

May God bless Fiji, and may we remain steadfast in our pursuit of a better Fiji for our generations to come.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a contribution to thank His Excellency the President for his most Gracious Speech in the Opening of the 2025 Parliament Session on Monday, 23rd February, 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, let me state that I have made a deliberate decision to concentrate on His Excellency's introductory remarks, as it covers the fundamentals of the Government rollout for the next 12 month period.

The Government plan, or any plan for that matter, sets out the visions and aspirations that will be laid out by the planner which, hopefully, will be achieved during the period under consideration.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Government plan, whether it be either economic, social or legislative must be based on sound platform to be successful. We can have all the well laid out plans in the world, but we will not achieve its aim if the basics are not established.

Our country, Fiji, needs stability, transparency and accountability. We need good governance and respect for the rule of law. The Judiciary and legal systems must be neutral or, at least, be seen to be transparent, fair and accountable. Without these, the plans mean nothing, and our people will suffer as a consequence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe it is fitting for His Excellency to recognise and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are congregating today and for the many past decades that the seat of Government has been accommodated here in the city of Suva. I join His Excellency in acknowledging the traditional owners and *vanua* of Nadonumai *kei na Turaga na Tui Suva*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution today will focus on the general comments delivered by His Excellency, as I believe that these are his own thoughts, as a high chief in his considerations for the people whom he leads and is traditionally dutybound to protect and guide, in one of the most difficult periods of our development as a nation. I thank His Excellency for his rightness in speaking the truth and being inclusive.

We, as Fijians from all walks of life, need to hear the truth - the truth, nothing else but the truth. I must repeat His Excellency's opening statement, and I quote:

“This moment provides an opportunity for us to reflect on our collective vision for our beloved nation – a vision based on progress, prosperity and unity.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to, I will concentrate my contributions on the emphasis and thought-provoking statements delivered by His Excellency, as it provides the fundamental principle of good governance and a platform for the Government to follow. His Excellency highlighted that our responsibility as Members of this Parliament, is to shape the future of our beloved nation by fostering a society that is just, equitable and resilient. We must walk together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in a quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development.

His Excellency also reminded us that this Parliament is not just a chamber for debate but a house of hope, a beacon of progress and a symbol of democratic spirit that binds us together as one people, one nation and one destiny.

We must remember the sacred duty that has been entrusted upon us, the solemn responsibility to serve and to lead with integrity in building a better future for all the people of Fiji. His Excellency quoted Matthew 20: 28-29, and I quote:

“Whoever will be great among you must be a servant and whoever will be first among you, must be your slave. Even as the son of man came not to be served but to serve

and give his life as a ransom for many.”

Additionally, His Excellency emphasised that the above verse requires us to sacrifice ego, ambition and greed in order to serve the people's collective interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded members of this august Parliament on the focus of the last two years, in the process of shaping policies and enacted laws to uplift our people, drive sustainable development and strengthen our resilience.

His Excellency, in his delivery, has set his visions for our beloved Fiji - a future that must encompass sustainability, inclusivity and resilience; a Fiji where every citizen has the opportunity to succeed and an environment that is preserved for future generation, where everyone work hand in hand with neighbours to promote peace and stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members of this august Parliament, I understand the challenges facing us today with economic shift and challenges of climate change, but we are reminded that we, as a nation, can build on resilience, unity and indomitable spirit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had the privilege and was compelled to read His Excellency's Address a few times to get the gist of his message. I now understand what he really wanted to put across to this august Parliament. His initial message was his own, without the government policy directive and roll out plan. I had made the decision to repeat some of His Excellency's words of wisdom, as I intend to re-emphasise these to our honourable Members and also all Fijians who are listening in today.

His Excellency quoted King Solomons word in Proverbs:

“When the righteous are in authority and become great, the people rejoice, but when the wicked man rules, the people groan and sigh.”

His Excellency reminded us that leadership is not about holding power but empowering others. It is about lifting those who are struggling and ensuring no one is left behind.

His Excellency specifically highlighted the importance of our young people and the role they play in the future of our beautiful Fiji. He emphasised that our youth are the future. Therefore, their dreams and hard work will define the destiny of our nation. He encourages our young people to be bold in their aspirations, relentless in their pursuit of excellence and unwavering in their commitment to build a better Fiji that thrives through unity and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency throughout his introductory remarks, reminded us all to stand together, upholding the values of respect, inclusivity, love and compassion. He emphasised the advantages of working together - as when we work together, we all rise, we all prosper, and we all contribute to a nation that will flourish for generations to come.

His Excellency emphasised our performance in Parliament and the effect it has on our people. He urged that we must put aside narrow personal interest, partisan political agendas and the past, and we must move towards building a nation united in purpose for our collective future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would plead with Government, through the honourable Prime Minister, to urge his Members to refrain from referring to the previous FijiFirst administration. We need to develop what has been achieved in the last two years, as that will compel us to move on. Most of the Members of the deregistered FijiFirst Party were not in government through the entire 16 years. In fact, most Members only joined Parliament after the 2022 General Elections, and nine have moved

to support the honourable Prime Minister and the Government.

Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, I continuously hear in Parliament references to the previous government, and I urge you, Sir, to talk to the Members of Government, especially the Deputy Prime Ministers immediately to your right, and remind them that it is high time that we move on.

I must congratulate His Excellency the President on his generous use of words, which should unite our people for our common good. His Excellency the President touched on promoting peaceful dialogue and discouraging online trolling and foster respectful discourse in politics.

In an era where digital communication has become a cornerstone of political engagement, it is undeniable and inevitable that it has touched our shores. Therefore, as leaders, we must foster a culture of respectful dialogue and discourage harmful behaviours, like trolling and spreading falsehoods online.

Online trolling and disseminating false information can undermine trust in our public institutions. Constant exposure to falsehoods and aggressive behaviour erodes the public's trust in our political processes and institutions. Furthermore, it divides communities and deepens social divisions, making it difficult to find common ground, as we work towards shared goals and prevent the exchange of ideas and solutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to counteract the negative impact of trolling and lies, it is essential that we, as leaders of our country, promote a culture of peaceful and constructive dialogue. We need to encourage fact-checking before sharing information, active listening to understand different viewpoints and fostering an inclusive environment where diverse voices are heard and respected. This strengthens the democratic process and enriches discussions.

Honourable Members of this august Parliament, we should lead by example and demonstrate respectful communication and fact-based discussions in our interactions. Publicly condemn trolling and the spread of lies, making it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable. Emphasise the importance of unity and collective effort towards common goals, encouraging supporters to focus on positive actions and, most importantly, keeping the public continuously consulted and informed to put their minds at peace and rumours to rest.

At a time when digital profoundly influences political engagement, it is crucial to cultivate an environment of respectful and informed dialogue. Political supporters and their leaders have the power to steer public discourse towards a more positive and productive direction. By discouraging online trolling and lies, and embracing peaceful dialogue, we can contribute to a healthier, democratic process and a more cohesive society.

Let us all commit to lifting each other through our words and actions, ensuring that our digital interactions reflect the values of respect, inclusivity, and truth. Together, we can build a future where constructive dialogue prevails, and our collective efforts lead to a thriving and united nation, and this august Parliament is where it starts.

As national leaders, we must put aside our differences for the common good of our people. His Excellency the President stressed the importance of focussing on our shared destiny and commonality.

As Members of this Parliament, we bear the responsibility of leading by example through having a unified front, where the needs of the people are prioritized over the differences of our contrasting manifestos. A divided house cannot lead a country to achieve commonality or inspire

hope for a better future. As His Excellency mentioned, and I quote, “the change we seek must start with us.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government of the day to work together with the Opposition members of this House, to live up to the theme of their manifesto, “Rebuilding Fiji Together and Unleashing our Potential.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address speech, His Excellency also called on the members of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) to help him build commonality. For me, this would include diversity and multiculturalism.

The Great Council of Chiefs was initially established as an advisory body to the Government, but they can do much more. We, in this Parliament are elected leaders, members of GCC are born leaders within the 14 provinces across Fiji – making them essential key players which will improve the quest for multiculturalism, diversity, and commonality. All leaders within the 14 provinces have the power to promote diversity and multiculturalism, therefore changing the mindset of the future and instilling positive change.

Fiji being a diverse country, whereby people of different races and background are able to live harmoniously, it is basically a catalyst that will bring about growth and changes. Henceforth with togetherness amongst the different cultures, it will create a good environment for peace which in turn promotes growth towards prosperity. Government must work hand in hand with the citizens of this country, to continue this trend as it will have an impact on our future generation and its leaders.

Multiculturalism defines Fiji and makes it stand out from the others. We, as leaders of this beautiful nation, must show unity and diversity as we project the values of this august Parliament. Thus, it will only follow through with leaders working together to progress and create peace, which in turn will bring about prosperity for Fiji.

To conclude, in the words of His Excellency and I quote:

“Collective strength and unity are the foundation on which we will build a prosperous future for all citizens. It is time for united and collective action rather than just grand speeches, talks and rhetoric.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the President for a very inspiring Address, and I would like to end my contribution with a quote from one of our own, a son of Fiji - a very wise man and a great statesman, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and I quote, “It was we, the old man that dreamt dreams. I now call on the young men and women to see vision. For where there is no vision, people perish.”

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we stand today, *ki Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva*. I pay my respect to the chiefs, past and present, as well as the emerging leaders and members of the *vanua o Nadonumai*. I acknowledge their role in caring for the *vanua*.

