

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 1ST MAY, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 1ST MAY, 2025

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

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 30th April 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live broadcast on television and the internet.

PL100 students - University of the South Pacific

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming PL100 students from the University of the South Pacific. I welcome you to your Parliament. I hope that today's proceedings will provide some valuable insights on the workings of your Parliament.

Written Responses

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat received the written response from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to Written Question No. 11/2025, asked by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. The response has been conveyed to the honourable Leader of the Opposition and a copy uploaded on the Parliament website.

Back To Office Report - 150th Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly

For additional information of all honourable Members, the Back to Office Report for the 150th Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly which was held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which I, together with the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Naisa Tuinaceva had the privilege of attending on your behalf, is now available in the Library for your perusal and reference.

POINT OF ORDER

Breach of Standing Orders of Parliament

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I would like to raise a Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order – Standing Order?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Standing Order 74(1)(a) in terms of an alleged breach of Standing Orders or practice of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- That should refer you to another Standing Order which specifically refers to the breach. Which other Standing Order are you referring to?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, I am referring to the breach of practice of Parliament, which is in a debate in Parliament. We are to ensure that our debate is not misleading, not based on untruths or false expressions and that is a common practice in Parliament. That is a practice which upholds the integrity and the honour of Parliament.

I would like to raise this in the debate on the Review Report on the Biosecurity of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Reports yesterday. Honourable Rinesh Sharma knowingly expressed an untruth designed to mislead Parliament and the nation when he criticised the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism for exaggerating the visitor arrival figures by stating that those are exaggerated, including transits.

The Fiji Bureau of Statistics clearly defines visitor arrivals as the number of non-resident individuals entering Fiji for tourism or other purposes, excluding those who are merely in transit. My assertion, Sir, is that in our debates, we need to be careful not to express such misleading statements or untruths, as the public or other listeners in the nation, take what we say as based on truth and evidence. What was expressed yesterday, in my opinion, is a breach of the Standing Order which I had explained. From my suggestion or assertion, that needs to be withdrawn, and an apology issued.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have to be fully cognisant of all the details of your complaint. I will answer to the Point of Order in a written form at a later time.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 74(1)(a), similar to the Point of Order that was raised by honourable Tuisawau. I do not want to make it sound like honourable Rinesh Sharma but, again, I am referring to his contribution to the House yesterday, and I am referring to Standing Order 62(4)(a) which states, and I quote:

“It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use -

(a) offensive words against Parliament or another member....”

I am suggesting that what he said yesterday was offensive to the integrity of Parliament, when he mentioned in his contribution the discovery of 95 kilogrammes of drugs at Sydney Airport, insinuating that it came from Fiji when, in fact, it did not. Half of it came from Malaysia and half of it came from another country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was here yesterday when honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua had the opportunity to correct him. That would have been corrected straightaway. So, I am raising this Point

of Order so he can withdraw it, apologize to Parliament and apologise to the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Similarly, I will reserve my judgment to tomorrow, on the Point of Order raised by the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report on the Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance 2021 and 2022 Annual Reports

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I am pleased to present this review report on Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance Annual Reports for the years 2021 and 2022. This Report reflects the Committee's thorough examination of the insurance sector's performance, the regulatory framework and the effectiveness of consumer protection measures.

The insurance industry plays a critical role in safeguarding the economic wellbeing of individuals, their families and businesses, particularly in times of uncertainty and crisis. The reporting period was marred by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the prolonged effects of COVID-19, Fiji's insurance industry demonstrated resilience with the total industry assets increasing from \$2.3 billion in 2021 to \$2.5 billion in 2022, representing 9 percent of the gross assets of the financial system. The positive trends were also seen in the increase in gross premiums, the introduction of micro insurance products, the increase in owners' funds and the rise in new life insurance policies.

While the Committee commends the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) for its continued regulatory oversight, our review also identified key areas requiring urgent attention. These include the need to –

- modernise the Insurance Act 1998;
- address the increasing number of policy terminations due to surrenders and forfeitures linked to low consumer awareness; and
- poor use of digital platforms to enhance insurance literacy.

Another significant issue is the dual role of the RBF as both, a regulator and adjudicator of complaints, which may compromise public confidence. Another issue is the use of insurer-appointed assessors which erodes fairness and public trust. We hope that the findings and recommendations in this Report will contribute meaningfully to policy development and reinforce public trust in Fiji's insurance industry.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the RBF, Consumer Council of Fiji, Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC), Insurance Association of Fiji and other stakeholders, for their valuable insights. I also acknowledge the valuable contributions of my fellow Committee Members – honourable Premila Kumar, honourable Semi Koroilavesau, honourable Aliko Bia and honourable Shalen Kumar.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I present this Review Report to Parliament and request all Members of this august House to take note of the findings in this Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report on the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji's 2022-2023 Annual Report

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby presents to Parliament the Review Report on the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji's 2022-2023 Annual Report.

The Parliament of the Republic of Fiji is the legislative body of the country. It is based on the principles of the Westminster Parliamentary System and guided by the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji. The Parliament is a unicameral legislature comprising 51 members after the 2018 General Elections and 55 Members after the 2022 General Elections. Section 46(1) of the Constitution provides that the authority and power to make laws for the State is vested in Parliament and is exercised through the enactment of Bills and assented to by the President.

Parliament is the voice of the Fijian people, charged with passing laws to ensure public safety, promote economic opportunity, guarantee equality under the law, provide needed administrative services and functions, and ensure the education, health and welfare of all Fijian people. It is also responsible for overseeing the operations of the Government and holding it accountable.

The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence's review on the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2022-2023 Annual Report highlights significant institutional progress, alongside key operational challenges. Despite the review being outside the Committee's usual mandate, it undertook a comprehensive analysis through public submissions and inquired additional information from Parliament.

The Report reflects a productive legislative year. However, the Committee identified several ongoing issues, including delays in the tabling of referred annual reports, staffing constraints, infrastructure limitations such as office and meeting space shortages, and the need for regular job evaluations.

To address that, the Committee made 10 key recommendations, including -

- expanding accessibility services;
- introducing structured training schedules;
- formalising post-visit reporting; and
- implementing standard operating procedures.

The analysis concludes that while Parliament has shown resilience and adaptability, particularly in digital modernisation, structural reforms and institutional capacity-building are essential to enhance efficiency, accountability and public trust in Fiji's democratic processes.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Madam Secretary-General of Parliament and to all the staff for their unwavering support during the Committee's scrutinisation of this Annual Report. I thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for their efforts in compiling this bipartisan Report.

On behalf of the Committee, I hereby submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

MR. SPEAKER.- I hope the PL100 students are listening to the introduction of the Report by the honourable Chairperson. To put it in a nutshell, the establishment of the Parliament, its membership and its role.

Review Report on 14 Provincial Councils from 2013 to 2015 (Volumes 4, 5 and 6)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review being conducted by the Committee follows the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji on the Financial Statements for the 14 Provincial Councils from 31st December, 2013 to the year ended 31st December, 2015, Volumes 4-6. A total of 42 reports were audited from the collective Provincial Councils.

In view of the above, Standing Order 112(1)(b) provides powers to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to compel the production of documents or other materials or information as required for its proceedings and deliberations.

The Audit Report for Provincial Councils Volumes 4-6 are the Consolidated Reports from 2011 to 2018, for which modified audit opinions were issued on all the 42 financial statements with Disclaimer of Opinions - the worst level of qualification. In the Auditor-General's Report, this was attributed to matters such as limitation of scope, non-compliance of disclosure requirements and the nature of transactions.

That disclaimer of opinion is becoming a norm to the Provincial Councils, some municipal councils and even some of the Government agencies. It must be stopped and resolved now. We cannot allow such organisations and agencies to have such audit opinions. It reflects negatively on the organisations and their leaders.

When the Disclaimer of Opinion is given by the Office of the Auditor-General to a Provincial Council, in this case, to all of them, it means that either there are some elements of fraud and misuse of funds happening at the Provincial Councils or the leaders and supervisors are incompetent to put through the necessary processes, procedures, systems and competent staff, to ensure this does not happen again.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Disclaimer of Opinion was there from Volume 1 of the Auditor-General's Report on Provincial Councils which looked at Financial Statements from 2000 and were advised by the Office of the Auditor-General that the opinion exists as well in Volume 7, that is, accounts up to 2022, and possibly Volume 8, going forward to 2024.

The Committee's view is that organisations with this level of opinion should undergo special investigations or audits to even include forensic audits, and its leaders made to account or changed. We cannot allow this level of audit opinion to continue. We have to follow what the Ministry Local

Government has started, that is, carrying out forensic audit on some of the municipal councils that have disclaimer of opinions.

The Committee strongly encourages the iTaukei Affairs Board and Chairpersons of the 14 Provincial Councils to continue to adhere to the Auditor-General's recommendations in which they are advised to improve the timeliness and standards of their financial reports, as well as record all relevant notes to follow through with reports.

The Committee pleads that there be an ample sense of urgency and responsibility for the deficiencies that have been identified in the audit and to engage in necessary actions to rectify these matters. The clarifications provided to the Committee revealed that there are many Councils that have yet to implement the Auditor-General's past recommendations.

The Committee imparts on the respective members of the iTaukei Affairs Board and Provincial Councils the hope that there will continue to be a fervent drive to provide consistent and reliable services that empower and elevate the lives of our beloved citizens residing in all areas of Fiji, from the urban to the rural, informal and formal, and further into the interior and to far-reaching maritime zones of our provincial homelands.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Chief Executive Officer and the Acting Chief Executive Officer of the iTaukei Affairs Board for providing written responses on audit issues that were raised in Section 3 and 4 of the Report, and to the officers of the Auditor-General for providing an unprejudiced report on these issues.

I also wish to extend my appreciation to all the honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report namely - honourable Jovesa Vocea, honourable Naisa Tuinaceva, honourable Alvick Maharaj and honourable Hem Chand. On behalf of the Committee, I respectfully submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report - Savusavu Town Council 2014 and 2015 Annual Reports

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on the 2014 and 2015 Annual Reports of the Savusavu Town Council.

Municipal councils in Fiji operate under the Local Government Act 1972 and are mandated to provide essential services and facilities to their ratepayers through sound policy direction. In recent years, Special Administrators, along with their Chairs and administrative teams, have been entrusted with transforming these Councils into modern, agile and customer-focused organisations. This transformation is guided by each municipality's unique characteristics, be they related to lifestyle,

demographics or economic potential, and is supported by robust community plans and local economic development strategies.

The Savusavu Town Council is responsible for delivering a broad range of municipal services to an estimated population of 6,000 residents within the greater Savusavu area.

In line with the Committee's oversight responsibilities, the Council was initially scheduled to present its public submission at the Commissioner Northern's Conference Room on Thursday, 10th April, 2025. The Committee expressed its disappointment with the non-attendance of the invited Council officials at that session. Consequently, the Committee unanimously resolved to extend a second invitation to the Council's Chief Executive Officer and Special Administrators. The rescheduled public submission was successfully conducted at the Parliament Precinct in Suva on Wednesday, 24th April, 2025.

The Committee acknowledges and appreciates the Council's efforts in compiling and submitting its Annual Reports for 2014 and 2015. This Consolidated Review Report highlights key trends observed during the reporting period and presents 14 actionable recommendations for consideration.

I extend my gratitude to the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for their collaborative and bipartisan contributions to this Report.

On behalf of the Committee, Sir, I respectfully submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report - Ministry of Agriculture 2019-2022 Annual Reports

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured and privileged to present the Standing Committee's consolidated review of the Ministry of Agriculture's Annual Reports for the financial years 2019–2020, 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

The Standing Committee on Natural Resources, under Standing Order 38(2), is mandated by Parliament to scrutinise the Ministry's performance over the three years reporting periods. This review process included an in-depth analysis of the Ministry's Annual Reports, gathering of relevant data and information from stakeholders, validations of the annual reports' facts and figures, and supplementary information provided by the Research Unit of Parliament.

Also included in its oversight function, the Committee undertook a nine-day site visit to the Northern and Western regions of Fiji from Monday, 7th April, to Thursday, 17th April, 2025. This field mission was instrumental in providing firsthand insights into the implementation impact of the

Ministry's programmes. Through engagements with farmers, local officials and project implementers, the Committee noted both progress and persistent challenges in agricultural service delivery, infrastructure development and support mechanisms for rural communities.

The Committee acknowledges the statutory function of the Ministry which included promotion of food security, ensuring sustainable development in the non-sugar sector, facilitation of the private sector development and the acceleration of agriculture production diversification.

Key thematic areas that were notable during the Committee's review included promotion of food security, adoption of climate resilient agriculture, strengthening of extensive services and enhanced access to markets for smallholder farmers and the development of support services for the agriculture sector.

The Committee wishes to commend the Ministry for the overall performance and the achievement despite the challenges faced during COVID-19. An outstanding highlight of the Ministry was that it maintained its unqualified accounts by the Auditor-General for its last three financial reports. While the Committee acknowledges the commendable stride made by the Ministry particularly in the policy development and strategies planning, it also identifies areas requiring urgent attention.

The Committee is confident that the findings and recommendations presented in this report will support the Ministry in addressing these challenges and reinforcing its commitment to sustainable and inclusive agriculture development.

On behalf of the Committee, I extend my sincere appreciation to the Permanent Secretary of Agriculture and Waterways and his Ministry, stakeholders, farmers and development partners who contributed to this review process, especially those who participated during the site visits. Their insights were invaluable in enriching the Committee's understanding and guiding its recommendations.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, honourable Kalaveti Ravu as Deputy Chairperson, honourable Joseph Nand, honourable Vijay Nath and honourable Taito Rokomatu for their invaluable contributions throughout the review process for the Ministry of Agriculture's Annual Report. Your dedication, hard work and thoughtful insights have been instrumental in ensuring a comprehensive examination. On behalf of the Committee, I respectfully submit this report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

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

Question put

Motion agreed to

Review Report - Ministry of Fisheries 2021-2023 Annual Reports

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my honour to present on behalf of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources this review report for the Ministry of Fisheries' annual

reports for the 2021-2022, 2022-2023 financial years. These reports reflect an important period in the fisheries sector, the post COVID and recovery period; a time marked by both challenges and progress. The Committee undertook its oversight role with diligence, guided by the need to ensure transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability in the management of one of our country's most critical natural resources.

The review looked at the Ministry's administration, structure; budgetary allocation; programs and activities; policies; achievements and challenges for the years under review. A key component of our scrutiny was a nine-day site visit to parts of the Central, Western, and Northern regions, during which Members of the Committee engaged directly with stakeholders on the ground. These visits provided valuable insights into the lived realities of fishing communities, the operational capacities of regional fisheries offices, and the different pressures facing both marine and inland fisheries.

The Committee wishes to commend the overall performance and achievements of the Ministry of Fisheries during the review period. An outstanding highlight of the Ministry was that it maintained its unqualified audits for its last two financial reports from the Auditor-General.

In the Western Division the Committee noted encouraging developments in aquaculture initiatives and community-based fisheries management but also noted infrastructure challenges and the need for improved market access. In the North, the Committee understood the importance of supporting inland fisheries and marine aquaculture, particularly in adapting to the impacts of climate variability, declining stocks, and limited research support.

Even though there is a huge need to strengthen and narrow the gap in data collection, the Committee commended the Ministry of Fisheries for several positive strides, including monitoring and compliance systems enhancements, a growing commitment to data-driven decision-making, and an inclusive approach to sector development. However, the Committee also identified critical gaps such as delays in implementation of key policies, constraints in funding and staffing at the regional level, and the need for greater collaboration with local governance structures.

The Committee remains committed to constructive dialogue and oversight, working closely with the Ministry to ensure that fisheries policies are not only effectively implemented but are also inclusive, adaptive, and forward-looking. The findings and recommendations emerging from our scrutiny aims to contribute meaningfully to these objectives.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the executive management of the Ministry of Fisheries for their comprehensive submission and valuable input to the Committee. I also wish to acknowledge and thank the staff for their dedication throughout this process, to the Ministry for its cooperation, and to the fishers, processors, researchers, and local officials who welcomed us during our site visits and generously shared their perspectives. Together, we have a shared responsibility to safeguard the sustainability of our fisheries for current and future generations.

I thank the Committee Members, honourable Kalaveti Ravu (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Joseph Nand, honourable Vijay Nath, honourable Taito Rokomatu and former Deputy Chairperson honourable Sachida Nand for their active participation, insightful contributions and commitment throughout the process.

On behalf of the Committee, I respectfully submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. N.T. TUINABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection (will deliver two separate statements);
- (2) Minister for Environment and Climate Change; and
- (3) Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

The Ministers may speak for 20 minutes and after that, I will then invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will be no other debate.

Domestic Violence in Fiji

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, *ni sa yadra vinaka saka*.

This morning, I rise to discuss a very painful challenge plaguing our nation, that of domestic violence in our families. Over the weekend, we had three tragic deaths, two women lost their lives to partner violence. Sainimere Tuinasakea, a civil servant from Lagilagi Housing, and Karishma Chaudhury, from Kerebula in Nadi, who was eight months pregnant. I would like to offer my deepest condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones. Mr. Speaker, with your permission, may I ask that we observe a few moments of silence for those who lost their lives in domestic violence.

MR. SPEAKER.- I agree to the request of the honourable Minister. I would request for the Members of Parliament and those in the gallery to stand and observe a moment of silence in honour of the three women.

(The House observed a minute of silence))

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, one other victim was found severely injured at a flat, while two more women and a man were injured through a stabbing incident in Laucala Beach. Productive lives have been extinguished, and six children have lost the care of their parents and have been emotionally-scarred for life this past weekend. Each of these incidents was avoidable, Mr. Speaker. These are the cases of tragedy we know. Each day there are many cases of domestic violence and most go unreported.