To our fellow citizens joining us this afternoon via radio, television, or live streaming, *ni sa bula vinaka*. I welcome your keen interest in the State Opening of the new Session of our Parliament. Before I proceed, I would like to take a moment to express our deepest sympathies and prayers for those who have been affected by *Cyclone Rae*. Our hearts go out to these families and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and my fellow citizens, I am honoured that I stand before you today to respond to the gracious Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji. The President's Address has set a visionary path for our nation, emphasizing progress, prosperity and unity. As a Minister responsible for Tourism and Civil Aviation, I am particularly inspired by his call for transformative leadership and collective action putting aside political agendas. Anyone who has been in this august House before us and those who are yet to come ultimately have one mandate, to serve in the best interest of our people. While we are appointed under various portfolios, our job is not to advance our sectoral interest alone but to do so together for our economy through healthy debate so that we may deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency has said, to move forward requires us to reflect on both our successes and challenges. The tourism sector has been a cornerstone of Fiji's economy, driving our post-pandemic recovery. In 2024, we approached the remarkable milestone of one million visitor arrivals, a testament to the resilience and dedication of our people. I just need to emphasise here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we had included the visitors via the cruise lines, that numbers were greater than one million visitors. The success was bolstered by the introduction of additional flights, major international events and renewed investor confidence driving development demand in Fiji.

The numbers speak for themselves. In January 2025, Fiji welcomed 70,794 visitors or 0.67 percent increase from 70,324 in January 2024 and a 329 percent recovery from the pandemic lows of 16,502 in January 2022. The steady growth reflects the confidence of travellers in Fiji as a safe and desirable destination, even in the face of adversity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a fair idea of what the demand is. What we need to work on now is room supply. We recognise the need to get more beds on the ground as a priority to match air inventory. Whether they are 5-star brands, smaller boutiques or community-based accommodations, we welcome both domestic and foreign investments to address this critical need.

Between this year and the next, we are seeing approximately 1,500 new rooms under construction with another 2,000 in pre-development stages. These are positive indicators, but the challenge lies in accelerating these developments. Whether it is streamlining processes to avoid unnecessary delays or investing more in support infrastructure, we are committed to creating an enabling environment for growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to reflect on how we have come as a Ministry too. At the outset, under the Coalition Government, the merger of the Tourism and Civil Aviation Departments into one has been a transformative step.

This integration has allowed us to streamline operations, enhance collaboration and achieve remarkable milestones that would have been challenging as separate entities. Under the previous leadership, tourism was a small unit grouped with seven other departments and units. And while I understand more Government officials does not necessarily mean greater effectiveness, we have a stronger case to provide the largest sector of our economy the support it deserves.

Since the merger, we have successfully:

- (1) launched the National Sustainable Tourism Framework 2024-20234;
- (2) supported the establishment of the ICAO Pacific Liaison Office in Nadi;
- (3) secured the Open Skies Agreement with the United States of America;
- (4) launched the first ever dedicated tourism grant for MSMEs;
- (5) brought major international sporting events to Fiji - amplifying our brand; and
- (6) boosted Tourism Fiji's marketing budget.

These achievements underscore the power of unity and collaboration in driving progress and is another testament to our commitment to grassroots development and inclusive growth. As we look ahead, we are confident that this integrated approach will continue to yield positive results, ensuring that Fiji remains a global leader in tourism and civil aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to highlight a significant milestone in our journey towards sustainable tourism development. Cabinet has recently approved the formulation of Fiji's first tourism legislation. This legislation, now in its initial stages of formulation, represents a historic step toward our tourism industry.

Once passed in Parliament, it will provide a comprehensive legal framework to enhance the sustainability, competitiveness and inclusivity of our tourism sector. It will ensure that Fiji remains a global leader in responsible and innovative tourism practices. While tourism contributes significantly to our economy, accounting for 40 percent of GDP and employing 150,000 Fijians directly and indirectly, tourism is largely centred in only four provinces out of Fiji's 14 provinces. The disparity highlights both a challenge and an opportunity.

The potential to grow tourism across all 14 provinces is immense, and we are determined to address this imbalance to ensure that every community shares in the prosperity that tourism brings. Through initiatives like the Na Vualiki Programme which focusses on sustainable tourism development in Vanua Levu, and the expansion of community-based tourism projects, we aim to ensure that all provinces benefit equitably from tourism. Our goal is to create a more inclusive tourism sector that uplifts every community and contributes to balanced regional development.

As we move forward, we will continue to strengthen our tourism policies, infrastructure, and sustainability practices to ensure that tourism becomes a driving force for economic growth and community empowerment across the 14 provinces. By fostering collaboration between government, private sector and local communities, we will create a tourism industry that is not only prosperous but also inclusive and sustainable.

On Civil Aviation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the modernisation of the Civil Aviation Act is a critical step in ensuring compliance with international safety standards, enhancing industry competitiveness, and attracting investments. These efforts will solidify Fiji's position as a premier global travel destination.

The proposed Civil Aviation Bill is a pivotal piece of legislation that will drive industry growth and ensure the highest standards of safety and efficiency. By modernising our aviation laws, we aim to create an environment that fosters innovation, attracts investments and enhances our connectivity with the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic growth is the bedrock of national prosperity, and His Excellency the President has set a clear vision for 2025; to build a Fiji where every citizen thrives. Tourism and civil aviation are not just sectors; they are lifelines that connect Fiji to the global economy. They provide employment, stimulate local businesses, and contribute significantly to our GDP. As we diversify our economy, we will continue to invest in sustainable industries, infrastructure, and digital transformation to ensure broad-based economic growth.

The President's vision for 2025 is one of inclusive growth, where no community is left behind. We are committed to creating opportunities that empower every Fijian, from the bustling streets in Suva to the serene villages of Vanua Levu. By leveraging our natural resources, human capital, and strategic partnerships, we will build an economy that is resilient, dynamic and future-ready.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment to sustainability is unwavering. We recognise the existential threat posed by climate change and are dedicated to implementing robust adaptation and mitigation strategies. The preservation of our environment is not just a responsibility; it is a legacy we owe to future generations.

His Excellency the President's call for sustainability is a call to action for all of us. In 2025, we will intensify our efforts to protect our islands, oceans and ecosystems. Through initiatives like the National Sustainable Tourism Framework and the Na Vualiku Programme, we will promote sustainable practices that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship. Our goal is to build a Fiji that is not only prosperous but also resilient in the face of global challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President's call for unity and inclusivity resonates deeply. In a diverse nation like ours, inclusivity is not just a value; it is a necessity. We must ensure that every citizen, regardless of background, has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from our nation's progress.

In 2025, we will redouble our efforts to foster unity and inclusivity. Through initiatives like the Pilot Tourism Micro and Small Enterprise Grant Fund, we will empower marginalised communities and create opportunities for all Fijians to thrive. By embracing our diversity and working together, we will rebuild a Fiji that is united, inclusive and strong.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we fully support the President's legislative agenda, which aims to strengthen governance, enhance accountability and reflect the evolving aspirations of our people. The review of our Constitutional Framework and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission are steps toward a more just and equitable society.

In 2025, we will prioritise legislative reforms and promote transparency, accountability and good governance. The proposed tourism legislation and the modernisation of the Civil Aviation Act are just the beginning. We will also focus on enhancing social protection programmes, ensuring that vulnerable groups have access to essential services. By enacting laws that reflect the values and aspirations of our people, we will build a Fiji that is fair, just and prosperous.

On that note, I would like to make special mention of a particular point of interest for the Ministry with regards to the review of the Regulation of Surfing Areas Act 2010. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Regulation of Surfing Areas Act 2010 was designed to position Fiji as a premier surf travel destination and to promote tourism, recreation as well as liberalize access to marine areas for such activities. Key provisions of the Act empowered the Director of Lands to designate surfing areas as well as facilitating open access to these areas, boosting the tourism sector.

Although the liberalisation of access enhanced Fiji's appeal as a surf destination and stimulated economic growth in the tourism sector, it restricted access to the use of the designated areas and compensation to certain groups affected. This Government has recognised the need to address the concerns upon assuming power and amongst other actions it has taken, conducted consultations for the development of a draft document outlining policy directives to address the concerns raised towards the provisions of the Act.

The Government has adopted an Integrated Policy Approach wherein it has formed a working committee comprising stakeholders whose insight and input to the final policy will ensure that a holistic and fair document is created and suitable for those who will be affected. The working committee intends to address the interests from the tourism sector, private owners and customary fishing rights owners into a framework ensuring that all parties rights and interests are captured and addressed.

The next step for the Ministry and working group is to finalise a working document that it intends to take out on consultations before the same is finalised into a Bill and tabled in Parliament before the end of this year.

Amongst other matters, the primary objective of the working committee is to develop a mechanism for compensation for the commercial use of marine areas that affects both individuals and customary fishing rights owners. Payment arrangements in the compensation scheme, whether lump sum or recurring is to be considered in the new legislation as well as other considerations such as social, environmental or cultural factors. The compensatory mechanism in the new legislation is intended to be adaptable rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the path ahead is challenging but our resolve is unwavering. Let us embrace the President's vision with unity, determination and transformational leadership. Together, we can build a Fiji that is resilient, inclusive and prosperous.

With your permission, Mr. Speaker, let me just reply to one of the comments made earlier today from the other side of the House that our policies are divisive, and our people are divided because of the policies. Let me just share with you an experience in Sigatoka. A lady of the Muslim faith who is a teacher came to me one day last year and said, "Thank you very much. My daughter has completed her studies in medicine, she is now a doctor. Thank you, she does not have to pay TELS." More than 53,000 young men and women benefitted from that. We do not care what community you belong to, where you are *iTaukei*, Indo-Fijian, that is a policy of the Coalition Government.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scholarship that we have available today is unprecedented in the history of this country. So, I do not know where the divisive policy is coming from. The reality is that we are a very inclusive Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I will just share with you that sometimes I tell my guys, "We are down playing our achievements. We should be saying a lot more about all the positives that we have done and are appreciated by the vast majority of our people."

In closing, let our words inspire, our actions empower and our leadership unite. Together, we will build a Fiji that stands tall among nations – a Fiji that is strong, sustainable and full of promise. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Given the hour and for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6, 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 still have a number of contributors to respond to His Excellency the President's Address and also there is a guarantee motion on the Fiji Development Bank that we need to discuss.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, 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, we will now suspend the proceedings for tea break and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.48 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.33 p.m.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka*. I wish to rise to deliver my response to His Excellency the President's Opening Address at the 2025 Parliamentary Session which was delivered on Monday, 24th February, 2025.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate His Excellency, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, on his recent appointment as President of the Republic of the Fiji Islands.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his exemplary leadership and steadfast dedication to the progress of Fiji over the past two years. His dedication to embracing the perspective of all citizens irrespective of age or gender, underscores a true democratic spirit and effective leadership, reaching beyond just those who cast their votes for us.

His Excellency the President had truly reflected that in the past two years, honourable Members had been able to shape policies and laws, uplift our people, drive sustainable development, and strengthen our resilience against the challenges of our time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji stands at a pivotal juncture, poised to convey a significant message to the global community as we seek to attract investment to our nation. Our focus remains on assuring prospective investors on the stability and security that Fiji offers, while also highlighting the beauty and abundant potential of our country as a prime destination for investment.

His Excellency has reiterated the importance of sustained support and dedication to all sectors of Fiji's economy, with particular emphasis on resourced-based sectors. I wish to commend His Excellency for articulating a forward-thinking vision that prioritises sustainability, inclusivity and resilience.

As leaders entrusted with the stewardship of our nation during these modern and challenging times, we are committed to building a Fiji where every Fijian is afforded the opportunity to succeed. We commit to safeguard our environment for the benefit of future generations and to work collaboratively with our regional partners to promote peace and stability, navigating the path towards a prosperous and harmonious future for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to highlight some major accomplishments of the Ministry in the past two years. These achievements set a solid foundation as we look forward to the honourable Minister's presentation, which will outline the key macro outcomes and exciting initiatives and programmes that we have for our farmers and agriculture stakeholders for this year.

I wish to commend His Excellency for emphasising in this august House the importance of the non-sugar agriculture sector to the Fijian economy since our Independence. It is undeniable that the agriculture sector plays a vital role, not only in ensuring our nation's health and food security, but also in driving economic prosperity and sustainably managing our resources for future generations.

In the past two years, the Ministry has made remarkable strides in enhancing productivity, resilience to pests and diseases, nutritional value and sustaining farming practices, while adapting to climate change and fostering technological transfers. Key milestone achievements include:

- (1) The release of a new kumala variety, Vanuavatu, which not only boost yields but is also high in iron content, aiming to address the nutritional needs of our population.
- (2) The establishment of a state-of-the-art tissue culture laboratory for the mass propagation of banana planting material for banana cultivation.
- (3) The renovation and refurbishment of the Fiji Agricultural Chemistry Laboratory, enhancing our analytical and diagnostic services for stakeholders.
- (4) The introduction of innovative crop genetic materials for pineapples, cassava, yams, vegetables and pulses, paving the way for agricultural diversity.
- (5) A significant step forward in livestock genetic improvement with the establishment of a nucleus herd of four breeds at the Government station and the development of a breeding centre.
- (6) Over 50 breeding bulls have been supplied to farmers, promoting breed improvement, alongside embarked initiatives for semen and embryo production for widespread genetic enhancement.
- (7) For the next two years, a total of 80 farms will benefit from the Artificial Insemination Programme, ensuring improvement productivity and production of milk and meat on private farms.
- (8) The newly established PCR Laboratory will transform livestock disease diagnosis, providing timely reports to farmers and effectively addressing disease challenges on private farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, modernising agriculture through mechanisation boosts diversification by enhancing efficiency, increasing cropping intensity and enabling timely land preparation. This flexibility is essential to adapt to climate change and market needs, ultimately resulting in more sustainable agri-food system.

Over the last two years, the Ministry had been working on improving and re-enforcing the distribution of modern mechanisation resources to strategic areas based on the land availability, market demand and, most importantly, farmer interest.

In total, 81 agricultural machines had been distributed over the past two years, comprising of 55 tractors, 15 rice harvesters and 11 diggers. In alignment with the North Development Plan (NDP), 36 of these machines were allocated to the Northern Division, 32 to the Western Division, 30 to the Central Division and two to the Eastern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that no one is left behind and to provide farmers with the opportunity to extend their operations in light of the challenges they face in accessing prime farmland, the Ministry has, for the first time, deployed machines to the Eastern Division, especially Lau and Lomaiviti. This initiative focuses on new farm access and effective drainage solutions. For far too long, these farmers have been deprived from the opportunities to explore potential crops that could enhance their income.

In addition, to address the surplus of food production in maritime region, the Ministry hosted a series of post-harvesting loss training sessions aimed at value adding, food packaging, labelling, and ensuring food safety for crops that are predominantly grown in the maritime islands.

In our unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of farmers, the preservation of agricultural land, effective water management and environmental stewardship in Fiji, the Ministry has successfully re-established the Drainage Board, which was dismantled eight years ago by the previous Administration.

Recognising the legal endorsement of the Drainage Act 2023 and the foundational Drainage

Act 1961, we are empowered to entrust this statutory body with essential responsibilities for maintaining and overseeing existing drainage schemes and outfall structures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure markets are accessible for our agriculture produce, especially for *kava* - a commodity that significantly contributes to our GDP and is recognised as a billion-dollar industry, the Ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Trade, undertook a market scoping exercise in the USA after a decade-long interruption. This reflects the Government's commitment to addressing the market needs of *kava* farmers in Fiji.

The Ministry will undertake a robust market scoping programme this year for all other key crops and livestock commodities, to ensure that farmers, exporters and policy makers have a comprehensive understanding of the target market landscape, including customer needs, competitor dynamics and potential barriers.

We cannot achieve complete transformation of the agriculture sector in Fiji without reforming the outdated agricultural legislation. With the Cabinet's endorsement, the Ministry is partnering with UNFAO, and the Office of the Solicitor-General is actively reviewing existing agricultural laws that were previously neglected in past years. It is time for decisive action to modernise and strengthen our agricultural framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to share that for the first time, the Ministry has developed three vocational courses centred on livestock-based agriculture, in collaboration with relevant industries. These courses have received accreditation from the Higher Education Commission, and are being offered by institutions, like the Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute. Designed to boost farmers' productivity, these skill-based courses aim to engage our youth and women in the agriculture sector.

In a significant step towards data-driven policymaking, the Ministry has successfully conducted its first ever specific commodity census, focusing on two key commodities - rice and *yaqona*. This important initiative is part of a broader effort to develop a plan to extend this approach of additional priority commodities within the crop and livestock subsector, ensuring that future strategies are grounded in solid data.

I stand in support of His Excellency's powerful message to our youth, the very architects of our nation's future. The agriculture sector in Fiji rests firmly in their hands; the duty to nourish their families, communities and our nation is theirs to undertake. This role is crucial for driving economic growth and ensuring the sustainability of Fiji.

The Ministry is firm in its commitment to elevate investments for our youth by rolling out innovative agriculture initiatives and programmes this year, tailored to meet the dynamic needs of our young individuals. We will ensure that they are not only familiar with but also efficient in modern technologies and machinery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank His Excellency for reiterating in this august Parliament the importance of diversifying the digital transformation with a particular focus on future strengthening of the agriculture sector and the micro, small and medium enterprises. This economy is robust, supported by the tourism, alongside agriculture and natural resources.

The tourism sector stands as the largest foreign exchange earner for the country, making its contribution indispensable. In 2024, we are nearing the one million visitor arrivals, a milestone driven by additional flights options, significant international events, and the implementation of the National Sustainable Tourism Framework, which positions Fiji favourably in the global travel market. Investment Fiji anticipated an increase of over 3,000 hotel rooms in response to the surging

demand.

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is imperative that we produce sufficient food for our rapidly growing population, which now includes an increasing number of tourists. This necessitates strategic investments in infrastructure and facilities to strengthen agricultural production and agri-tourism initiatives, while also safeguarding our land, water and marine ecosystems.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is actively collaborating with the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation on the farm-to-fork initiative. The objective is clear, to promote the utilisation of local agricultural products within the tourism industry by bridging the knowledge gap between farmers, middlemen and decision-makers in hotels and tourism-related facilities. This initiative will establish a cooperative business model amongst farmers, cluster groups, and enhance financial management within our farming communities - an area that is critically in need of improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of the agriculture sector has continued to navigate several risks and challenges over the years from external economic shocks, environmental issues, social trends and strict implementation processes. The Ministry continues to confront its challenges, particularly significant issues arising from a limited understanding of bio-physical processes and trends, along with insufficient utilisation of information about natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the volume of food imports into our region has been consistently rising since the mid-1990s. Currently, most of our countries are able to produce less than 65 percent of their dietary energy supply domestically. Our geographical position and distance from global markets affect food prices, making it difficult for our communities to access and afford nutritious diet.

Given the growing population and increasing tourist arrivals in Fiji, along with advancements in modern agriculture through technology, the Ministry recognises the need for more interventions aimed at equipping Extension Officers and farmers with the necessary skills and knowledge to support and guide the farming community effectively.

We are taking proactive steps to successfully launch major development-funded projects through international assistance. This will facilitate a positive influx of funding via effective investments, rather than the negative gearing situation we are facing now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve food and nutrition security for all Fijians, the Ministry has set two specific goals in the new Strategic Development Plan. These goals are to enhance the production of nutritious crops and livestock, and to work in collaboration with other Government Ministries and agencies to implement the Food and Nutrition Security Policy.

Fiji has embraced our National Policies, which have allowed our Government to prioritise investments through climate initiatives, and to engage strategically with funders to secure climate financing for projects that will best shield communities from worsening climate effects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Strategic Priority 3 of the Ministry's new Strategic Development Plan (2024-2028) is centred on sustainable resource management and climate-smart agriculture.