Mr. Speaker, while the global average is one in every three women, two in three women in Fiji experience violence in the hands of their partners. In 2024, Dr. Lice Saurara Vaniqi undertook a study in Nadi, screening for domestic violence at the Nadi Maternity Antenatal Clinic. Between March and June 2024, 345 women attended the clinic and participated in the study. Of these, 247, that is 71.6 percent of women stated they had experienced domestic violence in their lifetime. Thirteen percent

experienced physical violence during pregnancy, Mr. Speaker. And husbands and partners were the most common perpetrators of this physical violence.

Domestic violence carries a significant economic cost, estimated at around, staggering \$300 million annually, that is 7 percent of Fiji's GDP. This amount includes medical services and related government services. Then, there is grief, fear and emotional scarring for life not only for the victims but also other members of the family involved. Often it is children who witness and suffer violence with their mothers.

According to Fiji Police statistics, the Western Division topped the numbers from 37 percent to 40 percent of all reported cases of domestic violence against women, and around 35 percent of cases of violence against children in the past five years. The Eastern Division reported around 17 percent to 18 percent, Northern Division around 11 percent and Central Division recorded 3.3 percent of all cases in 2024. These are not necessarily the true reflection, because many cases may be going unreported each year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is always criticism that Government is not doing enough to curb the situation. We have a national plan on prevention of domestic violence against women and girls. Government has acknowledged a high prevalence of gender-based violence, and is now focussing on strengthening tertiary, secondary and primary prevention approaches aiming to stop violence before it happens. Fiji has boldly called on out patriarchy as the root cause of violence.

This is our commitment to reviewing systems and structures that contributes to high rates of violence against women and children. It is also opportunity to harness the strength of social systems to bring about transformational change in the lived realities of women and girls. Fiji's National Action Plan (NAP) to prevent violence against women and girls launched in 2023, was developed in collaboration with our civil society organisations, women feminist groups and faith-based organisations using a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach with an emphasis on stopping violence before it starts.

Now, in its second year of implementation, the secretariat chaired by our Ministry with Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, House of Sarah and Diverse Voice and Action (DIVA) for Equality and the UNFPA is currently driving the implementation of the National Action Plan across seven prioritised settings including health, sports, faith settings, education, traditional and informal settings. The education and traditional settings have been very progressive. The Ministry of Education progressed work in mapping initiatives by building comprehensive social, emotional skills for healthy, non-violent, gender equal, respectful and safe relationships among primary and secondary schools, including the UNFPA's Family Life curriculum.

In our traditional setting, following a number of high-level dialogues with traditional leaders and the iTaukei Affairs, the Great Council of Chiefs Amendment Regulations 2024 effective in December 2024, now includes advocacy to address violence against women and children as one of the 12 strategic directions set for the Great Council of Chiefs. Under the traditional setting, traditional leaders have agreed to not only look at the prevalence of violence amongst the *iTaukei* within the traditional boundaries but also look at the *iTaukei* living in the informal settlements outside the traditional boundaries and strategising to bring about services and suitable approaches to prevent violence against women and children.

Our Ministry is reaching out to the informal settlements through the Rights, Empowerment and Cohesion Programme (REACH) Programme. We are setting up women's forums in districts starting with the Central and Western Divisions. The intention is to reach out to every community and assist in developing support groups and prevention committees to identify, de-escalate and prevent violence from happening.

In November last year, in collaboration with UNICEF, we engaged Dalberg Advisors to carry out a much-needed rapid attitude survey for the NAP. The focus of the survey is to identify and understand the attitudes and violence against women and children, and we are hoping to complete the survey by June this year.

The Government has put legislations in place to fund social protection and counselling through the NGOs. There are 24/7 national toll-free lines - 1560 and 1325. We have service delivery protocol for responding to gender-based violence. Police, judiciary, health professionals and social services have Standard Operating Procedures for inter-agency response. The service protocols are under review to include additional stakeholders as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these services are provided at the end of the cliff, when the violence has scarred lives already. We need to change attitudes around domestic violence and break down patriarchal structures around our society. The violence occurs in family and community settings and needs action from all segments of the society – our families, our elders, our faith-based organisations and men taking responsibility for their actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a pertinent question being asked by every woman in this country is - Why do two out of three men in this country think it is okay to mistreat their partners? When men are in argument with other men do they use violence? No. Then why do they use violence against someone who stands by them thick and thin? Why is it okay to break promises of love and care? How is it acceptable to breach trust of their loved ones to cause grief and anxiety in their partners and their children? How can we, as a society, justify such behaviour from our men? What can we do to hold abusive partners accountable? Do we call out our friends and family members we know are abusive to their family members? We need men not to be bystanders, but allies and call out this behaviour when they see this. Sir, I call on faith leaders and community leaders to create spaces to have these conversations with men; to promote respectful relationships and create awareness on how violent actions destroy relationships and emotionally and physically scar those who have placed the love and trust in these men.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is gut-wrenching to see some of the children in our state homes, who are victims of such incidences, completely displaced and lost in life. They do not have their parents or family members who take care or guide them in life. We owe it to our children to stop the carnage, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Today is Thursday, a day dedicated to Thursdays and black campaign, a global initiative supported by World Council of Churches to raise awareness and protest against violence and abuse against women and children. Let us do more than wearing of black every Thursday, let us work on changing attitudes and practices that enable family violence. We as a nation have to commit to zero tolerance for all forms of violence and I appeal to this House to faith leaders, to employers, to family elders to open these conversations and commit to zero tolerance to violence in our homes and in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have it within our powers to halt this malice from growing, if we commit to taking action. For those women who may be in abusive relationships help is available through our toll-free lines 1560 and 1325 that our government-funded helplines managed by Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and medical services specific respectively. I also request media and social media users to be sensitive in the way we speak about victims and their families. While we need to provide support, let us respect their need to grieve in privacy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, domestic violence leads to physical and psychological harm, financial instability and reduced productivity, impacting the overall wellbeing of Fijian communities. Addressing this issue is essential for promoting human rights, creating safer communities and

fostering sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government remains committed to preventing all forms of violence against women and girls through targeted policy action across sectors and government ministries. I urge all of us to work together to take responsibility to stop this carnage.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her very topical and very important statement. Honourable Members, given the time, we will now suspend proceedings for our morning break, and we will hear the response to the Minister's statement from the Leader of the Opposition upon resumption. Parliament will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.16 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members we will now hear from the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate on the response to the Ministerial Statement from the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection this morning.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with a heavy heart to address the devastating issue of domestic violence. A crisis that continues to claim lives and tear families apart across our beloved nation. We commend the honourable Minister for Women for her forthcoming Statement. Yes, as leaders, we must confront the deeper implications of this strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recent weeks we have witnessed horrifying incidents that underscore the toll that domestic violence takes on individual and families. Such cases remind us that domestic violence is not only a societal failure, it is a life and death matter. The social health and economic impacts of violence against women and girls are enormous and penetrate all levels and aspects of society.

The economic loss from women and girls who are unable to participate in the workforce due to management of the consequences of violence or being prevented from working, leads to a national loss in productivity. The cost to the economy to provide health, justice, counselling and other services is significant given the prevalence of violence against women and girls in Fiji.

Furthermore, the out-of-pocket costs that survivors and their loved ones spend on getting to safety, receiving services and rebuilding their lives can push survivors into further poverty or economic insecurity. Choosing between safety and food is not a choice a survivor should have to make. Violence not only affects survivors themselves, but the children who are exposed to it, their extended families, friends, work colleagues and ultimately the broader community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these tragedies do not occur in isolation. Economic hardship exacerbates the precious family space, driving home driving some towards destructive paths. The rising cost of living has caused many into impossible choices sacrificing basic needs to stretch their resources further. This relentless stress weakens both body and spirit, undermining individuals' capacity to cope.

Poor nutrition, insufficient access to healthcare and the strain of daily survival are not just personal burdens. They are societal problems that fuel domestic violence. As leaders, we must address these underlying factors. Policies aimed at alleviating financial strain such as subsidies for essential goods, affordable healthcare solutions and job creation are critical to fostering stability in our families and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must also strengthen education and support systems to help individuals and families manage stress and build resilience. Prevention and accountability must go hand in hand. Let us honour the lives lost by committing to meaningful action to eliminate domestic violence. Together let us strive for a Fiji where every family lives free from fear and violence and where hope replaces despair.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to humbly request all those who are listening to me please kindly inculcate the values of love, peace, truth, non-violence and right conduct in their children so that they become good human beings and follow the religion of humanity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission I would like to say a few words in Hindi.

Gandhi ji ka jo lok-priye kahawat hai, 'Ahinsa parmo dharm'. Yaane ki hinsa na karna param dharm hai. Kisi ko bhi kisi ko maarne-peatne ka koi adhikar nahi hai. Agar koi galat karta hai, toh wo

iski shikayat police mein kar sakte hai, lekin kanoon apne haath mein lena bahut galat hai. Kisi ke paas kisi ko bhi maarne-peatne ka adhikar nahi hai. Hinsa karne se bache, yahi hamara sandesh hai. Aur jo log hinsa ke shikaar hue hai aur is duniya mein nahi hai, unke prati hum bhao-purn se shridhanjali arpit karte hai.

[There is a very popular saying by Gandhi, and I quote: "Non-Violence should be the ultimate duty of any human being. This implies violence is immoral".]

Update on the Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation Session

HON. S. KIRAN.- Honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition and Members of Parliament, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to provide an update on the Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation that was hosted in Fiji earlier this month. At the Pacific Islands Women Leaders Meeting held in Suva in 2023, the Fiji Government had requested that the CEDAW Committee conduct its constructive dialogue in the Pacific.

Our proposal received endorsement from the Pacific Island Forum Leaders and led to the convening of the Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation Session in Suva from April 7th to 11th. The first time for the CEDAW Committee to conduct a country constructive dialogue away from the UN venue in Geneva. In fact, Mr. Speaker, taking the work of the CEDAW Committee away from Geneva and to the very people it is meant to serve has been the subject of much discussion at the international fora for many years and only became a reality in the Pacific region.

The Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation Session convened representatives from Fiji, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The Pacific CEDAW Technical Cooperation Session also provides the opportunity for governments of Fiji, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands to undertake the constructive dialogue with the CEDAW Committee in Suva making it a historic first for the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women or CEDAW in 1995. CEDAW is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women's and girls' equal rights. As an accountability mechanism, the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee have guided our national agenda for gender equality over the years.

In December 2024, Fiji submitted its sixth state report under CEDAW, using the simplified reporting procedure with Cabinet's endorsement. This process streamlined our engagement with the CEDAW Committee by directly responding to the list of issues prior to reporting received in November 2022.

Our report reflects any inclusive approach in cooperating inside from ministries and statutory bodies across sectors. Parallel to our official report, civil society organisations contributed independent shadow reports covering alternative perspectives and highlighting challenges. Both the state and shadow reports remain publicly available on the UN website.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji held its dialogue on 11th April engaging directly with the Committee of 18 experts, to assess compliance and challenges and identify areas for progress. Our Government has worked to integrate CEDAW's principles across all sectors, reinforcing that gender equality is not the

sole responsibility of the Ministry of Women, but a national priority. We worked across government ministries to collect valuable data, insights and policy actions to support our dialogue.

There was a lot to share, Mr. Speaker, from across the ministries. Various policies to empower women implemented across the Government in the last two years, including the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Programme 2025-2030, a whole-of-government transformative approach to gender mainstreaming, an expansion of PILOT that started in 2020. There are 53 programs currently running across ministries and departments, and the Ministry of Agriculture is a great leader in this regard and has gender budgeting incorporated in most of its programs and projects.

With its gender and agriculture policy, there has been increased focus on providing equality of funding opportunities, inputs and, tools to women. The number of women assisted increased by 28 percent, which equated to 39 percent of the total beneficiaries. The Ministry also has a database and dashboard for their gender mainstreaming projects. There has been progress made in Fiji Police Force women's leadership, as well as in Defence.

Under the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services' leadership, Fiji's first Maternal and Child Health Policy was endorsed in February 2025, aiming to deliver comprehensive services for mothers and children from conception to the child's fifth year. In 2024, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services initiated Standard Operating Procedures for cervical cancer, with the finalisation of the cervical cancer policy and plan for Fiji.

In education, recent assessments indicate Fiji's net enrolment rate in primary education is almost 100 percent. The net enrolment rate in secondary education of 85 percent is just under the NDP target of 86 percent. Adolescent girls are more likely than boys to transition from primary to secondary schools. Among children aged 14 to 18, 91 percent of girls are enrolled in secondary school. As shared by honourable Minister for Education yesterday, more women than men have been recipients of tertiary scholarships and loan schemes. Almost 55 percent of all those who graduate from our tertiary institutes are women, greatly improving the opportunities of employment. In June 2023, Fiji launched the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls, 2023-2028. I acknowledge the Government of Australia for its technical and financial assistance in the development and implementation plan for the next five years until 2028.

Fiji Government has also dedicated budget for the implementation of the plan. We are finalising the National Action Plan on Women's Economic Empowerment. The experts, Mr. Speaker, were particularly pleased with the work being carried out around technology-facilitated gender-based violence, which is a growing concern across the globe, and I would like to thank the honourable Manoa Kamikamica and his hard-working team for bringing us this far.

While educational outreach remains a cornerstone of the prevention strategy, Fiji recently acceded to the Council of Europe Budapest Convention, the only binding international instrument against cybercrime. Through the convention, Fiji is part of the Council of Europe Cybercrime Convention Committee, an Ai working group which is mandated to do a mapping study on cybercrime evidence in Ai. This will build capacity and enable us to address Ai-generated child abuse and exploitation materials.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji has been actively involved in negotiations of the UN Convention Against Cybercrime. This was successfully negotiated and is the first multilateral anti-crime treaty in over 20 years and harmonises child protection. The UN General Assembly adopted it on Christmas Eve 2024.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the ministers and ministries that are actively implementing the Institutional Capacity Development Initiative, which serves to integrate the aspirations, concerns, and interests of all Fijian women into sectoral policies and programmes. Our

national delegation included officials from our Ministry, Office of the Solicitor-General, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Employment, Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Climate Change, Ministry of Agriculture and the Fiji Police Force. These representatives actively answered questions in great detail as we defended our report for five hours, responding to a wide range of questions on access to justice, climate change, education, economic empowerment, women in leadership, gender-based violence, and access to health services.

The CEDAW Committee commended Fiji's transparency integrated reporting approach and institutional reforms. The Committee acknowledged our legal advancements on violence against women, trafficking in persons and child protection.

As Committee Chair, Nahla Haidar noted, "I feel like I am talking to a different country 10 years later. I have a feeling we are on a good track, sharpening the issues, identifying the problems and the constraints." I make this statement on the back of a tragic weekend where three lives were lost to domestic violence. So, while there has been a lot of progress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of work ahead to ensure there is dignity, equality and equity for women and girls across the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the various agencies that worked in partnership with the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection to host the Pacific CEDAW Session – the CROP agencies with strong leadership from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the University of the South Pacific; the UN agencies through UN Women, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for looking after all the guests that came.

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Government of Australia that provided very generous funding to make the whole event possible. I also thank the European Union for their support through GIZ. By June 2025, Fiji will receive the Committee's concluding observations. We view those recommendations as constructive guidance for accelerating national progress.

Apart from the three national constructive dialogues, there were also *talanoa* sessions held during the week. Some of the key sessions revolved around the agency and voices of young women, the role of civil society organisations and the enabling potential that our cultures hold for equality and empowerment of women. That was a key opportunity for the CEDAW Committee members from Geneva to hear directly from Pacific people on gender issues in our region and some of the innovative ways the region was progressing gender equality priorities. Our Ministry hosted regional counterparts for a breakfast *talanoa* for sharing of work in this space across the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains committed to gender equality, regional leadership and international collaboration. We will continue to strengthen institutional mechanisms, driving policy reforms and upholding women's rights at all levels of society.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Minister and congratulate her for successfully leading the Fijian delegation to the CEDAW review. Of course, we look forward to the recommendations from the Committee. We, on this side of the House, are equally committed to CEDAW, particularly Fiji being a signatory that consents to be bound by the Treaty when it came into force.

I will not try to repeat because of time limitations, on what the honourable Minister has stated, but at the same time, I echo my sentiments on how shocked and saddened we are by the news of the deaths during the weekend. We are still hopeful, particularly in this House, we have the power to change things, and I hope that we can assist all the agencies involved, given our role as representatives of the

people and, of course, in the legislations as well.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of the CSO's in addressing the issue of domestic violence. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has just started a surveillance study to ascertain how statistics in this area has changed since the first surveillance study was done, I believe, about 12 years ago.

I also join the honourable Minister in acknowledging our development partners, Australia and the European Union, for the financial assistance.

My colleague has responded, but let me just say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, in terms of the domestic violence issues, is the machinery that deals with domestic violence fit for purpose? Do the people who implement the law understand the cause of domestic violence? Are our national efforts coordinated or everyone is doing their own thing? Are the penalties appropriate? How are we engaging men and boys in this conversation? Those are the critical questions that can be answered through a public inquiry by Parliament. We need to do more as, parliamentarians, and the time is now, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wish to touch on a few issues as far as CEDAW is concerned. One, is education, which is so important, and that is the quickest way out of poverty. If we need to get people out of the poverty cycle, we need to empower them with the necessary knowledge and skills. Education needs to be supported. I am thankful that we are continuing in the efforts to provide education, particularly to our people.

During my term as a Minister – and I have seen this in the Ministries – I was shocked. In the Ministry of Agriculture, there are a lot of women in the livestock sector now – an area that used to be dominated by men. That is what education brings, and in other functions of the various Ministries. We need to support education. Our women, as per the statistics given by the Ministry of Education, and the honourable Minister this morning, it is encouraging to see the number of scholarships and those who are graduating, and this needs to be supported. We, the men, must support our women to get educated.

Second is on the economic empowerment, which is very, very important. I always remember the words of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) President. Unfortunately, the former IFAD representative, honourable Tubuna, is not here. In a meeting in Rome, the IFAD President stated, and I quote: “You develop a man, you develop an individual. You develop a woman, you develop a community.” We need to support all the initiatives to economically empower our women. Some of these domestic violences are related to the economic status of the families, and that is why we need to address that.

Lastly, on women in leadership, let us continue to support our women in leadership. A challenge for us, perhaps, is the culture, but that is why education is important. With more education, awareness and advocacy will address some of those issues. We need to also look at having more of our women in leadership, so all the best honourable Minister in your efforts.

Fiji's Ocean Update

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I take the floor to provide this august House with an update of Fiji's ocean commitments, governance and conservation efforts. Our ocean has shaped our national identity and culture, and it remains central to our economy and the livelihoods of our people. It also underpins the stability of our planet and future generations.

At the outset, I wish to sincerely thank the honourable Prime Minister for his steadfast leadership at the domestic, regional and international levels. As the Pacific political champion for

ocean, the honourable Prime Minister has remained an unwavering voice for the Pacific in global forums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like other Pacific nations, Fiji weaves traditional knowledge, national policies and international collaboration to strengthen ocean governance. As stewards of this vast and scarred realm, we bear a shared responsibility to ensure its health and resilience for generations to come. Allow me to provide a brief overview of our progress in advancing governance and protection of our oceans and its resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are currently undertaking a mid-term review of our National Oceans Policy. This review will ensure the policy evolves with our national priorities, global developments, and commitments, refining its clarity, intent, and effectiveness to sustainably manage our ocean resources. The commencement of Part 13 of the Climate Change Act titled, 'Oceans or climate change', provides the legal mandate for National Ocean Policy and empowers the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to coordinate national efforts to protect our oceans. This is a significant step forward, demonstrating Fiji's maturity and leadership on ocean governance.

Mr Speaker, Sir, one of our key priorities is progress towards achieving Fiji's 30 by 30 commitment to ocean protection. I understand this is also a question listed in today's Oder Paper and that is Question No. 57. I will be asked by honourable Koroilavesau but I will be comprehensively covering that question in this statement.

Fiji first made a Marine Protected Areas commitment in 2005 at the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference in Mauritius. Fiji affirmed its leadership role in maritime conservation in the region by being the first Pacific nation to set a national quantified target. That commitment was reiterated by SIDs Conference in Samoa in 2014, as well as reaffirmed at the 2017 and 2022 United Nations Oceans Conference. That commitment has been further articulated and clarified in the National Development Plan 2025-2029 and the vision 2050, recognising the major importance of ensuring that we manage our marine resources in ways that support rather than harm their productivity and sustainability.

As custodians of some of the most incredible marine ecosystem on the planet, we know the importance of this contribution to future generations of Fiji and beyond. That needs to be considered an investment rather than a sacrifice. The returns on this investment go far beyond economic alone, and together we can bring to fruition its holistic value.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, implementing our 30 by 30 commitment requires a unified approach and one that is grounded in the interests of not just our generations, but those yet to come. It cannot be achieved by any single ministry or government alone. True success demands collaboration and ambition between government agencies, industry, conservation organisation, development partners, local communities and most importantly, our natural resource owners.

I particularly acknowledge the ongoing close collaboration between the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, which remains central to these efforts. Indeed, without these perspectives, we cannot truly understand the potential benefit or the implications of different development, use and conservation options. Fiji's designation of its 30 by 30 MPA is one that is guided by the best available science to identify specific marine areas that are to be protected through robust management measures to achieve long-term sustainability of Fiji's maritime biological diversity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2005, the Fiji Government, through the Ministry of Fisheries, has undertaken key initiatives to advance this global, goal, including the:

- (1) collation of scientific information to identify key biodiversity areas that need protection;
- (2) development and implementation of science-based decisions regarding sustainable use of marine resources;
- (3) robust governance framework and legislation to ensure that enforcement of legal provisions are met and safeguard marine biodiversity;
- (4) setting up of designated Marine Protected Areas and reserves to boost species recruitment and population; and
- (5) ensuring that there are limits set for licences issued and quota set for commercial species being targeted.

Through multi-stakeholder engagement, Government achievement towards 30 by 30 include the following:

- (1) Designation of no-take areas which are of significant importance to the overall biodiversity, such as the Naiqoro Marine Reserve and the Kiuva Marine Reserve. These are two areas known for rich marine biodiversity and spawning sites.
- (2) Over 400 MPAs or Marine Managed Areas (MMAs) in Fiji, co-managed by resource owners, hotel establishments, civil society and through Government programmes.
- (3) Closure of all areas within our 30 nautical mile radius, protecting reef systems of Fiji's fisheries, waters from all commercial tuna vessels, designated through Offshore Fisheries Management Act 2012 and its 2014 Regulation.
- (4) 100 percent control through restrictive measures of all tuna activities within the water column it migrates in. These restrictions include vessel sites, gear types, number of hooks, type of hooks, and the mitigation methods to reduce incidental catches of key species such as turtles, rays, sharks, marine mammals and seabirds.
- (5) Other restrictions including protection of seamounts, turtle nesting sites and areas of rich biodiversity.

Over the past six months, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests have collaborated to intensify shared efforts to achieve Fiji's 30 by 30 goal through consultations, planning with the Government Ministries and key stakeholders.

A major milestone has been the National Dialogue on 30 by 30 which was held on 12th March and 13th March, 2025, which brought together a wide range of participants, including scientists, technical experts, conservation organisations, industrial representatives and community leaders to evaluate progress and set a way forward that successfully balanced economic enhancement, environmental stewardship and community resilience.

The National Dialogue has helped to build consensus and provide inputs that continue to help ensure the MPAD designation process can balance stakeholder interests and consider a range of management approaches. Methods considered for different zones range from fully protected no-take zones to areas where specific marine management requirements apply and multiple use areas that allow flexibility for different activities.

In the coming weeks, we will continue working with the Ministry of Fisheries and our primary stakeholders, especially the fishing industry, to reach consensus on the most effective pathway to deliver our 30 by 30 target. By valuing cultural and ecological systems that exist between and across the marine areas of Pacific nations, we create connectivity and collaboration that contribute to promoting the long-term peace and security cooperation we seek to build across the region. This also

personifies the collective contribution of the Pacific Blue Continent to planetary stability and the natural capital economies of scale that would secure the future of the last healthy blue lung of this planet.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, through Blue Prosperity Fiji and other partners, are in the process of developing this ocean finance mechanism. This mechanism which will be operationalised in the short to medium term will help to deploy dedicated and predictable support for the sustainable enhancement of our fishing industry, while also supporting coastal communities and sustainable ocean management practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 30 by 30 commitment has earned Fiji international recognition as an example of a bold action to turn ocean protection historic into tangible changes to governance. It has also attracted strong interest from development partners, philanthropic organisations, multilateral climate and ocean fund seeking support, our leadership and intent.

That has allowed Fiji the ability to tap into emerging ocean finance mechanism, climate adaptation funds and private sector partnership aimed at marine conservation, sustainable fisheries and community resilience, bringing both technical assistance and financial resources to support our ocean goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the upcoming 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC 3) in France this June will serve as the world's largest and most influential platform for advancing ocean action and growing the blue economy. We intend to use this opportunity to announce Fiji's ratification of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement or High Seas Treaty, a milestone that reinforces our global leadership in ocean conservation. By adopting this Agreement, Fiji is committing to the collaborative stewardship of global commons, balancing ecological protection with equitable resource use.

Fiji will also use this platform to champion the establishment of the Pacific Ocean as the Ocean of Peace. This reflects the honourable Prime Minister's integrated vision of peace, security, sustainable development and climate resilience, which has been welcomed and adopted by Pacific Islands leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to highlight Fiji's emerging ocean priorities:

- (1) The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change is leading the development of Blue Economy Framework to guide the sustainable development of our ocean-based economy, ensuring economic prosperity, social equity and marine ecosystem protection. This initiative is in collaboration with several Ministries and partners and will be critical to further our understanding of the cultural, economic and social investment required to sustain our ocean ecosystems.
- (2) The Fiji Government has submitted a US\$4 million proposal to the Bezos Earth Fund through the Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity (UBPP) initiative. This grant will strengthen our Marine Protected Areas network, unlock new finance and accelerate the delivery of a nature-positive blue economy. Through this funding, we also aim to design a fit-for-purpose financing facility which can scale community led ocean-based initiatives.
- (3) The Ministry has also made significant progress in developing a comprehensive Marine Spatial Planning Framework, in partnership with the Blue Prosperity Fiji and UNESCO through the Marine Spatial Planning Global 2.0 Project.
- (4) Fiji is establishing a national Ocean Accounting System to holistically quantify the true value of the economic, social and environmental contribution of our oceans. Last month, I had the

honour of signing the Oceans Account Pledge in Costa Rica, reinforcing our commitment to advancing ocean accounts by 2030.

Furthermore, I am pleased to announce that Fiji's Permanent Secretary for Environment and Climate Change, Dr. Sivendra Michael, has been appointed as a Co-Facilitator of the UNFCCC Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue 2025-2026, alongside Brazil - the incoming COP30 Presidency. This appointment will further elevate the ocean climate biodiversity nexus on the international stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also ratified the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies which targets harmful subsidies that deplete fish stocks and supports our fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Another national priority is delineating Fiji's marine boundaries to safeguard our sovereignty, improve marine domain awareness and enable sustainable marine resources management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we prepare for UNOC3, Fiji has established a National Oceans Technical Working Group and an Informal UNOC3 Taskforce to:

- (1) provide inputs into zero draft of the UNOC3 political declaration.
- (2) validate progress against Fiji's voluntary commitments.
- (3) review national progress for SDG14, that is, Life below Water.
- (4) prepare for ocean action panels where Fiji will champion Thematic Area 9 - Promoting Sustainable Food Promotion, Poverty Eradication and Food Security.
- (5) coordinate sides events Fiji will co-host during the conference.

At UNOC3, Fiji will continue pushing for action beyond political declaration towards measurable and impactful outcomes. Our people depend on both, our domestic efforts and our international action, to secure a healthy, resilient and productive ocean for generations to come.

Let us, together, uphold our solemn promise to our people - our people of today and the generations to come, to protect the ocean and, through it, safeguard the spirit of our island nation and the rights of the people in perpetuity.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, let me thank the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change for providing an update on Fiji's Ocean Governance and preparations for the third United Nations Ocean Conference to be held this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the interest of time, I will restrict myself to the subject that was given in the synopsis this morning and if I have spare time, I will then be able to contribute to the 30 by 30 as alluded to by the honourable Minister. The first Ocean Conference was held in New York in 2017. Fiji and the Government of Sweden co-hosted the Ocean Conference. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are very well aware of, Fiji was instrumental in the establishment of Ocean Conference at the UN and also in the inclusion of oceans as a sustainable development goal, SDG14.

Ocean has cross-cutting issues with the Ministry of Transport, and the honourable Minister for Public Works and Transport has alluded on the energy efficiency in the maritime transport and also the honourable Minister for Fisheries and her efforts to balance sustainable fishing and the economic reality that fisheries bring to the economic wellbeing of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to salute Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Peter Thomson, for his efforts to bring ocean as an area of concern and be included as SDG14, highlighting the importance of ocean to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) or what I refer

to as large ocean island States. Ambassador Thomson became the first UN Special Envoy on Oceans, to recognise his contribution to ocean and the Oceans Conference which has been declared, as I have already alluded to, as SDG14.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SDG14 basically states that it is to conserve the sustainability use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. I urge the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change to develop acceleration actions and mobilise all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean.

The honourable Minister has also touched on the 30 by 30 which is basically a commitment by Fiji to declare 30 percent of our ocean by 2030. I had raised a question today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I was called by NGOs to a meeting to brief them on the efforts that Fiji had contributed to, in trying to come to a declaration of the 30 by 30 during my term as Minister for Fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your indulgence, allow me to speak briefly on the discussion with stakeholders. In brief, 30 percent can be achieved by reserving the areas of our tuna fisheries, declare the Southern Ocean and areas that our tuna fisheries fleet do not use. Declare the depth that is not used by longline fishermen who catch tuna. I think the honourable Minister for Fisheries knows this very well. This is an area of expertise which is a depth of around about 200 meters. We can reserve the depth before that and depth below that. That will be included as our NPA.

We can declare the Southern Ocean which does not really have much tuna, in the migratory pattern after they have come through our EEZ. Fiji's ocean is already declared a marine managed space. With negotiations and consultations with stakeholders, we will be able to reach 30 percent by 2030.

Nabavatu Village Relocation Project

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, citizens of Fiji listening or watching the Parliament proceedings via the internet; *ni sa bula vinaka saka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to briefly inform this House on the progress of the Nabavatu Village Relocation Project at Nabavatu, Dreketi, Macuata. They have been living in tents since *TC Ana* and in my substantive contribution today, I am going to briefly inform the House on the progress of the project.

The four main phases for the relocation project include:

- (1) Phase 1 - civil works, drainage, road and water access.
- (2) Phase 2 - construction phase, which involves the building of houses, installation of water reticulation systems and connection of the power supply to the main EFL grid.
- (3) Phase 3 - finishing phase, includes the construction of footpaths, footbridges within the Community.
- (4) Phase 4 - monitoring phase is whereby engineers will review all construction to ensure that it is adhered to plan and all the building standards.

On the progress made to date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil and drainage works, as well as land clearing had progressed significantly during the course of the last 12 months which paved the way to the next phase for construction. Civil works continue at the site for the upgrade of road access with 80 percent completion. The Public Works Department is expected to complete the works by end of May 2025.

Mr. Speaker Sir, earlier this year, a company called Engineering Express Limited was awarded the tender for the construction of 37 houses. The construction work began at the end of last month, following contract signing and the other necessary project management and administration works that needed to be set up. These are to be completed by the end of this year.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry continues to be engaged with communities for the issuance of free logging licences for timber logged from their land. This is to assist them in the procurement of building materials. Two landowning units - *Mataqali Carakoro* and *Mataqali Uluitoga*, have consented for the free issue licence, whilst negotiations are still continuing with the four landowning units, whose members require it to be relocated to the new village site. The logging activity in these areas is currently being undertaken by Gold Hold Timber, who has received the free issue licence, and is supervised by the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests and the iTaukei Land Trust Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the building materials procured are to assist in the building of an evacuation centre and church building for the relocated community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, through the Office of the Commissioner Northern Division, continues to work with NGOs and other stakeholders in assisting the community with social projects and empowerment training. This is to assist and equip the community with preparation before moving to their permanent relocation homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continues to provide assistance through the provision of WASH kits, family kits and early childhood kit to the community. In addition, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Fiji Red Cross also provided assistance in the form of non-food items such as tarpaulins and hygiene kits, to the village of Nabavatu. These organisations work in collaboration with the Commissioner Northern's Office, the Macuata Provincial Office, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also assists the community with the payment of their water bills for the time being in their current location, which is in an average of \$7,000 per annum, since the villagers have been relocated to the existing temporary site at the Dreketi Assemblies of God Church compound.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to better support the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change for planned relocation programmes, my Ministry has established a Relocation Unit to coordinate these works with the Divisional Commissioner's Office. The Unit, together with the National Disaster Risk Management Office, will work closely with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has already confirmed that that will have to go through a screening process for finalisation and submitted to Cabinet for a decision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must emphasise that whilst relocation will be a last resort, it may be inevitable to some vulnerable communities. We all have a collective responsibility to work with our communities to be adaptable and to accept change where it is necessary, especially to pave the way for our children to live in safe and resilient communities in the future.

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

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to thank the honourable Minister for his statement on the relocation of Nabavatu Village. It is truly heartbreaking that the people of Nabavatu Village have to leave their ancestors' homes, a place where generations have lived, worked and preserved their identity. Moving away from this cherished land is an emotional and difficult

experience for anyone. The relocation was the instruction from the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, where the Department of Geological Services visited the site and saw multiple cracks, lines, which could lead to landslides and posing threats to the lives of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a background, on 27th December, 2020, Category 5 *TC Yasa* made a landfall on the island of Vanua Levu, with wind speeds up to 250 kilometres per hour. That year, Vanua Levu also experienced a significant rainfall between 283 millimetres to 355 millimetres per day. On average, normal rainfall is around 100 millimetres per month. Early in 2021, *TC Ana* had a direct impact on Fiji, especially in the Central and the Northern Divisions, and 2021 was the wettest year for Vanua Levu in 64 years of history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management facilitated, whereby, a committee was established that consisted of Government stakeholders. Just to name a few, the Department of Lands and Mineral Resources, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, led by Commissioner Northern's Office through the Assistant District Officer (ADO) Seaqqa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Nabavatu Village relocation was guided by the Planned Relocation Guideline (PRG), which provides a structured approach for relocating communities impacted by climate change and disaster. Of course, there were delays. The causes of delay – the honourable Minister knows very well – was the land issue, and of course where the State land was also involved. There were differences amongst the villagers and the community. It was very a difficult task, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I remember very well around *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, for month and a half I stayed in Labasa, Vanua Levu, assisting the Commissioner Northern's Office. It was very difficult and very emotional to discuss and talked with these communities, insisting them to move around. Of course, it was another challenge to take water because we need to take clean drinking water. We needed to have electricity connected, construct temporary shelter, et cetera. I remember the Ministry of Forests also offered a potable sawmill whereby the villagers could use to get timber.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, the long-term solution in finding the permanent site and housing took a lot of time. We set the groundwork, and I thank the honourable Minister for the update. This project is a very crucial one in prioritising the needs of people. This is not just moving home, it is about restoring dignity, security and hope to the families who have faced immense hardships. The journey has not been easy, but the result reminds us of what can be achieved through dedication and cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also take this opportunity to thank the donor partners who came in under the guidance of the then Minister and current Leader of the Opposition. We were able to fix, move and shake a lot of things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can talk for hours on this topic because *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* were Category 5 Cyclones, we can have a lot of explanation, but time restricts me, otherwise we would have discussed that longer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a little bit of diversion, if you go to Wailevu area, you will find that they had started planting rice there too. Under the former Minister for Disaster Management and current Leader of the Opposition, we did a lot of work, and I thank him wholeheartedly. I also thank the Commissioner Central's Office, where we were guided accordingly.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is the last Ministerial Statement for today. Please, kindly note that Oral Question No. 57 of 2025 will be dropped from the Order Paper as it has been addressed extensively by the Ministerial Statement from the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Extension and Construction of Railway Network (Question No. 49/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry update Parliament on the extension and construction of the railway network, as announced earlier?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for the opportunity to reply to honourable Pillay's question. However, this morning, as I was walking into Parliament, the honourable Leader of the Opposition said that I will be tarsealing all the cane access roads. I did not say that, I only suggested and mentioned that all the cane access roads overseas were tarsealed and honourable Maharaj do not take me wrong and do not campaign in the cane fields because that cane field politics has gone now. You can go politics but not cane fields.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by honourable Pillay regarding the extension and construction of railway network. I must highlight that this is not the first time the honourable Member has raised this issue. The same question was posed in September 2024, and I responded in detail, outlining the realities and the constraints surrounding this matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind the honourable Member and the Members of this august House, especially those sitting on the opposite side, that whilst these questions are valid, they should also come with a sense of responsibility and honesty. They were part of the government that held power for 16 years, but they did nothing to maintain and repair or organise the railway infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we inherited a broken system. The rail network had been left to deteriorate under the previous administration. Decisions were made to purchase trucks to discourage farmers from using the rail network and abandon the long-term investment that could have been made our transport system more cost effective and sustainable today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had informed the honourable Member through this august House nearly six months ago, we are in the process of carrying out a comprehensive feasibility study on the railway network. This is not just about drawing lines on a map, it involves technical assessment, economic remodelling, consultations with the stakeholders especially with the sugarcane farmers, the landowners and aligning with the modern transport standards.