In our efforts to address the critical issue of "mitigation", the Ministry is implementing a series of initiatives, including effective manure management practices, the utilisation of biogas digesters for methane production for household energy needs, recycling manure as fertilizers, and conducting a thorough review of the use of chemical fertilizers in Fiji. We are also pleased to introduce organic fertilizers and bacterium culture to enhance soil microbial population and facilitate

fertility restoration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to acknowledge the growing challenges posed by the increasing intensity of tropical cyclones and other natural disasters, which significantly affect our farming communities. The threats of saltwater intrusion and freshwater scarcity are pressing concerns for sustainable agriculture in our region. To address these challenges, the Ministry is committed to the construction of retention dams and seawalls, employing nature-based solutions to combat flooding, coastal erosion and inundation.

The Ministry firmly advocates for the transformation of farming into a lucrative business, empowering graduate farmers to advance from subsistence practices to commercial operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) play a crucial role by providing additional support to cultivate resilient communities. In line with our strategic objectives, the Ministry is taking decisive action to minimise food waste through enhanced processing and storage techniques. We are also dedicated to shifting consumer preferences, ensuring that locally produced food is accessible to every member of our community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to forging stronger collaborations with national and international agencies to heighten awareness among farmers about invasive pests and diseases, and the significant threats they pose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to our strategic priorities as detailed in the 2024-2028 Strategic Development Plan.

I thank you for providing me the opportunity to deliver my response and support the motion before Parliament.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen who are watching live on the Parliament channel; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

I rise to respond to His Excellency's most Gracious Speech which sets a very clear roadmap for this Parliament and the future of our beloved nation. In his Address, His Excellency, amongst others, outlined the opportunities before us that we should capitalise on, the challenges we must navigate and conquer upon, and the collective responsibility we all share in shaping the economic, social and political landscape of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted the need for national unity, transformational leadership, integrity, dialogue and constructive debate, economic growth and diversification, strengthening our independent State institutions, respect for democracy and fundamental principles, and building social cohesion for a sustainable and inclusive development agenda.

Under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, the Coalition Government has restored democracy, media freedom and respect for human rights. The culture of fear, intimidation and weaponisation of State institutions have ended. Our people are free from dictatorial leadership.

The Coalition Government has brought about a new style of leadership which is focussed on inclusive governance based on genuine dialogue and consultation, participatory decision-making where everyone's voice is heard, and leadership that respects democratic principles and fundamental

values. This has set a strong socio-political foundation for lasting prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on economic policies, the Coalition Government has made significant progress over the past two years to revive the economy, bring back fiscal sustainability and financial discipline, to ensure that prosperity is shared and long lasting.

Our economy has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 after the economic decline induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and years of reckless macroeconomic and fiscal management. We have recorded two consecutive years of economic growth with the economy growing by 7.5 percent in 2023 and 3.8 percent in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated by His Excellency the President, we are on track for a third year of consecutive growth with the economy forecasted to grow by 3.4 percent in 2025. The first two months of economic data has been strong, and we are confident that this growth momentum will continue. The next two years also look positive, and we are working towards lifting Fiji's growth outcomes from 4 percent to 5 percent as envisaged in the National Development Plan.

However, to get there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all need to work harder. We need to streamline business approvals processes to unshackle the impediments to investment and growth. The private sector needs to be incentivised and supported to be on the driving seat. Productivity has to be lifted up across the economy and Government will have to continue to provide the enabling environment.

Apart from this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to diversify the economy. While tourism numbers are at an all-time high supporting growth, we must not become complacent. Our economic future cannot be overly reliant on a single industry, as we have seen during the pandemic.

We need to nurture and grow other high potential sectors, such as business process outsourcing, agricultural value addition and exports, light manufacturing, and other areas where we have inherent competitive advantages. This diversification is important to create more employment, drive exports, generate foreign exchange and grow the economic pie.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to hear the revitalising of Fiji's shipbuilding sector and the review of the six agricultural-based public sector enterprises, such as AMA, Food Processors, Fiji Rice, Fiji Coconut Millers, Fiji Meat Industry Board and the Yaqara Pastoral Company. This is to boost productivity and efficiency, improve operations and reduce reliance on the Government and overall contribute to GDP growth now and in the future. This will also minimize write-offs, converting debt to equity and endless grants without value that happened in the past.

There are also risks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our economy remains vulnerable to climate change and intense natural disasters. We are exposed to global shocks and international economic developments including increasing commodity prices, supply change complications and geo-political repercussions.

Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Management, this is another issue that raised by His Excellency the President. The Coalition Government has focused on restoring fiscal discipline, reducing waste, promoting value for money and prudently managing taxpayers' resources to give the best to our people.

When we assumed office, Fiji's debt stood at over 90 percent of GDP. With the strong rebound in the economy and decisive reduction in the fiscal deficit in the last two budgets supported by tax reforms and expenditure restraint, we have managed to reduce our debt to GDP ratio to around 78 percent. This is a 12-percentage point reduction in two years and this achievement has been

welcomed by our international partners like IMF, World Bank and our credit rating agencies who acknowledge the political will and commitment to fiscal prudence and discipline. With the planned reduction in fiscal deficits moving forward, we will continue to maintain our debt ratio on a downward path and a path to sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said before, the years of reckless fiscal management and debt built up by the previous government had left no option for the Coalition Government but to take immediate tax reforms to raise additional revenues for the Government and close the fiscal gap. Had we not done that, we were on a path of fiscal disaster as our debt levels had become unsustainable and we would have ultimately ended up in a major fiscal distress causing irreparable damage and enormous pain to our people with large tax increases and expenditure cuts. We had to take the decisive steps. However, it is fortunate that few on the opposite side are trying to mislead the people by saying that the tax reforms should not have been pursued. These were the same people who were part of the debt build brigade and supported the irresponsible fiscal management that almost brought the country to its knees.

Government Budget and Major Expenditures, in the last two budgets, we have also carefully crafted policies to support our people:

- Maintained zero VAT on 21 items and also added prescribed medicines to at least 22 items.
- For those who are vulnerable, we had increased the Social Welfare Allowance by 25 percent for people above the age of 70 and by 15 percent for those below 70.
- Increased the Government pensions and Aftercare Allowance by 15 percent.
- Increased the allowance for *Turaga-ni-Koro*, *Mata-ni-Tikina*, *Turaga-ni-Yavusa*, Provincial Administrators and District Advisory Councillors.
- Introduced the \$200 per child Back to School Support for all families below an annual income of \$50,00, assisting over 200,000 students continuously for the past three rounds paying over \$130 million.
- Wrote off \$650 million in TELS debt for over 53,000 tertiary students, freeing them from the shackles of debt when they start working.
- Provided over \$85 million in pay increases for over 38,000 civil servants who were deprived of a salary increase since 2017. The salary increase ranged from 7 percent to 20 percent.
- Taken a bold step to increase the minimum wage rate to \$5 an hour; an increase of 25 percent. This increase in the minimum wage rate to \$5 was based on a comprehensive review by a panel of experts who had undertaken a thorough analysis and consultation with employers, unions and other stakeholders.
- Paid the highest ever sugarcane price of around \$102 per tonne of cane for the 2023 season. For 2022, we paid \$91.38, both were higher than the \$85 guaranteed price.
- Paying our rice farmers \$1,000 of rice paddy and almost all of our cash crop farmers including dalo and cassava are receiving much higher prices for their crops.
- Continuing with our social support measures like free education, transport assistance, free water and subsidized electricity for households earning below \$30,000.
- Allocated \$150.5 million for various scholarships and grants administered by the Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Services (TSLs).
- A sum of \$13.5 million has been allocated towards the formalisation of five informal settlements which includes Nepani, Raiwaqa, Davuilevu, Wainibuku and Tavakubu.
- Great emphasis is placed on enhancing access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Government is continuously investing in upgrading water and wastewater treatment plants, distribution systems and rural water projects to address these issues.

- The Coalition Government has also proved that we respect the right of our workers. We had restored the FNPF contribution rate and restored the FNPF pension rate for our pensioners who were subjected to unjust pension reduction in 2011. A sum of \$4 million was allocated to reinstate pension payments for pensioners who opted with little option for a reduced pension rate following the 2011 reform.
- Government has successfully reached a resolution to end the longest strike ever in the world which lasted over 33 years, where 368 Vatukoula mine workers were allocated \$25,000 each, costing Government \$9.2 million.

All those measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will rebuild the trust between the Government and workers which had been destroyed in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated earlier, infrastructure investment is key to drive growth. The Coalition Government had also inherited infrastructure that was neglected for years with many State assets beyond repair. We need to fix this, and this will take time and cost. The dilapidated state of infrastructure in health, education, water and roads, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was all too evident and it is this Government which is now investing and improving those infrastructures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, still on the water, while we are adding additional capacity through the Viria Water Project, we need to reduce the leak at the same time. Apart from water infrastructure, urgent attention is needed in the wastewater area as well. Again Government, through the ADB is working on a major project to upgrade and increase the capacity of the Kinoya Sewerage Plant and improve its environment compliance.