The honourable Member must understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that infrastructure development, especially of this scale, does not happen in a matter of months. These are high impact decisions that must be backed up with proper evidence, planning and, most importantly, conducting the return of investment analysis. As I have said before, all the existing railway networks are outdated - only partially functional.

Of the original 482 kilometres of tram lines, only 384 kilometres are good to use. Majority of locomotives - the rail carts, are either obsolete or non-functional. These are not assets we can patch up or reuse. They require complete overhaul or replacement. Such locomotives are no longer available in the market and most of the parts are not available. We must not forget that many accidents that have happened in recent past whereby FSC personnel including the members of the public lost their lives under these locomotives.

Meanwhile rail transport has declined sharply from over 90 percent of deliveries in the past decades to just 6 percent in 2024. This is not just a reflection of ageing infrastructure, but also a loss of opportunities and misguided priorities from the past administration, especially luring FSC to invest in 117 lorries instead of upgrading the rail network system and infrastructure to reduce transport cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Government is taking a strategic phase approach starting where it matters most with our farmers. We are focused on restoring farmer confidence because without increased cane production, any investment in railway infrastructure will be economically unsound. As part of the approach of boosting farmer confidence this government has introduced targeted programmes just to name a few the farmers and incentive programmes which provides \$5 per tonne for every additional tonne a farmer supplies over the previous year's total. A manual labour subsidy of three to a petition which directly assists the farmers who rely on high labour or harvesting. The new farmers list is a programme which gives farmers security and confidence to stay on the land and keep producing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures are not symbolic, they are designed to address real challenges and stimulate increased cane production outputs across the country. We are positive that the results of these interventions will be seen in the coming seasons. Once production is restored to a sustainable level, we will have a stronger case and a solid foundation for making significant infrastructure investments, including the installation of new railway networks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government will not make hollow promises. We will not rush into high-cost benches without doing necessary groundwork. Our decisions will be data-driven, farmer-focused and financially responsible.

In conclusion, the honourable Member seems eager for quick announcements. Our approach is grounded with reality. We are building from the ground up - risk-prone trust, increased protection, and preparing infrastructure that can stand the test of time.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate keeps on saying 'hogwash'. It is not a hogwash, you are hogwash.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You were well aware of what is in the sugar industry before you came into Government. Yet, you made a lot of promises and you also made a lot of commitment. The farmers out there in Vanua Levu are still waiting for the promised rail network that you gave them, not only the rail network but the carts as well.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Your phased strategic approach does not address the issue. The question is, you made promises being aware of the issues in the sugar industry, when are you going to fulfil those promises, particularly to the farmers in Vanua Levu?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I must ask the honourable Opposition Leader to name the farmers who are questioning me. You gave a very generalised statement. I am a farmer. I should question myself first. It is a very effective cane farming industry in Vanua levu where we will increase cane production and all promises will be fulfilled provided we have enough cane. We have cassava, *duruka*, and we need cane.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard the repair and maintenance of railways. The farmers are also repairing their trucks and tractors, arranging manpower, repairing camps to prepare for the 2025 season. With the low payment in March of \$12 per tonne, my question is whether the Ministry of Sugar, through Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), will give a special payment to farmers to prepare for the 2025 season?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will leave that to the honourable Prime Minister down the line.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have heard from the honourable Minister is that over two years, a feasibility study is going on. He has also stated that 384 kilometres of railroad is usable. The question to the honourable Minister for Sugar is, how many kilometres of railroad has been repaired, from the 384 kilometres that is usable in those two years under his leadership?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said earlier, the current railway where there is a broken railway system, it is unequitable. We have to bring in new rails and tracks.

Again, for that, we said because green production in certain areas have dropped. FSC is putting data to us on whether we should continue with the rail system or we continue with the tracks? Those things are for FSC to decide, I do not decide as a Minister. Let the policies come from the Board and then let me know. That is it, I told you.

MR. SPEAKER.- You want to follow-up with a question, honourable Leader of the Opposition?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, Sir, if the honourable Minister wants names, we can go and collect the names, but this question is coming from the Wainikoro Sector, and he is very well aware of the promises that he made to the farmers in the Wainikoro Sector. I just simply ask the honourable Minister, are you going to fulfil those promises?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition would know this lady, I am sorry, I forgot her name, but she is a member of the Board of Directors of FSC, she comes from Wainikoro and she has not complained. So where do the complaints come from?

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of harvesting is going up, even cartage cost is going up. Even *sardar* these days are charging \$2.50 to \$3.50 per tonne and it is eating away the small profit the farmers are making. My question to the honourable Minister, are there any limitations to these expenses borne by the farmers?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very interesting to know that under the leadership of this honourable Prime Minister, \$105 per tonne is given. Now, *sardar* takes \$150 or \$250, it is a negotiation between the farmer and the *sardar*. We are here as a Government to give the best price, and if it means that *sardar* wants to work for free, he can work for free. If they want to charge \$2.50, then let the farmer negotiate. Do not bring that into our equation here.

MR. SPEAKER.- At least, we are keeping off the Vanua Levu roads. I think this is the right time for us to suspend our proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

Internet Connectivity in Vanua Levu
(Question No. 51/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament why despite the Government's repeated assurances of bridging the digital divide, internet connectivity in Vanua Levu remains challenging.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member is quite correct, I have been assuring the House of the impending roll out of 5 percent to 10 percent to the rest of Fiji. However, in order to understand that, I will just take a little step backwards, and try and understand what happened when we first came into Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we got into Government, the Ministry of Communications was absolutely gutted. The regulatory authority, Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF), for some reason, was not treated as seriously as what we are doing now. It was gutted, it had a few Government officials in there, very junior officials but no seniors, and so there was no real direction in that area.

Bearing in mind that this had existed for up to 16 years possibly, so, whilst we can and if it were up to me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is money in a Universal Service Fund, I would have just picked up the money and used it but it has laws and regulations, that we need to follow. In step one, we had to resource the Ministry and TAF better. Right now, we have the most qualified Boards in terms of the TAF, Chaired by Mr. David Eyre, who is a professional from Telecom Fiji; Mr. Tomasi Vakatora, a Chartered Accountant who is well versed in terms of telecommunications issues; Mrs. Annie Rogers, who is well known to Fiji, and she is a well-known technocrat and professional; and a few others.

The second step was to resource the Ministry of Communications. Now that is almost done, it took about 18 months to get it all in, including, a proper Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for TAF, so that is now all in place. The other side of the House always says, "Fix the problem". I can honestly say today that we are fixing this problem. That is why we were able to produce a very comprehensive Digital Strategy for Fiji. When we ask questions, particularly on that side of the House, I suggest we look in the mirror and understand the context in which we are moving on this side of the House. There are things to fix first, and then we can move.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 240 sites were gazetted by the other side of the House in terms of telecommunications, but they did nothing on those 240 sites. I can report today that probably in the month of May, there will be an announcement for the launch of 126 sites using Starlink to be deployed to remote communities. Honourable Nath, we have prioritised the maritime islands because they virtually have nothing. The first phase which we will get deployed essentially includes all the maritime islands of Lau, Lomaiviti and Kadavu. Once that is in place, we will roll out phase two in six months and that will include some sites from Vanua Levu and across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just not to put too fine a point on it in terms of trying to rebuild, Fiji's Telecommunications Act was enacted in 2008, and it is very outdated. Sometimes, I wonder what was that side of the House doing in the 16 years. Again, that is something we need to fix and make it relevant. That will happen before this term of Parliament is over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to provide some more context around what we are trying to do, we have all noticed in Fiji that Telecom has been investing in fibre optics in Vanua Levu. They have done done from Labasa to Seaqaqa, and now from Seaqaqa to Savusavu. Now that, that is in, we can look at that opportunity to leverage off some of the United Service Organisations (USO) initiatives we want to do. We could not say anything until that was in place. Quite apart from the planned rollout, there is an opportunity to leverage off the fibre optic cables by Telecom and get connectivity into Lekutu High School, which is just on the road, on the way round the coast. Those are some of the opportunities that you will see develop over the next 12 months to 24 months.

Apart from that – once I have a bit of time – there are also a few things that we are trying to do to ensure we maximise the penetration of telecommunications when we roll out. For example, the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport was talking about the Rural Electrification Initiative. They are going to power quite a few remote villages around Fiji. We are working very closely with the honourable Minister to ensure that when we roll out, we do not duplicate resource, therefore, increase the coverage. We are awaiting the plans from the Vualiku Project to come through, that will allow us to leverage off more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, it has taken a bit of time. One, we had to fix all the messes that we inherited from the other side, and two, we had to ensure that we do not duplicate resource and leverage off whatever else Government is doing, to ensure that when we start rolling out, we go as wide and as far as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what excites me is the fibre optics cable being deployed in the North. As we all know, 5G only works when there is fibre optics. Potentially, given the agricultural capacity in the North, we can leverage 5G in the North. If you recall from the Digital Strategy, we were saying, 50 percent penetration of 5G. These are not theoretical discussions, but we can penetrate through 5G. You also have a cable running down towards Korovou and coming around the King's Road that we can use as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I suppose that will probably be the gist of the answer to the question, but I hope in this answer, everyone understands that it is fine to say that we have been waiting for some time. One thing that I hope the other side of the House appreciates and the rest of Fiji is that we have inherited a lot of measures on this side of the House, so the priority has been to fix them first and then move. I hope once we start rolling out which is eminent, the other side of the House and particularly Fiji, can realise that we are moving, Mr. Speaker, but number one, fix the mess first.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind the honourable Deputy Prime Minister that we have been there, we have done it. Your favourite line of fixing all the messes that you inherited is not an excuse. It is no longer acceptable. It is not only maritime islands, we have places in Viti Levu, we have places in mainland Vanualevu that need this connection. It is important for agriculture, it is important for fisheries, it is important for the economic activities, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The question to the honourable Minister is, please, when will you get this done? The priority is our people. You have been doing a lot of overseas trips but fix this mess that you are doing.

MR. SPEAKER.- Let me explain how I look at it when you try to ask a question. You have to contextualise your question and that is put a brief background to what you are going to ask that will make sense to the question you are asking. That is why I will allow a brief outline of what you are going to ask, not a long outline, but just a brief one. I am not quite sure, I think I agree with the Deputy Prime Minister, that this is, at the end. Leader of the Opposition, can you ask your question now?

HON. I. B. SERUIRATU.- There are places in mainland Viti Levu.. Go to Tikina Vugalei in Tonia and these places, they do not have connectivity. Go to Navakasiga, Bua, and all these places, they do not have connectivity. It is not only the rural outer islands, we also have on the

mainland. When will you get that fixed?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, that is clear enough.

HON. M. S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I was hoping to provide a ministerial statement to give a broader picture. I will do that at the next meeting because this is an additional question, the question was on Vanua Levu. When the rollout started, Mr. Speaker, there were mandates given to TAF. what I can say is, because that side of the House did not have a proper regulatory authority, that is what happened. This is exactly what happened. You did not put any accountability on the telecommunications companies for 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, we are looking at the USO because that is a priority. A lot of the islands have nothing, so we are trying to start with that first. We have the other locations. What we have done is, very quietly, with the telecommunications companies, ask them to start looking at areas that they can deploy without having to touch the USO. I know for a fact that Vodafone is doing four towers this year and Digicel is doing six. I can get you the locations when I make my ministerial statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is happening, and we will progressively roll it out. One of the things they have said to us very clearly is the fact that they were reluctant to move because that side of the House never touched the universal service fund. We were deducting from them but not giving an opportunity for them to use it, so you are not using it. So that Mr. Speaker, is the truth. The other side of the House was talking too much and doing nothing.

Mr. Speaker, I agree with honourable Singh, if we had 16 years, the country would be in far better shape than what they gave us.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has a habit of making too big announcements when he speaks in Parliament. He keeps reminding us of 16 years.

HON. I.B SERUIRATU.- Tell him.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Can I just ask him, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- You have got the context now. You can ask the question.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes, 16 years. He should be called 'honourable Minister for 16 years'.

(Laughter)

When he made the announcement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was a big hoo-ha, Starlink, and everything else that he announced. When it does not happen, he comes into this House and blame us. He had already made the announcement. Did he make a study, he is blaming us, but did he make an assessment before he announced this? It cannot just be put on foundation or something that is not stable and unsteady.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think the question began with, did you make an announcement?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I never made a statement on the USO. But what I did was, when the questions were asked from the other side, I did make assurances that we were working on it. I can now happily report that we are at a point where we can actually deploy. I know they get very upset when we talk about the 16 years, but I suggest just own it and accept it. Like, take

it on the chin, you have criticised us...

(Chorus of interjection)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ...but remember this, you are comparing not even two and a half years with 16 years, right?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Eight years.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is absolute embarrassment.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very, very important topic. I request you to give us more chance to question him. Because we want to support the Digital Literacy Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we went to Drekeniwai Village (the honourable Prime Minister's village), in a Talanoa session from the floor came this question about connectivity. At that time, we requested the Ministry to find the black spot and we gave them 240 black spots.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is the question?

HON. V. NATH.- I got one minute. Listen. We gave them 240 spots with a black spot. I just went around Viti Levu, they are the worst, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than 240 places with a black spot. Even if you go to Nausori, as alluded by honourable Leader of the Opposition, more places with black spot. I am requesting the Deputy Prime Minister to tell us out of the 240 black spots, how many have you fixed?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- None.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Again, additional questions unrelated to the topic. But sometimes they do not listen to on the other side of the House. In fact, they were probably doing it for 16 years too.

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am saying is the 240 gazetted sites that were gazetted by them, which we are now doing something about, those are considered as remote communities under the Universal Service Fund regime. These are like isolated communities. Because of Starlink, it allowed us to accelerate things a lot better and faster. If we had come in and started spending the funds as soon as we got in, we would have not had the ability to assess Starlink and then go ahead.

The 240 sites, honourable Nath, are the island sites. I totally agree with you that there are black spots and brown spots within the areas that are covered currently by the two Telcos. What we are doing with them is having active conversations on where they can deploy towers straight away. Like I said, Vodafone is doing four this year, and I think Digicel is doing six. I will get the details for you when I do my Ministerial Statement.

As I have said before, please, accept the fact that you had destroyed the Telecommunication Authority of Fiji and also under-resource communications it has taken us a while to build it up. We have to go through budgetary justifications. All sorts of things that you did not do. And now we are trying to get up and running. So, by the time we come at the end of the year I can guarantee Mr.

Speaker, Sir, that 124 sites will be in and there will be a bit more improved coverage because of the good work the telecommunications is now doing with us because we are engaging actively with them.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just for some background let me put this 16 year nonsense to end once and for all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we gave them the fifth fastest growing economy in the world.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You can laugh as much as you want. We put the southern cross cable into Savusavu. What has happened is they keep harping on about the 16 years, is absolutely nonsense, is like the boy who cried wolf. Too long, for far too long you have been saying that, no one actually believes them.

MR. SPEAKER.- Your question now, honourable Koya you have done the context now.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I have done the context and I am sure he is listening. We have just come back from Vanua Levu, we have zero internet connectivity. The hotels are suffering. Zero.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The point here is your forensic examination of everything have you prioritised Vanua Levu for the thing to be fixed immediately in terms of the current existing services that need to be provided to every Fijian citizen living in Taveuni?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Koya for the question and again not listening. One other issues as soon as I got into government, one of the issues that the Telcom said is we really do not want to do anything outside what we are doing because you have not actually spent the universal services fee. What I did was, we started working together to try and get it going and now we are in a position where we can actually work together. We are about to issue contracts to the telcos, all three of them to actually deploy sites and then on top of that they have started looking at where else to go.

So, I am confident, and I agree with the honourable Koya for example like in my own area whilst we have good coverage around us, in some villages there is zero signals. And it is just because of the terrain and maybe the location of the initial sites of towers but had there been active telecommunication authority there would have been an ability to say and I quote, "...hey, you have not installed the right service, get it fixed".

Now we have an actual fully functional authority of telecommunication Mr. Speaker, Sir, which will manage some of these concerns. So, going forward, I suspect you will find improved coverage everywhere in Fiji because when the next licensing comes around we will make sure these KPIs are in, so that the telecommunications can deliver the commitments they made when they initially got the licences. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that answers the honourable Member's question.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind the honourable Minister that the biggest contribution FijiFirst ever did on which you are riding on is the deregulation of the telecom sector.