In partnership with the Australian Government and JICA, we are expediting the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project which will provide significant relief to the villages, hotel owners and operators, property owners, farmers and the people of Nadi who have often succumbed to the effects of severe flooding. The project is currently in an advanced stage. Similarly, we have commenced work on replacing four critical bridges in Viti Levu which will be made climate and disaster resilient. These four bridges are being funded by the Asia Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank in the form of concessional loans and grants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are making progress in the health sector. The master plan for a new Colonial War Memorial Hospital is ready with 27 sub projects identified by the Australian Government for implementation. We are working with the World Bank and ADB on the first phase with a focus on making CWM a regional referral hospital. The Indian Government has also approved the construction of a new 100-bed super specialty hospital. The Indian technical team was here last week, and it is expected that construction will begin in the next three to four months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from there are major discussions and technical work undertaken on the potential relocation of the Suva Port which has reached capacity. To support Fiji's future growth and development, a major investment in the relocation of the Suva Port is critical. Last week, we had called for a development partner roundtable, sharing Government priorities and coordinating development partner financing in a holistic manner to support high impact national projects. While financing does not seem to be a major issue, we need to lift up our capacity to implement those projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to strengthen the civil service which is one of our biggest challenges in recent years from the loss of skilled personnel due to migration, recruitment by the private sector and other regional and international organisations. At the same time, Government recognises it is crucial to enhance efficiency and productivity in the civil service through digitalisation to develop a modern and high performing civil service that is responsive to Government's priorities and efficient

service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to highlight briefly on the issue of drugs, particularly due to the rise in drug-related crimes and its consequent social impacts. As a strategy, Government is fighting against illicit drugs through “a whole of nation approach.” This means addressing the surge of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine which poses a substantial threat to both public health and societal safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to commend the Fiji Police Force for their relentless efforts in tackling this issue. However, more needs to be done. The path ahead is clear, we must sustain economic growth, manage our debt wisely, invest in infrastructure and strengthen our civil service. We must continue to engage constructively with our development partners, embrace new financial system and remain steadfast in our commitment to good governance and transparency. As His Excellency the President reminded us, “Progress is not merely about enhancing what already exists but advancing towards what will be. Let us move forward with determination, unity and a shared commitment to building a stronger, more resilient and more prosperous Fiji. May God bless Fiji.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge His Excellency the President's Address delivered at the Opening of Parliament. For years, when FijiFirst was in government, the honourable Members on the other side relentlessly questioned, “Who wrote the President's speech?” And now, in a shocking U-turn, the same individuals have crafted a speech desperately trying to conceal their Government's total failure to lead this country. Unfortunately, the Coalition Government has failed to even write a speech among a growing list of failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you analyse His Excellency the President's Address, he covered a number of issues and topics, it was wide ranging, and therefore, it gives opportunity for the Opposition to speak generally on the subjects. Again, as a responsible Opposition, we need to conduct a SWAT analysis understanding the strength or weaknesses so that the Government on the other side can improve their performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the speech painted an overly optimistic picture of the socio-economic situation, but the reality faced by the people tells a completely different story. Here is the reality under this Coalition rule:

- (1) Crime has surged, but the honourable Minister of Finance says, people are exaggerating.
- (2) The cost of living has skyrocketed.
- (3) Drugs have infiltrated every fabric of society.
- (4) HIV cases have increased exponentially.
- (5) Our young people are leaving at unprecedented rates.
- (6) Hospitals, which were always challenging to manage, but were once run effectively, are now in complete shambles. Again, FijiFirst is blamed for the generator not working; there is no backup generator. We are also blamed for the elevator, and for the shortage of medicine. When will this blaming end?
- (7) Our Judicial Services Commission has become a matter in which serious questions are being raised.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister has lost control, both of his Ministers and the country. The only thing the Coalition Government has done about our ailing country is:

- (1) Host expensive cocktail events to thank non-performing ministers.

- (2) Take overseas trips, which is meant for civil servants.
- (3) Hold endless meetings in expensive hotels with no action – of course, their favourite line is, blame FijiFirst to cover their incompetencies.
- (4) All they have done is cut ribbons for projects started by FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now their supporters are saying that this Government has done nothing. Their own supporters are begging them to stop blaming FijiFirst and deliver their election promises. I do not think they can. Seriously, we have seen monthly meetings since this Government was sworn in, all discussing the need for rehabilitation centres, yet we are still waiting for a single one that could easily be funded by the cost of just one overseas trip the honourable Prime Minister took recently.

At some point, the Coalition will have to stop cutting ribbons for projects commissioned by FijiFirst and do something of their own. His Excellency the President described this Parliament as a “House of hope, a beacon of progress and a symbol of democratic spirit, where ideas flourish and representatives champion the voices of the people who elected them. But what hope can the people have when this Government systematically suppresses debate, evades accountability and undermines transparency?

For the past two years, we have witnessed how this Government manipulates parliamentary processes. It silences critical questions of public interest by using its majority in the Business Committee, before these questions even reach the floor of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kumar, I am just going back because I think, in the beginning, you tried to justify where you are going now by making a general statement. In that respect, I recognised that honourable Koroilavesau had made a general statement but specifically referring to the general statement of the President in his opening Address in which he touched on the moral as well as the ethical dimensions of the Members. That, I allowed because it was specifically qualified by his reference to His Excellency's general statement at the beginning of his Address. I think every Member knew he went to some length in that regard.

What you are trying to do now, my interpretation of what you are trying to do, is to do the same as honourable Koroilavesau but not strictly within the bounds of what he had done on the interpretation of the President's opening general statement on that regard. I am just asking you, “please go to the gist of your statement on the various initiatives I was talking about, or you can generalise in a sense that you were referring specifically to certain issues that had been raised by the President. Thank you and you may continue.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had made reference to the President's Address in particular where he is talking about the House of hope and specifically he talked about democratic spirit that needs to be maintained, where he talked about beacon of progress, how can we make progress in this House if we not given that opportunity to speak. That is the point that I am trying to raise. It is very much in line with what His Excellency the President said. There is nothing that I have come up with which is outside the context.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 62 – Prohibited References. The honourable Member earlier on also said that the government was manipulating the Parliament. That is bringing disrepute to the former Speaker who is now His Excellency the President, it also means Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is controlled, managed, presided by the honourable Speaker. The Government does not manipulate, Government brings an agenda to Parliament. I think the honourable Member should refrain from saying, in fact, this is a government that has made this Parliament more open, more democratic, more friendly.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the Standing Order you are referring to is?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 62(1) and I quote, "When speaking a member must not impute improper motives to any other member."

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I get your reference, honourable Deputy Prime Minister. In that respect, I would ask the honourable Member to desist from that reference and that particular statement be struck off from the record.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker Sir. I am still on the House of hope, and I am talking about the facts, absolute facts, nothing else but the facts.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What is happening in the House?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last budget session, this Government slashed debate time from twenty to fifteen minutes, that is a fact. We were not given an opportunity to debate on the policies, some of the economic strategies that the Government introduced. Why I am raising it now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because it gives us the opportunity to improve the system, that is what we all want. We all want the system to improve, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most alarming developments we have seen in this House is the introduction and I have mentioned it earlier, the roll call voting system which is a blatant departure from a secret ballot process, and this is unconstitutional; we need to improve on that. This directly undermines Section 23(3)(b) of our Constitution which guarantees every citizen the right to vote by secret ballot in elections and referendums.

By stripping Members of Parliament off their ability to vote freely, this Government has created an environment of intimidation and political coercion. Calling it a mere "procedural amendment" does not change the fact that it is unconstitutional and a direct assault on democratic principles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a true House of hope does not silence the Opposition. It does not twist the rules to tighten control. It also does not block questions that are essential to hold the government accountable and that is why there is a Opposition in a Parliament.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the His Excellency the President spoke of a vision where "we all rise, we all prosper, and we all contribute to a nation that flourishes for generations to come", the exact quote from His Excellency's Speech. What a noble thought. I think we all should work towards that. But let us be clear, does this Government genuinely give all Fijians with an equal opportunity to rise and prosper?

The reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is starkly different. This Government preaches unity but practices blatant favouritism. Merit-based recruitment is only on the paper. Top jobs are no longer awarded to the best and brightest, but to political loyalists.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just look at the appointments to our Diplomatic Missions, Statutory Boards, Advisory Councillors and Special Administrators! These are failed candidates from PAP, SODELPA and NFP.

Equal opportunity is vanishing, Sir. Highly skilled professionals who had dedicated their lives to their fields are overlooked in favour of politically connected individuals. Public service appointments are shrouded in secrecy. Capable and qualified Fijians are being sidelined, simply because they do not fit the Government's political agenda and one has to just look at the DPP and FICAC Office.

Mr. Speaker Sir, how can we all rise and how can we all prosper when jobs and appointments are handed out based on who you know, not on what you know?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the His Excellency the President rightly pointed out that a nation's progress is not just about economic success, but the wellbeing of its people. Sir, what is the point of talking about economic growth when families cannot even afford food, medicine, and rent? Who is benefiting from this revenue collection? It is certainly not the –

- families drowning under the heavy 15 percent VAT burden;
- businesses forced to shut down or downsized due to skyrocketing cost of doing business and weak consumer demand;
- workers whose wages are falling behind with inflation, and I would like the honourable Minister of Finance, through you, Sir, to listen carefully; and
- elderly whose bus fare assistance was taken away at the age of 60; and (can you say that this is not correct?)
- hardworking Fijians whose savings under \$1,000 are now hit with the Resident Withholding Tax.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, Mr. Speaker Sir, while this Government celebrates growth, its the ordinary people of Fiji who are left to bear the cost.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The honourable Minister of Finance defends his economic policies by claiming imported inflation is beyond their control. I agree with him, but let us be clear, when imported inflation is already high, the last thing a responsible government should not do is make the situation worse by increasing VAT, corporate tax and duties, and not even leaving the government fees and charges. And I only wish that the honourable Prime Minister was a little bit tough when he said that the VAT should not be increased, he should have maintained that.

By implementing these policies, this Government has further inflated the price, putting even more pressure on households and businesses. The outcome? It is the ordinary Fijians who are paying the price for the government's poor economic decisions.

Mr. Speaker Sir, a government that fails to acknowledge the hardships of its people cannot claim to be a 'People's Coalition' Government. The honourable Minister of Finance, in his defence,

often says that the Bainimarama-led Government introduced 15 percent VAT. Yes, Mr. Speaker Sir, but that was done when imported inflation was low, and Fiji was not dealing with the aftermath of once-in-a-century pandemic.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- In 2022, despite the challenges of COVID-19, Fiji moved swiftly to reopen borders and schools to restore normalcy. But by June 2023, in his very first budget, the honourable Minister of Finance raised VAT, duties, corporate taxes, and other fees and charges.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just one example, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What used to cost \$5 for a birth certificate, now costs more than \$11. This Government's actions are hurting the people, not helping them. The assistance once provided to market vendors, fishermen, taxi and minivan drivers, are all gone! Small and micro businesses that are the backbone of our economy, are left to struggle.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And we heard that, when we had our Standing Committee on Economic Affairs Meeting in Nasinu during one of the consultations. We heard these businesses sharing their stories. To counter the impact, the Government increased the social pension, but only to offset the VAT hike.

The honourable Minister of Finance boasts about the back-to-school grant, yet under the Bainimarama-led Government, every child received \$180. He added only one item—prescribed medicine - to the VAT-exempt list, ignoring the fact that prices of all VAT exempted items still went up due to higher freight, insurance, and other costs associated with the VAT increase.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the timing of these harsh austerity measures was utterly wrong. Fijians and businesses were still recovering from financial shock, and what this Government did, they chose to burden them even more. And what excuse does the Government give? Debt! We just heard.

They claim that they inherited an unsustainable debt burden. But let us talk facts again, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Since coming into power, the Coalition Government has borrowed more than \$1 billion, with no major disasters or pandemics or major projects.

The Government brags about a declining Debt-to-GDP ratio, but here is the reality. The Bainimarama-led Government left behind a resilient economy, ranked among the five fastest-growing economies in the world, and that is why you are able to achieve economic growth in 2023 and we went back to the pre-pandemic level.

As the economy naturally began to recover after our borders open, the debt-to-GDP ratio declined, and let me share this. For instance, in December 2022, the ratio stood at 90.7 percent, and just a month after this Government took office, it had dropped to 79.9 percent. The decline was not due to any fiscal discipline by this Government, it was the result of the momentum created by the Bainimarama-led Government's economic policies. That was what led to economic growth!

This Government tried to fool the public that the debt is unsustainable. However, the Economic Review Committee Report concluded that Fiji's debt is substantial, but manageable. And

I remember once, even the honourable Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation once said, “it is manageable.” So, I do not know why all these increases in direct taxes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the His Excellency the President's address mentioned, “improving the business environment.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, a strong economy needs strong institutions. Businesses will not thrive in a country where institutions lose their credibility, like we have seen with FICAC and the Office of the DPP. Investors will not take risks when there is uncertainty, high costs, excessive red tape, and a weak rule of law. Investors need to trust that their contracts and businesses are protected under the law, not dependent on who is in power.

When the Government calls a longstanding investor a “stooge of the past Government”, it creates hostility and sends a dangerous message to other potential investors. This kind of behaviour from the honourable Minister of Finance only destroys investor confidence and harms our economy.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Do not lie!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the His Excellency the President emphasised “that transformational leadership is key to nation-building—leadership that is visionary, ethical, and accountable; one that serves the people, not political ambition.” This Government has failed to embody that.

Instead of forward-thinking leadership, we are witnessing a Government focused on political survival, all at the expense of national progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people can see that certain Ministers in this Government are not delivering. The honourable Prime Minister himself has admitted that a Cabinet reshuffle is needed, yet he chose to keep the same underperforming Ministers, while adding seven more and calling it a Cabinet reshuffle.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, now the honourable Prime Minister is telling the public that he cannot deliver on his Election promises because that the three-Party Coalition, now we have to call it four-Party Coalition. What a weak excuse, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

The reality is that the real power in this Coalition lies with G9, not SODELPA or NFP. This kind of political manoeuvring is not in the best interest of nation building.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency President spoke of transformational leaders having compassion, empathy, equality, and inclusivity, but -

- where is that in Government policies?
- where is the compassion when families struggle to put food on the table?
- where is compassion for 60-year-olds who are no longer given bus fare subsidies?
- where is the empathy when small businesses struggle with the rising costs of high taxes?

- where is the equality when appointments are based on political loyalty, and not on merit?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a transformational leader puts the wellbeing of the people above all, not self-interest, political survival and consolidation of power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rather than implementing the change they promised during the Election, this Government has expanded its Cabinet to an astonishing 34 Ministers, 14 more than the past Government, with increased salaries and perks. Can you imagine what media would have done if the Bainimarama-led Government increased the number of Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers? Where are our political commentators in Fiji? Where is Richard Naidu?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the kind of leadership that will move our nation forward. If you want to understand true transformational leadership...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ... you must look at Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew - a Leader who lifted an entire nation out of poverty. He built a nation through discipline, meritocracy and hard work. The best and the brightest led the country, regardless of race or political ties. Public service appointments were based on competence, not connections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Singapore, Ministers are held to high ethical standards. What I can say about current Ministers in this Government, who can get away with unthinkable things? So, I acknowledge the Code of Conduct Bill which is going to be introduced in Parliament. At least, it will deal with unethical behaviour of our Ministers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has very few transformational leaders, who put the nation before politics, who made tough decisions for better Fiji. Two names stand out - Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Voreqe Bainimarama.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Unfortunately, I do not have much time, but let me tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Bainimarama-led Government modernised governance and created institutions like ACCF, Walesi, FRA, FICAC, WAF, Asset Fiji. And during his term, nine years of economic growth, GDP doubled from \$6 billion to nearly \$12 billion. Foreign reserves hit a record of \$3.6 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under his leadership, the telecommunications sector was deregulated to drive competition. The HFC Bank was established as Fiji's own bank after the SVT Government bankrupted NBF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the difference is clear, transformational leadership is about results, not empty talk or blame game. We built, we developed, we delivered. The Bainimarama-led Government had put Fijians first. Under this Government, what we know is, fill your pocket first, give excuses and consolidate power.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and God save Fiji from this Government.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, honourable Premila Kumar is our last speaker for today. We will continue with the next speakers tomorrow morning.

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE - FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purposes of Section 145(1) of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 131, I move:

That Parliament approves that the -

- (a) Government guarantee for the Fiji Development Bank borrowings for the 12-month period from 1st March, 2025 to 28th February, 2026, through the issuance of short and long-term bonds, promissory notes, term deposits, any Reserve Bank of Fiji financing facility and other short-term borrowings;
- (b) Government guarantee for a sum of \$190 million for the guarantee period; and
- (c) Bank pay a guarantee fee of 0.075 percent on the cumulative utilised guarantee credit.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think most honourable Members in this Parliament are familiar with Government guarantees. The Fiji Development Bank (FDB) is a very important institution. It was set up in 1966 to facilitate and stimulate the promotion and development of natural resources, transportation and other industries and enterprises in Fiji, and in the discharge of these functions, the Bank shall give special consideration and priority to the economic development of the rural and agriculture sectors of the economy of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not go into the details of the requirement. The Bank comes under the supervision of the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) and provides a six-monthly report to the Minister of Finance. Under the Act, there are provisions such as Section 61, 16(3) and under 62(1) of the Financial Management Act, the Government may guarantee the financial liability of any entity, in respect of a loan or otherwise, but only if the giving of the guarantee is approved by Parliament, hence, this guarantee motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025 Government guarantee request from the Bank is to:

- (1) continue the facilitation of Government's policy by lending to essential sectors of the economy, particularly resource-based sectors including agriculture; mining and quarrying; manufacturing; transport; communications; micro, small and micro enterprises; wholesale and retail; hotels; sustainable energy from fossils fuels to renewable sources and professional and business services which will assist the disadvantaged of the community to earn a decent living.
- (2) provide the Bank support so that it can lend to the resource-based sector, which will assist in the development of the agriculture sector.

- (3) provide finance and support the growth of Small Medium Enterprises and improve people's social and economic wellbeing by assisting them with their needs and making the correct development investments.
- (4) ensure that the Bank's borrowings are guaranteed by the Government, therefore, reducing the perceived risks associated with such borrowings. And given that the Government provides a guarantee, the Bank has a much better leeway in terms of negotiating the Bank's borrowing funds.
- (5) make the Bank's instruments more attractive to investors and it also reduces the cost of borrowing which can be passed on to the customers of the Bank.
- (6) Ensure that the Bank's proposed term deposits and RBF's Import Substitution and Export Finance Facility and any other RBF facilities guaranteed by the Government. This also builds investor confidence and helps the Bank to manage its liquidity position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of some details on the Bank's lending portfolio, the Bank's unaudited Financial Statements of 31st December, 2024, recorded a cumulative total loan portfolio of \$447.3 million, representing 8,502 accounts of which amounting to \$369 million were in the focus sector, and 969 accounts which amounts to \$78.25 million is in the non-focus sector, compared to \$482.73 million in 2023.

The total agriculture and SME on wholesale, retail, hotel and restaurant, Mr. Speaker, Sir, amounted to 68.86 percent of the total number of loan accounts as of 31st December, 2024, and out of that 68.86 percent, 32 percent were for the Agriculture Sector.

Women entrepreneurs also benefitted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, notably 2,903 loans were awarded to women, accounting for about 30.7 percent of the Bank's overall loan portfolio in both sectors - focus and non-focus sectors.

The overall asset base, Mr. Speaker, Sir, stood at \$529 million as at the financial year 2024, a 10.9 percent decrease when compared to \$594 million in 2023. While total liabilities declined to \$341 million at 17.13 percent decrease from \$411 million in 2023, with the decrease in total liabilities. Total shareholders' equity increased by 3.08 percent to \$887.85 million.

The Bank has total cash and cash equivalent of \$73.6 million, a decrease of 58.9 percent when compared to 2023. The decrease was attributed to the payment of the borrowing maturity during the year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and re-classification of short-term instruments for audit purposes.

Given the Bank's forecasted inflows which is only \$74.9 million during the proposed guarantee period, the Bank, therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, requires \$190 million in guarantee. And that is proposed to be raised through the issuance of bonds, promissory notes and short-term borrowings and any other RBF financing facility.

The Bank's current average lending, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is 5.57 percent, with the borrowing cost of 0.81 percent as of 31st December, 2024. Additionally, the Bank accommodates and delivers a variety of Government's socio-economic and directed lending policies and, therefore, requests that it continues to be assisted by the provision of Government guarantee.

As I have said, the Government guarantee allows the Bank to use these instruments in a more flexible way and also to be able to negotiate better borrowing terms from other institutions and, thereby, able to provide additional support to the customers.