Understand that, based on that you are able to bring in Starlink which is not really functioning everywhere. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is related to poor internet connectivity. There are people who are paying for the service not delivered and as the Minister for consumer affairs as well, I would like to ask what is he doing to ensure that the internet connectivity is there and people are charged

correctly for the service that is delivered not when the service is not delivered and they charge fully for the service? What are you doing honourable Minister?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seemed to have meandered all the way from Vanua Levu to more contemporary questions, but I will answer it anyway in the spirit of good parliamentary accountability. I agree with honourable Premila Kumar. There is a need to actually look at proper coverage, like I said, now that the Telecommunication Authority is in place, who have appointed a CEO who is a former Telecom regulatory official. He is probably one of the four running experts in terms of regulatory issues in Fiji. And we are lucky to have him.

So, now that is in place, Mr. Speaker, he is starting to look at these sorts of issues, and again, working with the telcos to develop proper coverage. Because I was going to do a Ministerial Statement, I will try and make sure that is all covered. But it is important to note how we are organising telecommunications now in Fiji, we are setting it up because I have said in Parliament, we are going to be contributing 10 percent of GDP in the future.

So, Mr. Speaker, what that means is we need to set up well in terms of our regulatory environment, the legal environment so that we can capture some of these opportunities. In terms of billing as well we will look at that as well. I mean honourable Premila Kumar knows quite well the Consumer Council has a very capable CEO as well, who is monitoring all these issues. And if she has any specific complaints, I invite her to direct them to me or to the CEO, and we will address them. But I agree with the sentiments expressed that we need to make sure with the services there is also accountability so that one, we get good coverage and two, that the charges are appropriate and not, there is no overcharging or price gouging.

Benefits of MOU - Fiji and UAE
(Question No. 52/2025)

HON. L.D. TABUYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the short and long-term benefits of the Memorandum of Understanding signed recently between Fiji and the United Arab Emirates?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Tabuya. The MOU that was recently signed between, it was actually the Federation for UAE Chambers of Commerce and FCEF, which is the equivalent for Fiji, was done on 18th February, 2025 to establish collaboration between the two private sector advocates, if you like organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if anything, this is a precursor for deeper engagement in the future with the United Arab Emirates. There is already talk of high-level discussions in terms of private sector engagement which will only benefit our respective countries. It means that there will be more opportunities for trade and of course, the Honourable Prime Minister talked about the opportunities in terms of trade and the UAE was mentioned.

I have to say that this initiative was an initiative when we got into Government where there were already talks by the FijiFirst Government and we concluded the talks, so you know it is a wonderful way of beginning engagement with another country that has a lot to offer to Fiji. We only have to look at how the private sector is organised in Australia and New Zealand to see how effective that is. We do have a Fiji New Zealand, Fiji Australia Chamber of Commerce and likewise vice versa. These entities work together very closely to facilitate trade and business and investment. It is always fine sometimes to have the Government overlay, but unless the private sector is engaged, these things

do not work as well as they should. I guess, Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Tabuya for the question, but it is a major opportunity for us, and we are working and supporting MSAF to get this going with some other bilateral engagements to happen over the next 12 months between Fiji and the United Arab Emirates.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, I know this is the basis of the start of something. I know this may be a sore point, but will you be looking at including a proper official MOU between the two countries in areas such as employment of our tourism staff, our specialised teachers, et cetera? They are in big demand in that particular place. So a formal way of doing, so will we be looking at that particular avenue? It is a fantastic opportunity for some of our citizens in Fiji. As much as I know, the honourable Minister for Tourism will not like it, but we may include some of our tourism staff.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- There is a regional Economic Partnership Agreement currently under discussion. It is being addressed on a regional level because that is what the UAE preferred. Some of these economic discussions can perhaps make their way into that agreement, and so you know the devil is in the detail, of course. Once that discussion gets going, I am sure we will consult all the arms of Government widely, in terms of the economic partnership agreement. And ensure that Fiji's concerns are addressed. As you correctly pointed out, labour opportunities is one of them.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just a quick follow-up question. I am not sure, if you will be able to correct me, honourable Minister, in terms of our goods going across to them. Are we going to face any problems regarding tariffs, et cetera?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- For some of the guys going in, there are some tariffs imposed at the moment, from what I understand. But obviously when this comes under an economic partnership agreement, we can probably address some of these issues as well, directly. FIJI Water is well documented as a popular sort of water for the royal family in the United Arab Emirates. They do not drink anything else, apparently.

That is an opportunity on its own and then, of course, the other watering companies we have. Apart from that, the cosmetics is something that is of great interest there. I think also, you know, there are some other things in the works. We are working with the Ministry of Agriculture, and you probably will not believe this. One of that is actually goat export, but in very early stages, I should not say too much. But, Mr. Speaker, there are some opportunities around, and certainly, you know, we will address them as part of the Economic Partnership Agreement and also ensure that tariff levels are fair to both countries.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- May I have a question? Perhaps I should have just relayed this to the Honourable Deputy Prime Minister in private, because I have the opportunity now. Probably I speak on behalf of not only the UAE Ambassador, but other higher commissioners. It is an issue about budget, honourable Deputy Prime Minister. It was raised to us because they are foreign affairs, and they are doing work for trade. There is a trip coming up in June. You might get punished by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs because he is coming on a trade mission, but he has his allocations. This was raised to us in our recent visit to the UAE, so I am just conveying on behalf of the good Ambassador.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this side of the House, there is no silos, we try to work as one Government. Honourable Koya is coming in as correctly mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I suppose in the next budget. The opportunities that have come through from the UAE, has somewhat accelerated in the last six months, because of some intense engagements that has been happening at the high level with the honourable Prime Minister, certainly the Ministry of Trade and some other Ministries here. Sometimes the pickup in momentum does not

coincide with the budgetary allocations.

This year we just scrambled around to try and help so that he can come. Going forward, I am sure the honourable Minister for Finance can accommodate. The key thing for us is, we are opening up to a genuine big market for our country, and that is a good thing for the whole of Fiji.

Status of Fiji's Nationally Determined Contributions
(Question No. 53/2025)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change update Parliament on the status of Fiji's Nationally Determined Contributions?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was proud to be the first country to ratify the Paris Agreement in 2016. We played a pivotal role in securing global ambition to limit the average temperature rise, below 1.5 degrees Celsius. While the Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs involve voluntary commitments, it is critical that new NDCs submitted by all parties to the Paris Agreement this year collectively provide a pathway to climate safety and serve to avert the increasing threat of surpassing the 1.5 degrees cadre.

The urgency of this task cannot be understated, and we will be looking to the world's major emitters to deliver the requisite ambition. The NDCs represent national commitment under the Paris Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adapt to climate change. This year marks a crucial moment, the countries will submit their third round of NDCs, which will shape the global action from 2025 to 2035.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2024 was the warmest year on record, and global average temperatures are pressing up against the 1.5 degrees limit. As a result, scientists now suggest that this is the last batch of NDCs that matter when it comes to keeping the overall objective of the Paris Agreement in play. To limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, greenhouse gas emissions must peak in 2025 and decline 43 percent by 2030, instead of emissions arising, putting us on track to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold within the next three to five years, unless there is an immediate radical redoubling of effects.

This year, Fiji will submit an updated NDC 3.0. As a Pacific Small Island Developing State, we expect the world's high-emitting nations to deliver concrete solutions, scale up ambition, and honour their responsibilities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we intend to submit Fiji's NDC 3.0 ahead of COP30 in Belém, Brazil, from 10th to 21st November 2025. Fiji has secured financial support for this work through the NDC partnership and technical support from Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI).

Fiji's 2020 NDC confirmed Fiji's commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by the year 2050. It reaffirmed our goal to reduce energy sector emissions by 30 percent by 2030, presents key adaptation targets and committed to development of the Climate Change Act. As to Fiji's recent Biennial Update Report in 2025, Fiji is scaling up our implementation and measuring progress across its commitments. We will continue to strive towards these targets through:

- (1) increased renewable energy power generation;
- (2) efforts to reduce transport sector emissions;
- (3) strengthening and expanding the minimum energy performance and labelling standards for appliances and introducing more efficient lighting.

These mitigation actions continue to contribute to emissions reductions and align with our existing NDC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to face challenges regarding the unavailability and quality of mitigation-related data across sectors. These challenges are found across sectors and sub-sectors and impact our ability to strategically design mitigation action. Many data and information gaps relate to unavailability require new information systems and will be enhanced through new regulations.

The enforcement of Fiji's Climate Change Act 2021 will significantly improve the quantity and quality of information and data required to design and track implementation of our NDCs. Fiji's NDC 3.0 will be informed by robust data, evidence and science and stocktaking of progress, barriers and opportunities. The inception workshop to initiate the development of NDC 3.0 is planned for May 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our NDC 3.0 will be designed through national multi-stakeholder engagement, including through workshops and consultations with government ministries, community groups, private sector participants and experts. This collaborative process will not only create awareness through the dissemination of information but also facilitate national ownership over both the process and the outcome.

NDC 3.0 targets are not just about reducing emissions. In Fiji's context, NDCs are a tool to highlight our adaptation priorities, sustainable development objectives and financing needs. In our context, they are a vehicle for communication, our environment protection objectives and means to showcase our efforts to conserve biodiversity. NDCs inform our actions, but they also shape the approach of our donors, support our eligibility to access finance, technology transfer and capacity building. Our new NDC must be holistic and serve to benefit multiple sectors, and be a further basis of increasing cooperation, coordination, coherence and complementarity between the government agency, private sector, civil society and the international actors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, developing countries can enhance their NDCs by including commitments that align with national sustainable development priorities as well as with global targets. NDCs are critical opportunities to frame the urgent ambition and transformational and country-driven mitigation and adaptation action that are prepared to deliver over the coming decades. They are also the primary platform of shaping our access to climate finance. In keeping the scale of the crisis response required, we need COP30 to galvanise climate leadership during a time of geopolitical turmoil and cause correction needs to be evident and defined by the submission of the new 1.5 degrees complement NDC.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you honourable Minister for your response. I am happy that all the consultations are already in place, but I understand that the expectations was, submission in early February but the Minister has committed to sending our revised NDC before COP. Usually before NDCs are submitted, the long-term strategy is also submitted, usually the year before. I will check with the honourable Minister if the long-term strategy has also been submitted while we are preparing our revised NDC or the two will go together?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I agree with the honourable Leader of the Opposition. We currently are also revising that and probably the two will go together before COP30.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his good response on this subject. How is the Ministry or the Government ensuring that NDC implementation does not burden taxpayers already affected by high cost of living and climate impacts?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, implementation of NDCs, for us we are focusing on the energy sector and also more importantly on areas where we are focusing on nature-based seawalls which are helping our coastal communities that are facing coastal erosion, plus relocation that was covered by the honourable Minister in the morning. Those are the things that we are focusing on at the moment.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his replies. I think the issue that we are talking about here is one of the most important things that is impacting life on this world at the moment. It seems there are so many other things that have gotten in the way. I am glad that we are talking about this on this particular issue.

The thing about the NDCs and we will see this from the NDCs in the past - carbon zero, carbon 50 and completely renewable energy by the year 2036. The problem with this has always been that the implementation largely is done by the private sector. I am just wondering, as part of this, how are these consultations, seeing the problems that we have had so far in past NDCs to now? A lot of them we have not been able to make that significant progress. You have been thinking, maybe it is to do with the manner in which we get the consultations going so that we get that commitment upfront from those that can deliver it.

We are now living in an environment where the most powerful country in the world is not really regarding climate change as something that is important. But even in that sort of environment, we need to make sure we can put good NDCs and how do we get the players involved so they can fully commit so we can fully deliver it; that is my question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Did you have consultation with the private sector?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a challenge, we note that and we will continue our stakeholder consultation and for them to provide the commitments given that we have our national determined contribution. That consultation still continues, and we hope that they come on board, given that we all need to come into the play when we are trying to achieve this goal.

Completion of Upgrade - Nadi International Airport
(Question No. 54/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the timeline for completing the upgrades at Nadi International Airport, to improve and enhance service quality ahead of the projected 2025 tourism growth?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Tuiwailevu for the important question regarding the upgrades at Nadi International Airport, and our preparedness for the projected growth in tourism. I would like to add, not only 2025 but going forward.

Allow me to indulge this august House, the operating objective is to make the airport experience as pleasant as our tourism products. We all travel, we all know what it is like at the airports. We want that experience to be a pleasant one. I think we all have our favourite airports in the world. Me, personally is Changi in Singapore. It is number one consistently but recently also Doha has become number one. It is between Changi and Doha these days. As we travel, sometimes we try to delay our departure from our hotels to go to the airport. But for Changi in Singapore, you want to go there early because the whole airport experience is more than a hotel. That is the kind of placid experience that we want to encourage and the same now is happening in Doha.

May I, at this juncture, Mr. Speaker, just share with you for tourism. I got a call from our Ambassador in the UAE and he was sharing with me, there is a number of royalties from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait who have just returned home from their holidays in Fiji, and were very pleased with what they experienced here. They travel incognito. They do not come in with all their official staff. It is something that we should all be proud of. This is not only this year, last year also. Quite a number

of royalties from the Middle East have been visiting Fiji. They normally go to Seychelles, Maldives, and Bora Bora but now Fiji appears to be very much in their itinerary now. So, it is something to make us proud.

Fiji Airports, as a dedicated custodian of our nation's primary gateway, is the driving force behind the significant upgrades underway at Nadi International Airport. The comprehensive Nadi Airport Master Plan serves as the blueprint for strategically developing the airport's infrastructure and elevates service quality to meet tourism demand going forward. The Fijian Government fully supports and collaborates closely with Fiji Airports in the execution of this vital plan. While the timeline for completion is actively managed by Fiji Airports and may be subject to ongoing project dynamics, I can share the anticipated progress across key areas of their ambitious undertaking:

Recent completion of the e-code grade apron has improved overall apron capacity for aircrafts and enables a progressive expansion of the terminal. It will not be very rare for passengers to get off on the tarmac. The vast majority, I think most of us now, will be connected the aero bridge into the airports. So, it will be very rare that you embark into the tarmac. The departure lounge, early works contract is now under construction and will enable the doubling in area of the Fiji Airways Lounge later this year. This project will also improve the transit passenger flow and enables the future deployment of smart gates which is also known as e-gates for arriving and departing passengers.

Smart gates and improved self-check in systems and Automated Bag Drops will be upgraded and expanded to aid and improve passenger flow through the terminal. These upgrades are planned for this year in cooperation with the Department of Immigration through an initial trial system deployment that will enable a seamless deployment to occur in January 2026.

We tried to be equal to the world, some of the world's best standards here. In some airports, from the curb to your gate is 16 minutes. Curb, check-in, immigration, customs, into your gate - 6 minutes and vice versa on arrival on touch, your curb is also curb is also around that 16 minutes to 18 minutes. That is the kind of target that we have.

On the expansion of the Departure Lounge, commencement of the major expansion works to the Departure Lounge will also occur later this year. This major project will significantly increase capacity of the lounge, increase area by approximately 600 seats, a broader food and beverage offering, and streamline passenger flows. I think we have been having issues with congestion in that area. Now we are increasing that to 600. Upgrade of baggage handling systems and baggage hall, baggage screening, the installation of the new, more efficient baggage handling system is on track for completion by the end of the first quarter of 2026. This will improve overall efficiency and reliability of baggage processing.

On the enhancements to airside infrastructure, works on improving airside infrastructure, including taxiway upgrades and apron expansions are progressing steadily and are scheduled for completion in stages through to 2030. These upgrades are crucial to accommodating increased aircraft movements. The first package of work associated with this expansion of the domestic apron is already awarded and scheduled for completion by third quarter 2025. What we know, Mr. Speaker, is when a jet lands, and you need to park it, we now have two gates where you can park those jets so that you allow others to come in.

Looking beyond the immediate upgrades, Fiji Airports has a robust, long-term vision for Nadi International Airport. The Nadi Airport Master Plan outlines major capital programme's work that will continue through to 2033. This sustained investment is strategically planned to proactively address and anticipate a significant growth in both flight movements and passenger numbers over the coming decade. These future works will encompass further terminal expansions, additional airside infrastructure development, and enhancement to support services, ensuring Nadi International Airport

remains a world-class facility capable of meeting Fiji's evolving connectivity needs and tourist ambitions.

The Fijian Government maintains a strong collaborative partnership with Fiji Airports, ensuring that its crucial projects, conceived and driven by their expert planning, remain on track. We are confident that the productive efforts of Fiji Airports, guided by the Nadi Airport Master Plan, will result in significantly enhanced service quality at Nadi International Airport, providing an exceptional experience for visitors as we embrace the projected growth in tourism and lay the foundation for sustained future expansion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, very commendable efforts with respect to Nadi Airport and its upgrades. The question relates to, there were some conversations that we had earlier on regarding some accommodation that was going to be placed currently where the car park is or above it. Is that still part of the plan?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will need to reconfirm that, but I know it was part of the plan. As I indicated, we are now finalising the master plan. I know it is something that is needed. Like I was indicating, I was in Doha two weeks ago. There are two hotels in Doha, they are fully booked all the time at the airport. There is a case to be made for an airport in the transits at Nadi Airport.

Transit, Mr. Speaker, is becoming a huge part of Fiji. When you talk about traffic, both ways for about more than two million people, you add in the transit element, it can be much higher than that. The transit element would require accommodation within the airports area.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for the question to the honourable Minister. Background on this, because the Committee had gone for public submission and we had spent around three hours, in fact, with CAAF and AFL, and we had a lot to exchange and share and understand about the complexities and the pursuit for airport expansion.

Sir, AFL services 20 airlines and connects Fiji to 15 cities, and we must congratulate Fiji Airways, which is a full-time member of the Oneworld Alliance. Also, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica highlighted the motion to review Fiji Airports 2021 Annual Report and it placed emphasis on Fiji's strategic location as an entry and transit hub for passengers. After all those efforts, can the honourable Minister agree or disagree that Fiji has seen a boom in visitors transiting through Fiji and if our Airport Lounge area currently can cater for the capacity that is coming into Fiji?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I just ask the honourable Member to repeat the last part of the question.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if our Airport Lounge area currently can cater for the capacity of visitors who are transiting through Fiji?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- As I had highlighted and I understand correctly, that part of the question is whether we have the capacity to look after our transit passengers?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I indicated, we know that we need more rooms in this country. There is an imbalance between the air inventory - the number of seats coming into the country and the rooms available, but we cannot leave it at that because we do not want the airline to be flying empty. So, there is quite a lot of focus now also on transit passengers. The experience at Nadi Airport, as it is, is sufficient for this time, but as the question by honourable Koya, we need accommodation to strengthen that part of the offering for transit passengers.

In terms of connectivity, yesterday I highlighted that in the South Pacific, countries like Samoa and Tonga now find it easier to come through Fiji to go to Australia and New Zealand and to all the points where Fiji Airways flies - Dallas, Vancouver, San Francisco, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore. Indeed, with Samoa, it is more advantageous to come from Apia to Nadi and to Auckland, than to flight direct from Apia to Auckland. That is the strength of Nadi now and is supported by the operation of our national airline because they make it very attractive for people to transit through Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, with respect to the ongoing negotiations with China, and I am kind of looking forward here, we suddenly decide and agree for them to bring their A380s, will the airbridges that we currently have or in motion, be sufficient to cope if they suddenly decide to bring an A380 out of Shanghai into Fiji?

HON.V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe we are able to provide that kind of service to any kind of way but I do not think we can do the A380. Anything around the Boeing 777, we can do it.

I think it was a bit unfortunate for the President of India that she got off at the Tarmac, she should have come through the airbridge, we could have handled that better. But that was a Boeing 777 ER. We can meet those types of expectations, Mr. Speaker.

Lease Compensation for *Mataqali* Members

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament on how *mataqali* members are being compensated now that equal distribution of lease money has been removed and *mataqali* members are getting far less, compared to what they used to get under equal distribution?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to state clearly that the equal rent distribution of lease money to members of landowning units has not been completely removed, but remained one of the modes of its contribution. Government had endorsed the reinstatement of the old lease distribution, but in a revised formulation. The iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTTLTB) was tasked with the reinstatement. The 14 Provincial Councils were consulted and fully endorsed the proposal, given their obligations to their people, the *vanua* and the church.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTTLTB is empowered, under section 8 of the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940 to issue leases and licences. From the proceeds of leases, the iTTLTB is legally mandated to deduct 25 percent, but it only deducts 18 percent currently. The 82 percent balance is distributed in accordance with Regulation 11 of the iTTLTB Leases and Licences Regulations 1984, where 85 percent is paid to the Proprietary Unit, 7 percent to the *Turaga ni Mataqali*, 5 percent to the *Turaga ni Qali* and 3 percent to the *Turaga i Taukei*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the added deductions for the traditional leaders is in recognition of their God-given role and traditional obligation that is required of them. The neglect of this allocation has given rise to the breakdown in social structure in our rural setting and is a major factor in the prevailing social needs. In respect of the 85 percent to the Proprietary Unit, it is distributed in three modes – 100 percent to the Landowning Unit Trust account, or 100 percent equal distribution, or a hybrid, both depending on the percentage distribution decided by the landowning units.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, equal rent distribution or assignment of lease money through the Landowner's Trust Account continues to be the choice of the landowning units. Currently, 154,378 landowners are receiving lease money through equal rent distribution. In essence, the equal rent distribution to

landowning units has not been removed but remains with the added deductions to the title holders of those landowning units.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his explanation on the Government policy. When we walk around the country, Sir, we meet a lot of *iTaukei*, who are at the lowest earners, the place that they live. They struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet. They have to contribute to the churches and to all these things and one of the things that they relied to a lot was the level of lease income that they were getting in the old system, and they are asking a lot of questions. Why is it that those at the top who have more, are getting more, while those who are at the bottom are getting less?

On this grounds, Mr Speaker, Sir, will the honourable Minister consider reviewing this policy? I am telling you what people tell us. They will not say it in front of a *tikina* meeting, or at a Provincial Council meeting, but when we meet them, this is what they say. On the basis of that, is the Ministry prepared to review this on the impact that it is having on the most marginalised *iTaukei* who collect lease money? I do not collect any lease money myself, but I ask on their behalf, because this is something that they are raising with us.

HON. I. VASU.- Thank you, honourable Usamate, for the question. The current distribution, as we have seen, we have considered the social obligations of the traditional leaders, as I have already mentioned, looking after the people, the *vanua* and the church. In the equal distribution, while the traditional leaders were looking after those areas, even a Class 1 primary school student is also receiving the same amount but is not looking after that major responsibility, that is looked after by the traditional leader. Thank you.

HON. A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, we recently visited a lot of Provincial Councils and there were concerns were raised. One of them relates to the same question that was asked. One person said that when when it comes to feeding the family, it matters. "I can sleep at night with an empty stomach, but I cannot actually see my kids going hungry without any food. We have to do something to put food on the table." The concern raised was that because of the unequal distribution of money whereby they are receiving far less, . the members are now resorting to stealing and that is why the crime rate is going up. That is not my concern but is the concern of the members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, I think you are way off here. Ask your question which is relevant to the answer that was provided by the Minister.

HON. A. MAHARAJ.- My question is, how will these members be compensated? How are these members going to be compensated now that they are receiving less?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, a landowning units in the Fijian setting is owned by the *mataqali* and not owned by individuals. So, when they distribute the rent money, it first has to look after the holistic needs of the *mataqali*, and later it goes to the individuals. Some of the *mataqali* members are out there overseas. They are getting their shares, but they are not contributing to the daily lives of what is happening out there in the village or in the *mataqali*. That is why we allocate those portions - t 15 percent and 85 percent is still being given to them. It is for them to look after the '*vanua*', the '*lotu*' and its people.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I want to raise a Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Your Point of Order, honourable Tuisawau?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Standing Order 62(4)(d). Some of the words used by honourable Maharaj can provoke ill-feeling amongst community members and their chiefs. He mentioned that

because of the reversal of the distribution, it has led to hunger and crime. He is sort of imputing that it is the direct result of that.

MR. SPEAKER.- I take your point, honourable Member. The honourable Minister has expressed the view that the distribution is a complex issue, which reflects the society and the Fijian community's way of living. Honourable Maharaj then talked about whether, in fact, the honourable Minister is thinking of reviewing the distribution and one of the side effects of the change that has come about is increase in crimes. They are not directly related. You have not established the nexus of that yet, so it is an assumption that you are giving. It is quite wrongly made, unless you have the data to support that.

I think the honourable Leader of Government Business's point is valid in that respect, although it rides on subsection 4(b) that are likely to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between communities, is that what you are relying on? I do not think that will go that far. I think my issue is that it is a supposition that you have made of a set of situations that have been explained by the honourable Minister, and you do not have the nexus to make that assumption or conclusion. I am asking you, in fact, if you can withdraw that conclusion, because of the inequality of distribution, it has caused a rise in crimes to those who are not happy, as it were, with that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respect your decision, and I withdraw those comments. But still, I would like to thank the honourable Minister responsible for explaining it in a very rightful manner.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Maharaj.

Honourable Members, honourable Immanuel has withdrawn his question, Oral Question No. 56/2025. Also, the ninth Oral Question which honourable Members will know, has been dropped from the Order Paper this morning, as it has been addressed through the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

Wind Loads Standards for Building Structures
(Question No. 58/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament on how the recently approved Wind Loads Standards will improve resilience of building structures against the severe wind events in Fiji?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are all aware, the Pacific region is subject to extreme climate change conditions and cyclones and strong adverse extreme weather events is part and parcel of the lives of us who live in this region of the world.

In terms of data, certainly the data from the Fiji Meteorological Office has shown that wind speeds have increased significantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last few decades. As we look back, Fiji has experienced quite a few Category 4 and Category 5 cyclones over the past few years. *TC Winston* looms large in 2016 in everyone's mind. Hence, Mr. Speaker, after *TC Winston*, there was an initiation by the Ministry of Trade at the time to relook at the wind load standards currently in Fiji and see whether there was a need to increase the wind speed. Currently building structures in Fiji are designed at wind

speeds up to 66 meters per second and once the work was done, which is quite detailed and included the University in Australia expertise, the revised wind speed was 74 metres per second.

What that has meant, going forward, there will be a requirement for buildings to be designed at a revised wind speed. We did conduct extensive consultation to arrive at these wind speeds because we were mindful, particularly, the cost involved with wind speeds. In terms of looking at that particular aspect, even the professionals could not agree on the potential impact on the economy in terms of cost design. Hence what we agreed with the industry was that the wind load standards for now be introduced as the voluntary standards to allow the industry to have a look at the standards and then come back with any concerns, with a view to then perhaps formalising them into mandatory standards over the next few years.

At the moment we are going through a process of awareness and discussions with the industry, certainly from the economic side of things, we did not want to impose something that would depress the building industry because of the cost impositions and it was quite clear that between the professionals, there was no congruence in terms of the cost implications. The decision was taken to really take the road of a pragmatic approach, I suppose and introduce the standards as voluntary and allow industry to embrace and have a look, come back to the ministry with feedback and then we can make further decisions in the next two to three years.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- (Inaudible)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya , I can hardly hear you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sorry, Sir. Is that better?

MR. SPEAKER.- No, it is your voice itself.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I must admit, Sir, I am suffering at the moment with a ear problem. I apologise.

I am sure the honourable Minister understood what I was saying. It is the roofing sheets that come into the country that need to be a particular standard so that we can adhere to this particular standard that has been spoken about today. My question to the honourable Minister is, do we have the sufficient expertise or materials or equipment to be able to test and ensure that whatever we produce here is up to that standard?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, the Department of National Trade Measurement and Standard (DNTMS) which is the standards department in the Ministry does have the expertise to evaluate and they do reach out to external parties as well to assess. There is adequate expertise in-house and when there is not enough, we do reach out. We have got very good support from the James Cook University funded through the Australian Government. So, that has been quite helpful in terms of developing the whole standard and developing specific standards for the Pacific and for Fiji.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question is related to consultation with insurance companies. Often when standards are made and particularly in relation to building, we have seen that the cyclone cover uptake is quite low. The reason being there is an upfront cost in meeting all these standards. So, a lot of money goes into meeting the standards. If someone builds the building according to the standard, will insurance companies consider giving discounts to the general public who meet that standard? Was there any discussion that took place in this area?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, because currently the standard is voluntary, there probably has not really been that discussion but it is probably something we need to, in terms of

when we do the awareness, talk about a bit more. We will take that on board and make sure it is part of the ongoing discussions in the industry.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just a quick one to the honourable Minister, is there engagement with the local authorities also in terms of when buildings go up for them to be able to test and certify and say, “yes, it is alright and it complies with the national building standards?”

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, the authorities from the government side were part of the discussion. I think taking the voluntary approach was very pragmatic particularly in the Fiji context and when there was no understanding of what the cost implications were, in my opinion. Going forward, it is going to create some discussions. I am hopeful before the three voluntary timeframes up, we can actually firm up and come up with some more mandatory standards which is important for ongoing cyclone proof design in Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Given the hour, we will have an afternoon tea break but before that, the Suspension Motion for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have one Written Question, three items for the Bills and in Schedule 2 there are four motions.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, are there any interventions?.

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 a break. Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.05 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.05 p.m.

Written Question

Government Vehicles - Accidents and Disciplinary Actions
(Question No. 59/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the following –

- (a) number of accidents involving Government vehicles from January 2023 to February 2025, including the total cost of repairs and write-offs, and the number of new drivers appointed during this period, along with how many were involved in those accidents; and
- (b) what disciplinary actions have been taken against drivers found at fault, including the number of drivers surcharged and the total value of surcharges to be recovered.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

LAND TRANSPORT AUTHORITY (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) BILL 2025

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Wednesday, 30th April, 2025, I move:

That the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 09/2025), be debated, voted upon and passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be reminded that the debate on this Bill is limited to one hour, and your speaking time allocations will be displayed on the wall.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my contribution to the debate on the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill in support of the motion. This Bill represents a necessary course correction in Fiji's Public Transport Regulatory Framework, specifically addressing the governance and operation of the taxi industry. We propose the repeal of the Open Taxi Rent System (OTRS), and then the reintroduction of the base-and-stand system. This is more than a procedural adjustment; it is a deliberate and evidence-based response to serious operational enforcement and policy shortcomings that have surfaced since OTRS was introduced in April 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government reaffirms its commitment to inclusive economic participation and equitable service delivery across the nation. It is not a privilege; it is a constitutional right. Every person is entitled to reasonable access to transportation, as per Section 34 of the Constitution. The reintroduction of a structured, base-and-stand system is a step towards realising this right. It creates a fairer and more accessible framework that allows regions the opportunity to operate taxis and a dignified livelihood and deliver essential transport services to their communities.

The OTRS was introduced to increase operational flexibility and improve fairness. It allowed taxis to operate on a rotational basis. However, the past two years have shown that in practice the system has fallen short of its objectives. It has led to mounting congestion in urban areas, such as Suva,

Lautoka and Nadi. Regulatory and enforcement agencies, including the LTA, the Fiji Police Force and municipal councils have encountered significant challenges in monitoring and managing taxi operations that are no longer geographically bound.

Moreover, under the current system, urban centres have become saturated with taxis, while peri-urban and rural communities, where public transport is urgently needed, have been left without adequate service. This imbalance has not only undermine access to essential services, such as healthcare, education and markets, but also widened the socio-economic divide between urban and rural areas. The reintroduction of the base and stand system will directly address these pressing issues by restoring service coverage in rural and peri-urban communities, decongesting urban business districts, reinstating accountability, structure and operational discipline within the taxi industry. It will also curb the proliferation of illegal and unlicensed taxi services, while ensuring that all Fijians – regardless of their geographic location – have access to safe, reliable and regulated transport services.

The data speaks clearly, based on the Ministry of Transport's Household Travel Survey. Approximately 70 percent of the public use public service vehicles and 20 percent of these are taxi users. Using this data, the LTA has developed a new quota distribution system based on ward-level population statistics from the Bureau of Statistics. This ensures permits are fairly distributed with special considerations for areas with high tourism and commercial activity, promote equitable distribution and improve accountability, especially for low-income applicants.

The LTA has reviewed the taxi permit checklist. The updated process aims to ease the permit application process, particularly for those households with income of \$30,000 or less per year. Despite the introduction of Open Taxi Ranking System (OTRS) between 2022 to 2024, we saw the emergence of close to 2,000 illegal taxi operators who were issued a total of close to 2,500 traffic infringement notices.

These individuals have wilfully taken advantage of the regulatory ambiguity OTRS introduced in the previous government and had been operating unlicensed taxi services, referring to the illegal taxi operators. These operators using private vehicles without the proper permits, have thrived under the Taxi Permit Issuance Barrel System, which was done a few months before the election, and the OTRS, that lacks effective oversight. Therefore, this poses a significant safety risk to the public and undermines the legitimacy and livelihood of legal permit holders who continue to operate in accordance with the law. This Bill – through the introduction of the base-and-stand system – will enable enforcement agencies and municipal authorities to ensure order in terms of the legal operations.

As honourable Members may recall, the OTRS was introduced following amendments to the Land Transport (Budget Amendment) Act 2021 and came into effect on 25th April, 2022. As stated, the system has failed in its initial intention to promote fairness, improve flexibility, and reduce illegal operations. In 2024, the Ministry and LTA conducted consultations across the four Divisions – Northern, Western, Eastern, and Central – and it highlighted the overwhelming public consensus for changes, improvements, to remove the OTRS and to reinstate the base-and-stand system.

The participants also called for the removal of the PSV levy, citing its redundancy once the base-and stand fees are reinstated. This Bill addresses that concern by repealing section 24(b) of the Land Transport Act to eliminate the PSV levy. The Bill also proposes key amendments to restore regulatory clarity. It updates definitions to reflect the reintroduction of the base-and-stand system, repeals the use of the term “zone” by replacing it with “base”, to better align with the permit structures, and amends section 65(2)(a) to require that taxis operate from designated base or stands. The definitions of “base” and “stands” will not be restricted.

Furthermore, it aligns the geographical boundaries of each base with the statistical ward boundaries defined by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics to ensure consistency across Government data

systems, planning processes, and service delivery frameworks. This alignment of terminology will help eliminate confusion, such as in Nadi, where Nadi 1 and Nadi 2 zones apply only after the OTRS, creating public misunderstanding and confusion. Alignment to pre-existing boundaries, such as the Fiji Bureau of Statistics demarcation wards, will support effective monitoring and reporting, allowing Government to better plan transportation services at national and regional levels.

Beyond the regulatory reform, the reintroduction of base and stand also presents a valuable economic opportunity. It provides a platform for landowning units, particularly *iTaukei mataqali*, to establish designated taxi bases on their land, generating income streams, creating jobs and empowering local communities. This aligns with the Government's broader agenda for the *iTaukei* empowerment, especially economic activity and business ventures, and inclusive economic development. Close collaboration will be held with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, LTA, and the Ministry of Trade and Cooperatives to roll out this initiative.

To promote fairness and prevent conflicts within the taxi industry, all newly issued taxi permits will preferably be registered solely under natural persons. This measure is intended to eliminate any potential disparities or disputes between base stand owners and permit holders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, this Bill addresses deeply flawed systems and responds to the urgent needs of our people. It restores trust of fairness and safety to public transport services and works to curb illegal activities.

I commend the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025 to this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers, and given the numbers, each speaker, including the mover of the Bill in reply, have seven minutes each for their contribution.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the introduction of the Amendment Bill. Although, I fully understand the reasons behind it, I will probably highlight why I have a bit of reservation on the amendment.

First of all, we fully understand how important this is, particularly the services that are provided by our taxi operators and, of course, the issues that have come up very recently since the introduction of the OTRS under the previous administration. The question is, are we progressing on this or are we just moving around in circles?

We will probably need to come up with long-term solutions and that is why I strongly feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that further consultations need to be done so that this can be addressed adequately. Is it a question of the Act itself or the regulations or is it about enforcement and the implementation of the Act itself? Is it about the resources that need to be given to the stakeholders? Of course, we have conflicting thoughts on the issue. There are some that benefit from it, there are some that may be disadvantaged as well.