The overall financial implication, I think this is important and the Parliament needs to be aware of this, as at 31st October, 2024, the total Government guarantee debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, stood at \$965.3 million, which amounts to an equivalent of 6.9 percent of GDP. So, adding this additional guarantee of \$190 million will increase the total Government guarantee exposure to \$1.2 billion, or 8.2 percent of GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we always say this that in the event of a default by the Bank, the Government will be liable for the utilised guaranteed borrowings of the Bank, but the good news is that in the past years, the Bank has never called on the Government to honour its guarantee, but the Bank continues to pay the guarantee promptly upon the utilisation of the guarantee. So, there is a good history with respect to the government guarantees that has always been given to the Fiji Development Bank and we know this from past experience as well.

Mr. Speaker, I want to just quickly, very briefly, not go into detail just highlight some of the strategic focus of FDB. We have a new Chief Executive Officer now. We had very good discussions with the CEO, with the board, with respect to the strategic focus of FDB. The Government will continue to work with the Bank to strengthen its reach in agriculture, SME, MSME sectors while improving its digital capacity.

The Bank strongly focuses on aligning its product to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the focus will also be driven from the Government's National Development Plan. I am told that the Bank is clearly now focused on delivering score mandate in terms of supporting our agriculture resource sectors, small and medium enterprises. The Bank will also continue to work with the agriculture sector and with the Ministry of Agriculture to modernise the agriculture sector through mechanization and boost its economic contribution considering the growth in the export demand for non-sugar agriculture produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has done its part. We have since 2023 provided for the first time subsidies to non-sugar crop sectors whereby we are providing subsidies for fertiliser and weedicide and that has produced good results. We have seen total production increased in various non-sugar growth sectors. This is second year for the Bank's approved 5-Year Strategic Plan, and as part of the plan, the Bank will continue to focus on these strategic areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the overall picture of the Bank's financial performance in 2024 shows that it is in sound financial health and it will continue to play a very pivotal role within the agriculture sector and other resource sectors and indeed the overall economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those presentation and description of what is happening in the Bank, I commend the motion to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion and I have a list of six speakers.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to support the motion before the House, to do with the increased guarantee limit to the Fiji Development Bank for \$190 million. Sir, if you look back at the history of the Fiji Development Bank, there has always been a vehicle of tremendous importance to the Fijian economy, from the days of the manufacturing when manufacturing was first brought into Fiji.

Some of the now large businesses in Fiji attest to the fact, that without the Fiji Development Bank, they perhaps would not be where they are today. And so as an instrument of economic development, as an instrument of economic empowerment, as an instrument that drags people out of

poverty, the Fiji Development Bank has over the years demonstrated quite adequately its ability to execute well and drive benefits to the people of Fiji.

In the Ministry of Trade, honourable Premila Kumar and honourable Faiyaz Koya will be quite familiar with this, the collaboration that happens between the Ministry of Trade and the Fiji Development Bank has been one that has proved fruitful to the MSMEs in Fiji. In particular, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just mention one particular funding arrangement or grant arrangement, which is called the Integrated Human Resource Development Programme (IHRDP). It is an arrangement that allows an applicants to get about two-thirds of their project cost from the Government and has to seek one-third as their contribution. From the very beginning, the Fiji Development Bank has stepped in to partner with the Ministry of Trade to actually allow, particularly the applicants who may not have equity to lend from the Fiji Development Bank and allow them to package this together to facilitate their business requirements.

I just thought I would share one in particular, and this is a village up in Navosa called Nakoro. There are prolific kava farmers in Navosa, and they decided because of an initiative by the previous government, to try and start pounding their *kava*. The previous government, through the German donation, has facilitated a solar plant up in Navosa. After a while the village of Nakoro formed a cooperative and decided, "Why not we pound our *kava* up in Navosa rather than sell the green *kava* to middlemen?" Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you wander up to the middle of Viti Levu right now, to Nakoro, you will see a processing centre and a pounding *kava* machine powered by solar.

This is the type of transformational opportunities that happen and we are starting to see and have also been seen by the previous government. In this particular case, it is quite important because it allows our resource owners to look at their resources and try and find a way of optimising it, commercialising it and turning it into more of an economic opportunity. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I speak about this motion, it comes from a very pragmatic sense that through this guarantee, more farmers will benefit, more small and medium enterprises will benefit, and more women of Fiji will benefit from the guarantee that we approve today.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the motion before the House and support the approval of this guarantee.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to support the motion that is before the floor of Parliament this afternoon. As alluded to by the honourable Minister of Finance, FDB is a very important institution, and since its establishment through the Act of 1966, it has come a long way. It is also pleasing to hear that its past performance has been healthy, and of course, we look forward for the continuation of that.

At first, I do acknowledge again the FDB Board of Directors and the newly appointed CEO, former Ambassador Filimone Waqabaca who was appointed on 15th January, 2025.

I will just focus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the initial focus as alluded to by the honourable Minister of Finance and, of course, to support again the plans of Government as alluded to by His Excellency the President on economic diversification, broadening our economic base and addressing issues such as unemployment, poverty, particularly in rural Fiji. Having served in rural Fiji as a Commissioner Northern, I know the benefits particularly for MSMEs. The Northern Development Programme, they benefited a lot from FDB, Mr. Speaker, Sir, particularly in how it assisted our farmers and those in the forestry and fisheries sectors as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course we fully understand that there are competing priorities in the various sectors, but I hope that there will be alignment to the macroeconomic policies of Government,

particularly with the resource-based sector. I know that when the current CEO used to be in his previous role with the Reserve Bank of Fiji, this is something that we discussed a lot in supporting.

Although it is always termed as high-risk, but with proper training, capacity development, we should be able to mitigate most of those risks. I would urge the management to work very closely with the officials, particularly with the Ministry of Finance, because as I have alluded to, the alignment is very important. I hope that the Office of National Planning or Strategic Planning will also monitor this very closely and play a more active role in ensuring that this comes into effect and of course serves the very purposes that it was designed for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, let me refer to His Excellency's Address, I talked about the review of these agro-based public enterprises;

- (1) Fiji Rice Limited;
- (2) Agro Marketing Authority;
- (3) Fiji Meat Industry Board;
- (4) Copra Millers Fiji Limited; and
- (5) Yaqara Pastoral Company Pte Limited.

I know the honourable Minister of Agriculture would agree with me that the most common challenge with these public enterprises is the issue of supply. I hope if we will assist applicants, particularly in the resource-based sector, such issues can be addressed in classical economics. The issue of land, labour and capital - factors of production, but today if we want to raise our economic performance to another level, let me suggest to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you add three to land, labour and capital, that is, science, technology and entrepreneurship. This is where the role of FDB becomes very important.

They need finance to elevate our performance to the next level so that we can improve our economic performance and see growth as well in Fiji. So, I hope that we will be able to use the services provided by FDB to full effect so that our communities can be impacted, and particularly as well, when we talk about the incidence of poverty in rural Fiji, I think now we will focus on planning, particularly in the respective geographical areas.

I have talked about President Xi Jinping's new concept, particularly with education. It focuses on specific areas, looking at the resources that are available and then come up with a package that will ensure that those who are assisted can contribute more to social and economic development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few remarks, our best wishes to the CEO and his Board of Directors, and we fully support the motion before the House.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in this august House in support of the FDB guarantee bill for a Government guarantee of \$190 million. I support the motion and perhaps outline some of the concerns that I have on the FDB.

The first one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is 62 percent of the FDB portfolio is allocated to agriculture. However, when we closely analyse the portfolio, 90 percent of the loans are provided to sugarcane farmers. You can see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is forfeiting the benefit that will be going out to other small-holder farmers. When the evidence is coming that the production is declining, perhaps we need to go into other sectors that have comparative advantage in this country.

I think the honourable Leader of the Opposition has raised some of these issues relating to invigorating agriculture in this country. That is because he was trying to do that as a former Minister. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to look into the other crops, such as root crops, vegetables, livestock, and

of course, *kava*, which is an upcoming crop in this country. The Prime Minister's Office was instrumental in the establishment of smallholder coffee farms in the highlands of Navosa and we have established some farmers there, working with the private sector - Bula Coffee.

A few years back, FDB initiated a value chain financing. The Fiji Development Bank Agricultural Value Chain Financing (AVCF) project which is designed to provide targeted financial support to farmers through the agricultural value chain, connecting them with guaranteed markets and by facilitating loans, specially tailored to different agricultural commodities like ginger, rice and dairy, thereby improving access to funding and boosting agricultural production in Fiji.

Essentially, the farmers can access loans with the assurance that their produce will be bought by established buyers. Mitigating market risks, these are the types of innovative approaches that I would ask the new management of FDB to look into. Where we have a specific buyer, and the loan is being provided to farmers and controlled by the buyers so that we can address and try to mitigate some of the risks relating to small-scale farmers, and why FDB also has also moved away from farmers is that most of the farmers are not paying back their loans.

Another area, that perhaps FDB should be looking into is fisheries. Previously there used to be a lot of support provided to fisheries in terms of loans. But I have noted for the last 10 years, fisheries has been a neglected sector, with very little support from FDB. Fiji's ocean area is 70 times larger than our land area. The country is made up of over 300 islands across the Pacific Ocean. The ocean area is more than 1.3 million square kilometres. And yet, we are not according the fisheries sector the priority that it should deserve.

We are importing most of our marine species, such as prawns, and enough attention is provided to formulating feed for prawns. I would call on the new management of FDB, maybe to prioritise this very important.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is MSMEs. There has been a lot of attention being given to MSMEs but not enough has been accorded to the management of those MSMEs. We have new institutions, such as Business Assistance Fiji (BAF). Perhaps, FDB should be working very closely with those institutions to provide them with the management and hand-holding which will achieve the outcome of successful businesses. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs met with the MSME Council a few weeks back and they were saying that there needs to be more synergy between FDB and those institutions, such as BAF.