However, that is normal, Mr. Speaker Sir, but I strongly recommend that we tread carefully and look at the issues holistically so that we can come up with better options and better solutions, given the importance of this service that I have stated. Perhaps, I will highlight a few things again.

On the consultation, if the Committee of Parliament can be given at least a month or two, or even come the next sitting to come back to the House and present on their findings because that is important, particularly when we want to hear the views of all our stakeholders and particularly, demonstrating that we are a Parliament that listens, that we are engaged with our people in consultation because the quality of what we will present in this House and the long-term effect and implications as

well will be something that can be well addressed if the responsible Standing Committee of Parliament can be given more time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I was hoping that the permit and the issue about the Base and Stand system can be reviewed together.

However, I know for a fact, Sir, and I wish to refer to the deliberations in this august House on 18th April, 2024 on the issue about taxi permits. Government, through the honourable Minister, has not come back to this House on what has happened, the progress of investigations on the issue of illegal taxi permits and as a result on that day, the honourable Speaker ruled on that question by the then Member of Opposition but now the Assistant Minister for Transport on the issue of illegal taxi permits.

I strongly feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that once we sort out this issue about the stand and base system, the next thing that will logically come into place is taxi permits, and Government owes an explanation. Perhaps, if the honourable Minister can provide a feedback to this august Parliament on what has progressed on the issue of illegal permits, something that happened last year and something that also needs to be given some feedback on the nature and how important it is in terms of governance.

We are looking at this Bill in terms of improving or addressing the governance of the taxi industry but that investigation, whatever the outcome, is perhaps important as well. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have some reservations as of now and I will agree with the Government if we can have some consultations and if the Committee responsible can have a look at that and, of course, if these two can be considered together by their respective agencies and even a committee because they are linked to the other and there are questions about spaces. Who is going to provide the spaces? I do not think the issue of congestion will be totally addressed as a result of that. So, there are still pending issues, and I hope that we will look into that when we look at the amendment, as recommended by the honourable Minister.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025. I wish to begin by acknowledging the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport for his clear considerate presentation on the importance of this legislative reform.

The Bill before this House represents a significant and timely intervention that seeks to address the operational enforcement and governance challenges arising from the current Open Taxi Rank System (OTRS) which has proven increasingly difficult to regulate effectively and to serve the people of Fiji well.

Mr. Speaker, I must make it clear from the outset that the heart of this amendment is the people of Fiji and their need to ease for mobility at any time they choose and at any destination they want to travel. Since, the OTRS was legalised in 2021 and the Base and Stand System was removed, gaps have been discovered. Its intentions may have been honourable in addressing the concerns of taxi operators through the equitable sharing of income in a competitive and liberal economic model, however, the oversight does not adequately consider the needs of customers.

On taxis and passengers, that is a relationship, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Taxi business exists because of customers and customer needs underscore the taxis' existence. By their very essence, taxi are there to serve customers.

Provision in the LTA Act also empowers this commercial relationship between taxis and customers, ensuring that both, the operator and the customer, benefit - one earns an income and the other receives a gift of mobility. However, it is unfortunate that the Open-Rank System is flawed with its unintended outcome. We have taxi drivers that have become picky, choosy and selective about the trips.

Mr. Speaker, often, customers are left stranded or abandoned by the service that was supposed to assist them. One party is not honouring part of the relationship and makes a system not working. The outcry from the customers and passengers is deafening. While customers in urban areas may have a better chance of hailing a taxi since many operators flock to these locations due to a high number of passengers, those outside city limits can wait for hours and may never secure one.

Mr. Speaker, relying on the lack of available taxis limits mobility. For instance, no taxis are available at night in most towns and many peri-urban or rural areas. Furthermore, people's lifestyles have evolved with more movement into cities and towns in the evenings and at night to enjoy dinners and other forms of entertainments, like movies. Taxis should be available to meet customers needs as publicly classified transport which is mandated to provide this service.

In a sense, the lack of taxis has enabled the rise of private operators who are stepping in to fill the gap and honour the relationship of serving customers. This is what the people want and deserve. I highlight this, Mr. Speaker, to stress that the relationship between taxis and customers must be mutually beneficial. In detailing all these, I invite us all to look at the bigger picture, enabling the taxi-customer relationship and experience to drive our country's greater economic aspirations like local business and economic flow and their employment and livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill propose to bring fairness into the taxi-customer relationship by allowing more taxis into the system, especially in our peri-urban and rural areas. This can only work if the OTRS is removed and the taxi bases are re-established.

It is also fair for those currently operating illegally to become legalised taxi operators and pay the tax and other financial dues to manage their taxis. The Open Taxi Rank System has inadvertently created inefficiencies, leaving customers without reliable transportation, especially in the rural areas and during critical times.

Mr. Speaker, one of the biggest failures in the ORTS is the absence of a provision to facilitate a new taxi permit application for specific locations. For example, if there is a dire need for taxi services at Davuilevu 1, or even Waila Housing or Nausori or at Sawani, LTA will not be able to process any application because there is no base or stand attached to the application. Instead, permits will go to the zone and not to the location where they are needed or where the demand comes from. That is a bad system. Public service permits and licences are demand-driven and should be given to locations where they are needed and not to the zone. Mr. Speaker, moving forward in terms of providing taxi services precisely where they are needed, then the base and stand will be the solution.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, this amendment, in no way, means taking away permits or business from current taxi service providers. They are well protected and will continue with their service, but in a way, they will become more efficient and more effective in responding and serving our Fijians. The implementation will be done in places in a careful manner to ensure there is no interruption in the current service.

Mr. Speaker, I commend this amendment and strongly urge support for its benefit to the people of Fiji.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, the Open Taxi Rank System (OTRS) in Fiji was introduced during the 2021-2022 National Budget and was put on exercise on 25th April. There are several key reasons, and I will speak on a few, if time permits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was born in the transport industry, and I drove taxis on weekends and during school holidays. I have seen many challenges faced by taxi drivers and taxi owners as well. Currently, the PSV permits are renewed every 10 years. This was introduced so that the PSV owners could use

their taxi permit as collateral and get loans from banks and upgrade their services.

Prior to this, all permits were to be renewed every three years' time, and one of the requirements for the renewal was the support letter from the base owners. This is where the problem started, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In Fiji, there were about 8,000 taxis then, now, the number has increased. If any owner wants to renew the permit, he needs to produce a letter from the base owners. When there is a municipal or council, they will issue the letter in a very small amount, maybe \$30 at that time. When VAT was introduced, it became \$33. But the private base owners, just to renew one permit, used to charge around \$3,000 to \$5,000, just for a letter stating that the vehicle owner is currently running from Centrepont, for example. That letter would cost the owner or the driver \$3,000 to \$5,000. I very well remember Mr. Speaker, Sir, that many drivers came to me during my term in the Government. You will see that the problem started right from here.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, another reason is the level playing field for operators. Previously, only certain taxi bases with high-end base would benefit the most. The new system allowed the licensed taxi drivers the equal opportunity to pick up fares promoting fairness in competition. For example, if a taxi operator comes from Mead Road to the city, previously, after dropping the passenger, he has to go back to his base because he cannot pick a passenger within the radius of 100 metres and if they do so, he will find the town and city rangers, police or LTA issuing the TIN.

I will talk about one base, let us say, MH base which is right in the city, that is a very high-end base. Anyone who takes a bus or a taxi will find that the base will be open, empty and a passenger will ask the driver, "please drop me here." If the driver says no, then definitely there is argument. Or if the driver agrees or stops the vehicle to unload a passenger at the said base, you will find that another waiting passenger will jump in, which will definitely end up booking or issuing of TIN.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has happened to me, I am talking from experience at this point in time. To avoid this, the current system well articulates but unfortunately, we needs to iron out and adjust things here and there, making more parking areas where taxis after dropping can stop and wait for the next passenger. Otherwise, the previous law wants the taxi to go back to Mead Road. The current system is economical.

As I mentioned earlier, if a taxi from Baulevu comes to Nausori, he has to go back to Baulevu because he cannot pick any passenger in Nausori Town because Nausori Town is approximately 100 metres. That means he has to go empty from Nausori Town to Baulevu where he can pick again. The former CEO knows about it because we had a good discussion about this with him. He agreed that this is a way forward, a modern Fiji. We are talking about a modern Fiji. Now we are going back to the 1980s. Wake up Minister! We are going back!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V. NATH.- When you compare Singapore and other developed countries, you will find that this is the way forward.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, another reason is to improve service coverage. The open taxi rank system encouraged better distribution of taxis across urban and rural areas, potentially, improving service availability where coverage was previously limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, support for digital integration aimed to modernise and streamline the

operation, aligning with core effort to digitalise the transport services in Fiji. I do not know why there is a rush. Yesterday, it was introduced, today we are debating. I hope there is no hidden agenda.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025. This amendment will minimise the illegal operation of private vehicles which is commonly known as pirate or “*pari*” as they are normally known in our cities and towns. I hope the Opposition are not using *pari*!

(Laughter)

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this amendment will also force regulated taxis to confine themselves to bases where they are required to pay the prescribed fees and abide by the regulations that govern their operations in that particular rural or urban base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were approximately a cumulative total of 8,000 registered taxis in Fiji in 2022 and in 2023. There were an additional 293 registered taxis in Fiji. The current Open Taxi Ranking System (OTRS) currently means that all those 8,000 plus taxis can operate anywhere from Fiji. This is chaotic and biased to *pari* taxis and all other transport providers simply by its very nature that OTRS is just that open. With this amendment, *pari* taxis will not have a base to operate from, forcing them to legalise their services and follow the clearly set out procedures and processes, including the mandatory PSV training and defensive driving that is required of all PSV drivers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *pari* vehicles are unregulated, charging fares as they often wish and causing havoc in both the rural and urban areas as they can sweep in and take over a base. *Pari* taxis have moved and currently moving freely within the OTRS. With this proposed amendment, they cannot.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, taxis – whether regulated or *pari* – operating in the current OTRS, are creating traffic congestion and in areas where they could potentially provide regulated services, prefer to remain on the periphery to ensure that they escape paying the necessary base fees to the town councils. This amendment will ensure that all regulated taxis return to their base including rural-based taxis to return to their designated bases. Once the rural-based taxis are back in their bases, the projected trickle-down effect is that, all taxis will be in their own bases. There will be no taxis looking to zoom into a taxi base to pick up a customer, and for those that are *pari* taxis or out-of-town taxis, they will have to stop and honour the agreement to operate only out of the base which they had paid for. The taxi operators from the out-of-base system are coming into the cities and towns where they create more problems.

When we revert to the base system, most of these problems will be resolved. The rural-based taxis will return to their designated bases where private vehicles are currently operating. The base system will resolve issues in towns and rural areas. The letter of the law and the intention of the law will be followed. Regulated taxis will be based where they have paid their fees; customers will know their PSV drivers and providers; all PSV drivers will have undergone the requisite training in servicing the public; municipal workers will ensure collaboration with base owners and operators; and most importantly, service provision will be consistent and can be monitored by the local authorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current OTRS encourages the rushing around of taxis so that they can get to the base or stand first and get customers first – first come first serve. With the recent spate in road accidents, the amendment of this Act will give peace of mind to taxi base operators. They will safely transport their customers without fear of rushing back to their base, as their base will be reserved for them, given that they have paid the prescribed fees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am talking about, if you are from Suva, you board the last bus from Suva to go to Rakiraki. Once you get off at Rakiraki Town, then you will know why this Bill is very

important. All the taxis are not available. Sometimes the visitors to Ra will have to cry. Luckily the police station is next door to provide services to the public. With this amendment, it will encourage, or the people will be served, as the honourable Assistant Minister had said – people's needs will be served.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mainstream media reported in 2023 and again in 2024, that the Suva and Nausori Taxi Association are calling on the Government to reinstate the taxi base system, and they are ready to pay base fees, as taxi drivers are operating from anywhere they prefer. The Association said a base system will have taxis operating from allocated base and the public will have a better service from legal taxi operators. We are the Government that listens; we are the Government that consulted the major stakeholders in the taxi industry; we are the Government that favours fair play and equitable access for our people in accessing services that they need. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are the Coalition Government that supports access to justice and offering real solutions to our travelling public throughout Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- This subject is very close to my heart. I have been a taxi user for all my life, so I have a vested interest in this Bill. Just a point of clarification, honourable Assistant Minister. There is a new word you introduced also *pari*, does it stand for pirate?

(Honourable Member responds)

MR. SPEAKER.- That is for the purpose of our *Hansard*.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I think my mic is now working. First of all, I know you are an avid taxi user, so long as you are not a *pari* user, Sir. But to my two very good friends on the left here, all I can say is *babre babh*.

Mr. Speaker, when this particular system of Open Taxi Rank System was implemented, the reasons that were given at that time for the implementation, and one of the main reasons was that it was going to create a level playing field for every single taxi operator that existed, and I will tell you why. I will use the example that my learned friend from Rakiraki said, that if you get off the bus in Rakiraki, suddenly this system will actually give you a taxi. Well, Sir, when you get off the bus at 11 o'clock, the taxi operator who owns that base is not there. He has gone home. So you do not have a taxi whereas in the system that is currently in place, any taxi operator will be allowed to operate from that base. So those that fly by night and drive taxi by night, are actually using that particular base and they provide the service.

Mr. Speaker, the initial idea in that Bill was that there was going to be a framework for operators, it was going to remove taxi bases and stands and replace them with open taxi ranks. That particular provision was also taken care of by the FRA. So new spaces were made all around the country and it was done by the FRA quite efficiently. So what we will have now is a fight for those particular spaces that currently exists as taxi spaces, that every taxi user can use. Again, this was done on the basis that this was part of our 20-year National Development Plan at that time.

If you look around the world, Mr. Speaker, where taxis operate, they are all the same - first in best dressed. Go to any airport, it is first in best dressed. You do not have a particular taxi operator who owns the base. You have heard of the example that has been given by my friend here on the right, honourable Vijay Nath, where private operators were charging \$3,000 to get a taxi base letter; that is ludicrous. It was absolutely ludicrous, and it was getting dangerous for taxi operators. Now, what it along also did was that it created a levy for all taxi operators, all PSV holders to pay and that levy was actually put into a particular fund that was controlled by the Permanent Secretary of Finance, from what I understand. What is going to happen to that levy? Everyone contributed, not just some taxi operators.

I raised objection, and I said this on the day this Bill was presented, that it ought not to have come by order of it. We understand that you have a policy. We understand that you may want to chop and change things, et cetera. The honourable Minister said this was done without consultation; that is wrong. It was done with consultation right around the country. Therefore, you decide to do this yourself without the level of consultation that you think is necessary. Now, my point is that this ought to have gone to a particular Committee, to actually go out into the country, and if the majority of the country or the taxi operators came back and said it, so be it. But I do not think that has been done. The other thing also, Sir, we are also playing with the Constitution. Everyone has a right to economic participation. You are playing with that.

Now, my point here is, Sir, the Open Taxi Ranking System, it gives you the opportunity to freely operate on a first-come, first-serve basis. It also, Sir, we had previously owners of private vehicles operating as public service vehicles and they were strangling the existing legal operators. That same issue is now being used by the Coalition Government and saying it is strangling the particular taxi operators in terms of them being allowed to operate; it is not. The idea behind this, Sir, it is quite simple. There is an easy fix to all of these. Two things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would create the proper environment. All you needed to do was tweak and two things, one thing is deterrent and enforcement.

Who does the enforcement? The LTA. The deterrent is us in terms of putting the laws in place that deter these people to do this. I can honestly say this, Sir, by doing this, you are not going to remove the *pari* operators. You will probably end up with more, you will, because there is not enough deterrent. There is not enough beefing up of LTA to make sure the enforcement exists. This is the very same LTA that went around the country to ensure that this open taxi-based system was put into place. The very same people that work there are now saying something else. Okay, you have a different policy, but please, it requires more consultation in terms of getting this done. You are going to end up strangling those operators now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when this came about in 2021, there was a lot of discussions about it. However, I fear for some operators where you are going to create a problem. A lot of times, sometimes, taxi operators end up in fisticuffs. We have all seen it live on *TikTok*, et cetera, where taxi operators with respect to bases. Some base owners have owned bases for 10 years to 30 years. What is going to happen to the funds, in terms of the councils, et cetera, that own these base owners? Are we going to go back to them charging the base fees? Who is going to get the money? Is it going to go to Ministry of Finance, or is it going to the Council? There are a lot of issues that need to be ironed out with respect to this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at that time, I think there were some 8,000 taxi operators; about 6,000 were urban, and 1,523 were rural taxis. There is a substantial amount of room, from what I understand, still for a lot of taxi permits to be issued. The increase in appetite to use taxis is here, then those taxi permits should be issued. Those taxi permits, again, everyone has a right to participate in all of these.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021 the LTA had issued 25,000 TIN notices to private vehicles; that is a substantial amount of money. What was stopping this Government from busying up the LTA to ensure we protect those that have proper licences. That is all they had to do. Not change the law in this particular fashion, and throw it out completely in one day where, you know very well, a lot of research had gone into this, and this particular thing was part of a development plan that was well thought of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am totally against this Bill with respect to what has been put before us today. All we need to do is empower the LTA some more, at the end of the day, and ensure that the standards with respect to PSVs, et cetera are still the same. I do not agree with the Bill before the House.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. I rise to

contribute to the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) of 2025. I want to refer to the Explanatory to this Bill. Firstly, it identifies that the Land Transport Act came into force, so it was introduced in 1998. The Board established under section 6 is a body corporate under section 7 of the Act. The Board is made up of seven members who are appointed by the Minister responsible for Public Enterprises with the concurrence of the Prime Minister. Sounds familiar, Mr. Speaker? It does sound like the 2013 Constitution.

The reason why I say that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that it was not always like that before. From its inception, the seven Board members of the Lands Transport Authority (LTA) were appointed by the Minister responsible for Transport. The amendment that moved the appointment of the seven Board members to the Minister for Public Enterprise with the concurrence of the Prime Minister was brought by an *ad hoc* amendment law in 2019 during the FijiFirst Government. The powers of the Board are prescribed under section 8 and its functions under section 9.