Also, on tourism, that is an important sector too, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In the past, there has been quite a lot of seasons, particularly for rural backpacking. There is a big shortage now of hotels and Airbnb has become a promising area. We need to ask the new management of FDB to also look into the establishment of small backpackers, particularly in the rural areas. That is all from my side, Mr. Speaker., Sir, I would like to take this opportunity in supporting the motion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- First of all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say that we are actually supporting this particular motion before the House. I think it is actually important because it is a very important institution for Fiji, an institution for Fiji and its development to a modern nation state.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with what has been said earlier by the honourable Speakers – honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Assistant Minister, both honourable DPMs, I think everyone is on the same page with respect to this particular guarantee. But there are questions that probably need to be answered, a response that would come from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister himself.

I understand, in fact, the information that you passed on this morning, I understand that the increase in the guarantee is roughly round about \$16 million. Now, the questions that I would like to propose for the honourable Minister to respond, we all know, Sir, we are here to support the FDB and all that it actually undertakes. We all know that the mission of the FDB is to ensure that the rural sector and the SME sector is at the core of its business. With respect to the promotion of natural resources, transportation sector, other industries and enterprises, it has a big portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also in terms of its core activity, a special consideration must be given and prioritise it in terms of economic development of the rural and agriculture sectors that contribute. Why I emphasise this, Mr. Speaker, because we all heard it for many years now, not just this particular Government, previously also about the kind of diversification that is required in Fiji for us to move on and become a modern nation developed state and also to move away from such huge dependence on tourism.

Honourable Gavoka, will actually agree with me, Sir, that 40 percent of the GDP, wonderful in terms of statistics, et cetera, and what it actually gives the economy, but we have other industries. This is the institution that can lead the way whether it is a smaller scale or medium companies, et cetera, for us to make a better Fiji because we all know how difficult it can be in term of commercial banks.

I see from the numbers and the statistics that in terms of apportionment, even in the agriculture sector the FDB is actually behind in terms of the amount that is being given out by commercial banks. There are particular portions that are favourable to the FDB but the question as I said earlier is, in this extra guarantee, is there apportionment or what will the bank be doing in terms of, is it heading towards more commercial activity to ensure that it is profitable as it is always or are we looking at and in conjunction with the Ministry like Ministry for Trade, Ministry for Lands, Ministry for *iTaukei* Affairs, all of them, are we looking at actually seeing that how we can diversify and do more things?

I see the great figures that have come out of women entrepreneurs and in our experienced (mine and honourable Premila Kumar served with the Ministry of Trade) they seem to be doing a hell of a lot better than some of our male farmers. And testament to them, Sir, they have really done, and I think the joining the dot exercise, the handholding exercise that we are all engaged in, even when we were in government trying to get people to do these things has actually worked. I know the Ministry for Lands, we had actually managed to get some people involved in terms of getting new leases, et cetera.

The MSME sector, how much of that? It would be nice to hear from the honourable Minister whether it is a portion or what they are looking at or is there a concentration in a particular area. But one glaring question that I hope the honourable Minister can answer, is there a case also of the FDB bailing out non-performing loans from commercial institutions?

I again, that would be a fact check that the honourable Minister would have to do to let us know whether that is the case. I am not saying that some non-performing loans in commercial banks are good or bad customers. It just that it might fall by the wayside and FDB lifts them up intensively to a better entity. But I think these are the things that probably need to be disclosed by the honourable Minister to see if we can make head or tail of what it is.

In all reality, Sir, \$60 million increase gets chewed up very quickly if they manage to get all the money out of the bonds, et cetera. It is not a substantial amount of money. As I see, it is something that is needed for FDB to make it even more profitable. I see from the last annual reports that were done in 2024, it is done extremely well. The other thing also is what portion of it is actually, is it a dedicated portion that is actually going to be looking after the rural sector and the agricultural sector?

One of the things that I would really love for the honourable Minister to answer about is, has the bank even further de-risked its portfolio? Because I know it had done so in the 2024 Report, it had actually come out with a lot of de-risked and we put them in a better position. So, has it further de-risked itself?

In terms of what it had done in 2023, and the digital transformation also has actually helped and has this been passed on? It is a great opportunity, I know the Ministry of Trade would have been involved in it. We have done extremely well out there and if there are any numbers being crunched, it would be great to see how much economic development will happen out of all of this. I know it can be done and how much of it is part of the overall diversification process that actually happened.

As I have said earlier, Sir, I totally agree with what earlier speakers had said and just those simple questions honourable Minister, if we could just get some answers, if you have them. If you do not, I suppose you can pass them onto us at a later stage. I want to wish new Chief Executive Officer well; very well-known, he is a strong character and a very good man and also congratulations to the former CEO who has actually done well and made a profit for FDB. With those few words, I wholeheartedly support the motion before the House.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute in support of the motion moved by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Please allow me to also congratulate Mr. Filimone Waqabaca on his appointment as the Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Development Bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know about FDB since the 1960s, it has been synonymous with economic growth particularly for MSMEs from all sectors and walks of life. They have played an instrumental role in our economy and Fijians who want to start, invest and grow their businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we did last year in this House, the Government's guarantee will support our collective efforts by lending to essential sectors including tourism who are able to access finance with facilities that are developmental in nature. What FDB does as well through its programmes is allow certain resource-based sectors and Fijians to scale up to a commercial level such as the ginger loan facility. Through partnership, FDB also supports local handicraft makers directly supporting the tourism sector. The loans which are not only more accessible but flexible, and we have seen resorts, tours, eco-tourism projects and transport benefit.

There is also increasing support to women entrepreneurs and resource owners. I recall last year, their partnership with the Ministry of Trade saw to a truck and an excavator handed over to Vurabere Investment Pte. Limited and Tokatoka Namara Development Pte. Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I spoke today about the plan to develop tourism across the 14 provinces. Much of these will be small-scale - backpackers, Airbnb and homestay. Also, for tourism, there is a need to focus on the development of activities in tourism. The challenge for us going forward is that, there is not much that people do in this country except to enjoy the facilities of resorts. Fiji used to be marketed as sun, sand and sea destination but now people want to see more activities and we need to grow this outside of the resort areas and there are these needs development at local levels and FDB will be instrumental in funding some of these developments.

Not only the small-scale tourism projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB has also funded some of the bigger tourism projects in this country and of course we all remember, when Fiji Airways was in dire needs of fund during those difficult days, FDB came to the party together with the Asian Development Bank and Fiji National Provident Fund that helped Fiji Airways survive that difficult period. As we all know, Fiji Airways is now a very firm footing and thanks to the loans from those

financial institutions, including the FDB.

By offering this Government guarantee for bank borrowing, we ensure FDB can access funds needed to lend to businesses vital to a developing nation such as Fiji. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute and I fully support the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I thank all the honourable Members, the two honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Koya Minister and honourable Assistant Minister for their contribution. I think the sentiments expressed, I fully concur with it.

The FDB's role, I think in the diversification of our economy can be very critical. It was always intended that FDB will support diversification of the economy in different ways, particularly in the development of agriculture resource sectors. The honourable Leader of the Opposition talked about that alignment - science, technology and entrepreneurship which is a valid point.

Adding to that, Mr. Speaker, I think science, technology and entrepreneurship is very important given the impact of climate change on agriculture. In fact, we can no longer ignore technology and science in building climate resilience and agriculture. I think the FDB's role in terms of supporting new innovations in that area is going to be strategic because more and more, I know in the old days, in the 1980s when I was in FDB for a short while, they had schemes where they were providing very small loans. These were like unsecured loans. The difference between that time and now is the vagaries of the weather. It does not allow those kind of farmers to use and be able to service their small loans.

I think technology, entrepreneurship, and the use of science in building climate resilient agriculture is going to be very, very important. We have had very good discussions with the board, with the CEO and I think the focus of the FDB, quite rightfully, is going to be on diversification, on the focus sector and making sure that they support through the disbursements of loans, et cetera so that new and plant resilient agriculture techniques are used by the farmers.

Just on honourable Koya's question, I think that was a very valid question with respect to what happened, how the bank came out during COVID and they have increased their profitability compared to 2022 and 2023 from \$1.8 million, \$3.8 million to \$5.6 million in 2024. In answer to honourable Koya's question, this additional \$60 million is based on the total outlay for the guarantee period and based on the Bank's forecast of their outlay. For example, loan and equity disbursement during the guarantee period is about \$155 million. But repayment of borrowings that the Bank has done is about \$180 million. Operating cost including interest payment, et cetera, is about \$25 million and capital expenditure is about \$3 million. So, a decrease in Bank balance is about \$31 million.

They have not questioned this guarantee of an additional \$60 million for a particular target. I think what they are doing as part of their five-year strategy, and they are in the second year of their strategy, is to use the additional funding to support those focussed sectors, particularly the agriculture sector. So, a very quick answer to your question, honourable Koya, there is no specific policy to say, "this \$60 million is going to go to XYZ."

What they are saying is that this additional \$60 million, based on the forecast of the outlay and the financial position, this additional guarantee of \$60 million which takes into \$190 million as opposed to \$130 million in the last guarantee will allow the Bank time to recast and redevelop its strategy in terms of supporting the overall focus sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I would like to thank the former CEO, Mr. Saud Minam, for the good work that he did, he is now with the ADB, and we wish him well. I want to congratulate our new CEO, and the Board are working very carefully in looking at the second phase of the strategy for FDB. I am confident that FDB will play an important role in supporting the focussed area, particularly agriculture and resource sectors. I take honourable Tubuna's point, I think the focus now is on non-sugar crop sectors as part of the Government's own strategy. As I said earlier, we have now focused in supporting non-agricultural crop sectors through subsidies and fertiliser and weedicide, and that is already producing results.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the big issue that the farmers are now facing is the onslaught of unpredictable weather conditions and the traditional forms of agriculture, especially if you want to increase production on a bigger scale is hindered by the vagaries of the weather. Therefore, I think aligning the strategy of the FDB to support farmers to improve their technology, build entrepreneurship, and raise production is going to be a good way of enhancing production.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members, particularly the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Koya for their support to the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 6.34 p.m.