For purposes of the reference to this Bill, I refer to the powers of the board under section 8(1)(b) which states, “to ensure as far as practicable the provision of road transport passenger services, adequate to meet the requirements of the public.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021 a new taxi system was introduced. Let me explain what the system was. If you want to operate a taxi, you need a permit. For you to get a permit, you need the following:

- (1) a bank balance of \$6,050 or \$1,050 if you already own a private vehicle that complies with PSV standard;
- (2) a base letter;
- (3) a medical report;
- (4) police clearance; and
- (5) a passport size photo.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will be required to pay your application fees, publish your application in the dailies, inviting objections to your application. If there are objections, Sir, there will be a public hearing conducted by the Board. There will require to be a proper investigation and that is usually done by the LTA to establish the need of the application. If there are no objections to your application, then the CEO will grant you the permit. Then you have 90 days to bring in a vehicle, have the plates fitted, and you are good to go.

The caveat there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that you must operate from a base where the need is established. The need is established specific to the locality where you apply from, and it ensures that the people of that area can call you up or call up your base and expect that taxis should be there to serve them.

In 2021, the Base and Stand System, although not perfect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was thrown out for the Open Taxi Rank System (OTRS) that we have now. Sir, I googled ‘open taxi rank system in Fiji News and lo and behold, nothing positive came out. Instead, this is what I got:

- (1) Open Taxi Rank System not working, *Fiji Times*, 29th October, 2024.
- (2) LTA pushes for removal of Open Taxi Ranking System, *FBC News*, 17th October, 2023.
- (3) Association says Taxi Open Ranking System copied and it will not work in Fiji, *Fiji Times*, 21 April, 2022.
- (4) Fiji Taxi Association objects to Taxi Open Rank System, *Fiji Village*, 31st March, 2022.

In my view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision by the Government in 2021 to introduce the OTRS was misguided and, put simply, another part of the Singaporean dream implementation gone wrong. It was simply lawlessness made lawful by the previous Government.

In the rush Mr. Speaker, Sir, to liberalise the taxi industry, I believe they forgot the basis of why we need taxis - Public Service Vehicle. It must be based on the need basis of the public.

In the Explanatory Note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at 1.3 and 1.4, you will find why this Bill is important to be passed. The saying goes, doesn't it? If it is not broken, do not fix it.

I submit this in the House, Mr. Speaker, that the Base and Stand System was not broken but the FijiFirst Government decided to fix it, blindfolded, literally. Seeking into the barrel, blindfolded, as if it could convince anyone that the system was the fairest, blind to colour, race or creed, like lady Justice, except that lady Justice does not drive on the streets in the taxi and knows no public need for transport.

Communities need to be served. If all the taxis in a zone brought under the OTRS congregate in Suva City because that is where the business is, then you will find the public service replaced by undocumented operators or pirates, as the honourable Member had said, they will enter the market. That is why the pirate business, Mr. Speaker, had flourished. I am not suggesting that pirates only came into existence in 2021, they have always been there. But since 2021, they seem to have consolidated and almost lawful default position in the rural, semi and peri-peripheral urban areas because all the taxis there have gone to Suva, Lautoka, Nadi and Ba.

Mr. Speaker, the Stand and Base System will be reintroduced and that will address the need of the localities, so we are going right back to where we should have started from the start. As indicated by honourable Tuisawau, there had been widespread consultation and the result is an overwhelming support for the taxi-base system. This system will ensure fair share of wealth for all taxi permit holders as they are able to embed themselves in the areas or the localities of their operation.

Mr. Speaker, I support the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill of 2025.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to get back to the basis, this is for the satisfaction of the travelling public. This is being done to satisfy their need. I think that is the most important thing. What is public transport for? It is for the public who are traveling in taxis.

The other important issue is just explaining the basis. I had explained the link to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics' population statistics on the wardss, that was analysed and from there, the determination was made on the need for taxis by ward. That is what the analysis put out in terms of the number of permits. But then the problem was that those wards are not being served by the current OTRS. There needs to be a move to pull those back to those wards to serve them which is what we are trying to do here.

Various issues have been raised. The honourable Leader of the Opposition had asked for an update on the legal issue of taxi permits. Definitely, that was a big issue and that is in the courts and the perpetrators have been subjected to the court system, and that is ongoing, but LTA has reviewed the internal process related to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been various concerns raised, I suppose, about the implementation on how we implement it. After this will be the regulations part. For example, some have raised the fees, base, and I am not sure whether honourable Nath had mentioned \$3,000 to \$5,000 fees for a letter but those things will be carefully monitored. So, the task force which we will establish will look at all those issues.

The other one was in relation to the concerns about this system being a rigid one where everyone is confined to their base. No, it will not be like that. For example, in our major build-up urban areas, it will be a mix of a specific base and open so that there will be flexibility for those who are not there to come into the base.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, that is what I am saying. You are telling me that we are rushing, no, this is a phased implementation, but we need to do it now because of the demand by the public for taxis.

Honourable Koya mentioned the lack of consultation. We had been doing consultations and this had been brought up since 2023 or 2024. There had been ongoing discussions going back and forth and consultations in the various regions. I recalled that the OTRS was brought through during the budget, so that was just brought into the budget and implemented. We were there that night; we were surprised when it was brought in without any consultation.

However, in terms of pirate taxis, they have been expressing that, that will increase. No, the opposite will happen because we will legalise them. From what we have seen, a lot of them are from the peri-urban and rural areas coming into the towns, especially at night, and this will enable them to have their own bases where they are located. Even at night, it will not be restricted for anyone in terms of coming to serve the public in the urban areas.

There will be flexibility. This is a democratic Government, it is not a dictatorship, which is why when we introduce a law which will cascade down to regulations, those regulations will consider all, including what you have expressed today. As usual, we are not talking about the *Bible* - this is a law created by Parliament. Of course, there will be ongoing reviews, as we move forward. We still have 16 years, so in two years' time, there could be another review.

There have been talks about bringing in Uber, so that is another possibility which we could look at as a next step once the IT side is enabled. Those are just some of my comments today.

Question put.

Vote Cast

Ayes	-	36
Abstained	-	13
Not Voted	-	6

Motion agreed.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Land Transport Act 1998 enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. Act No. of 2025]

WORK CARE BILL 2025

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir pursuant to Standing Order 85(1), I move:

That the Work Care Bill 2025 (Bill No. 07/2025), be read the second time.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call upon the mover of the motion, I remind honourable Members that pursuant to Standing Order 85(1), the debate will be on principles and merits of the Bill only.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Work Care Bill 2025 establishes the legal framework

for my Ministry to process employment and school accident cases under the No-Fault Compensation Scheme. The Bill is a crucial piece of legislation, aimed at providing social justice to injured workers, dependents of deceased workers and students who have been injured at school or whilst engaged in a school event in an expeditious manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of the Bill is to:

- (1) transfer the functions of the employment and school accident compensation cases from the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF) to the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, under the existing No-Fault Scheme;
- (2) redirect the mandated employers' deductions of 0.4 percent of the 1 percent NTPC levy for payment of employment and school accident cases to the Work Care Fund; and
- (3) provide for efficient processing of employment and school accident cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the objectives of the Bill is to:

- (1) ensure compensation is paid under the No-Fault Compensation Scheme for the personal injury or death of workers and pupils;
- (2) provide for efficient compensation processing services;
- (3) consolidate, integrate and implement employment and school accident compensation policies; and
- (4) promote sustainable and productive social protection standards in workplaces and schools.

The principles of the Bill:

- (1) The No-Fault Compensation Scheme, whereby the injured workers and students continue to receive compensation for workplace and school-related accidents, regardless of how the injury occurred or who was at fault.
- (2) The payment of weekly wages. The injured workers who are on medical leave due to workplace injuries are entitled to receive two-thirds of weekly wages whilst awaiting their final medical assessment.
- (3) On equity and access, the modernised accident compensation system aims to provide fair and equal compensation regardless of occupations or status. Compensation is applicable to any worker, whether at the shop floor or managerial position.

The merits, Sir, I wish to inform this august House of the benefits:

- (1) With clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and concise Standard Operating Procedures, we will significantly improve the processing timeframe for employment and school accident cases and ensure that timely compensation is paid to the injured workers, students, and dependents of deceased workers and students.
- (2) It will be a one-stop shop for the workers, students, and dependents as the entire processing will be done by my Ministry, and there will be no outsourcing as was done previously by ACCF to Veritas Finance Private Limited.
- (3) Savings to Government, this will save the government approximately \$1.2 million annually, which consists of \$900,000 as service fee to Veritas Finance Private Limited, and \$320,000 as salary to the CEO of ACCF. Between 2019 and 2024, we have spent to the tune of \$6 million, and that will now be a saving hereafter.
- (4) Medical expenses, the Bill also addresses the cost of medical examination and treatment, which will now be met by the employer. This will provide some relief to workers as currently

they themselves are paying the cost of medical examinations.

- (5) The duty to report employment and school accidents, this Bill also has a mandatory requirement for employers and the school controlling authorities to notify the Ministry of any employment and school accident cases. No longer will it be a requirement to apply for compensation by filling in the mandatory application form by the injured workers or students. It will no longer require the dependents to obtain a probate or letters of administration to be paid compensation, which is costly and time consuming. Sometimes it takes more than a year.
- (6) Time limitation, the Bill also extends the timeframe for investigation of cases from three years to six years, and this will ensure that social justice is delivered to the injured workers, students, and dependents of the deceased workers or students, as the case may be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those were some of the principles and merits of the Bill that is before us.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for the debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me. Speakers are reminded that they are given 20 minutes each for their respective presentations.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Work Care Bill 2025, an important piece of legislation that seeks to address a pressing need – a fair and efficient compensation for personal injuries and debt sustained in workplaces and in schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I must commend the Ministry of Employment for bringing this Bill forward, I must also stress that this legislation is far from being perfect. Establishing a Non-Fault Compensation Scheme, creating the Work Care Fund and clarifying process for accident reporting and compensation are set in the right direction. However, this Bill, as it currently stands, contains significant weaknesses that could undermine its very purpose. These shortcomings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, demand our urgent attention. I want to make it clear that the concerns I will highlight today are not just mine. They are echoed by stakeholders, including employers, workers, and industry representatives. Their voices, shared during public consultations and reported in the media, paint a picture of a Bill that requires further refinement to be truly effective.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to outline seven critical weaknesses in this Bill, supported by the insights gained from consultation, public submissions, and articles we have reviewed:

Lack of sustainability measures for the Work Care Fund - While the Work Care Fund is essential, the Bill does not provide clear mechanisms to ensure its long-term sustainability. Consultations revealed concerns from employees about the allocation of NTPC levy with 40 percent directed to the Fund. This redirection might ensure better management but how do we safeguard the Fund's viability in the face of economic downturn or increased volume of claims? Without a sustainable model, we risk exhausting this critical resource when it is needed the most.

Inadequate appeal process - This appeal process outlined in the Bill is limited to questions of law and directed solely to the High Court. This approach brings broader efforts to dispute resolution that could provide a quicker and more affordable remedies for workers and employees alike. Stakeholders, such as the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation have stressed the need for more critical reforms. Expanding the appeal process to include questions of fact and alternative mechanisms will make this legislation more accessible and equitable.

Static compensation caps - The caps on compensation which is in the tune of \$75,000 for fatal cases and permanent partial incapacity are static and fail to account for inflation or changing economic

conditions. This Bill lacks the mechanism to review and adjust these gaps over time, potentially leaving beneficiaries without adequate support in future years. For a Bill that seeks to provide sustainable and fair compensation, this omission is a glaring oversight.

The Ministry's broad discretionary powers - This Bill grants the Permanent Secretary wide-ranging discretionary powers including control of the compensation approvals and legal proceedings. While administrative authority is necessary, such powers must come with robust safeguards. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the stakeholders have pointed out, rushed consultation and limited transparency raise legitimate concerns about how these powers might be exercised. Oversight mechanisms must be included to ensure accountability and prevent inconsistencies.

Insufficient rehabilitation provisions - The Bill mentions rehabilitation but does not outline concrete measures to support the recovery and reintegration of injured workers or people. Employees have highlighted low productivity as a significant challenge, and rehabilitation programmes could play a vital role in addressing this issue. A practical well-defined rehabilitation initiative would not only benefit victims but will also help restore workplace and school productivity.

Ambiguities in employer and school responsibilities - The responsibilities of employers and school authorities are not sufficiently detailed in the Bill. During consultations, stakeholders place confusion about accident reporting requirements, particularly for committing accidents. This lack of clarity could lead to non-compliance or disputes which could ultimately delay the support the victims need. Clear guidelines must be introduced to address these ambiguities.

Financial burden on SMEs - Small and Medium Enterprises are already facing significant pressure and this Bill risk adding to their challenges. As noted by the Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation, mandatory levies and administrative requirements could force SMEs to reduce working hours or lay off employees. This would defeat the purpose of the Bill, as workers the very group this legislation seeks to protect would end up suffering the most. Tailored solutions such as tiered levies or compressed incentives are necessary to address these concerns.

Integration of ACCF insights, I would like to highlight the importance of leveraging data and insights from the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji. In the 2019 and 2020 financial year, the ACCF paid out approximately \$9.7 million motor vehicle, workplace and school accidents combined. However, the ACCF data does not provide specific figures, workplace and school accidents pointing to a lack of transparency that the Work Care Bill must address. Mandating annual reporting on accidents trends and compensation outcomes would stress an accountability and allows us to better allocate our resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Work Care Bill 2025 is a necessary piece of legislation, its weaknesses cannot be ignored. These are not minor issues; they are critical gaps that could undermine the Bill's success and harm those it aims to protect. The concerns raised by stakeholders including employers and workers are very clear. This Bill, in its current form risk getting financial add administrative burdens without guaranteeing the desired outcomes. Issues such as static compensation caps, vague and insufficient rehabilitation measures must be addressed urgently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Parliament must demand amendments that protect workers without crippling employees, safeguard the students without overwhelming schools, and deliver a framework that truly works for all stakeholders. This is our responsibility to ensure that this legislation is not just passed, but perfected.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I give the floor to the other speakers, I would remind them that the debate is basically on the principles and merits of the Bill.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I will be very brief, being as it is only the second reading. Just on the merits, earlier speakers mentioned quite a lot. My issue really is, I am grateful to the honourable Minister also because this is going through the normal process rather than swiftly through Standing Order 51. It will end up hopefully with the Committee to be able to vent and vet it even more.

The issue that I have, Mr. Speaker, is that this particular provision that has been made, now the Work Care Bill and a creation of the fund, it is just literally the same thing that was being done or is being done by the ACCF. I understand the honourable Minister may have some reservations because some of the work was farmed out, outsourced, but that is a practice around the world where things are outsourced and done for purposes of getting it expedited or done efficiently.

So, if there was an issue that arose with respect to getting these things done in an expeditious fashion, maybe the beefing up of the ACCF was the solution rather than creating an entirely new law with respect to the Work Care Bill and the same thing and everything that is in here, I am assuming now also that exactly the same as what the ACCF was doing. The ACCF was a new institution, maybe it just needed to be tweaked, Sir, and I really do not understand why a new Work Care Fund has been created also because that fund has to be funded somehow.

The fund that was actually going to the ACCF, now we will have to see how that is going to be apportioned in terms of the funds that were received by the ACCF. And from what I understand, the ACCF had done quite tremendously well, purely because it is a fund that established, when it was established, is a no-fault-based one. I think there are other no-fault-based funds, et cetera, or Accident Compensation Units that are in and around New Zealand which attend to the same thing and they are all done under the same roof. Now the creation of this means the creation of more staff, it means more public servants, it means it is going to go back to the very institution or the Ministry that was taking care of this in the first place. Also because quite a number of problems existed within that Ministry to ensure that this was efficiently done.

So, you are going to balloon the Civil Service even more with respect to creating more staff in a new division within the Ministry to take care of just this. It is not efficient use of resources. It would have been best to beef up the ACCF to ensure whatever the policy is with respect to this particular government on the Accident Compensation Unit to actually just give it back to the ACCF and said, "look, the board would have had to just look at it and say we need to beef up our resources to make sure that we are even more efficient."

Everyone understands that it needs to be reviewed every few years with most institutions that exist, all of them in fact. But this is not in my opinion, Sir. This is not the right way forward with respect to it. But I am grateful that the honourable Minister is actually allowing this to go through the normal process, and it will be a Committee that takes care of it, deals with it and gets an opinion and we can actually have a chat with the general public on this at a later stage.

Just a short intervention on that, but I have also one query and reservation and I hope the honourable Minister can clarify this. This is a Bill, I hope the work that is supposed to be taken care of by the ACCF is not already being done by the Ministry, without the necessary law being in place. From what I understand, I am not sure, I am subject to correction by the honourable Minister himself, if the work has actually already been fund out to the Ministry, under what law is that being done? Because from what I understand, I think the earlier laws had been repealed. So just a word of caution on that one, Mr. Speaker, and that is my contribution.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, honourable Minister for bringing this particular Bill under the normal process of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, those who are sitting in this august House today might recall, I stood up in this Parliament the day there was a motion to take the Workplace Injury

Compensation from ACCF back to the Ministry. At that point in time, Mr. Speaker, I stated that the Workmen's Compensation Act was repealed. All the pending cases could have gone through that particular Act to be compensated, but no new cases could have been registered because that particular Act was repealed.

At that point in time, I was told that I was not a lawyer, I did not know my stuff, et cetera - comments came from the Government side. I would like to thank the new Attorney-General for identifying the issue and bringing this particular Bill, because the Attorney-General then argued that the repealed Bill would be used to compensate these compensations.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Listen, listen!

All these new cases would be compensated according to the Workmen's Compensation. This is the proof because if that particular Bill would not have been repealed, they would have made amendments to the Workmen's Compensation Bill; not a new Bill in this august House. I was very specific and clear that that particular Bill has been repealed.

So, the Ministry for the past two years has been dealing with all these cases without any legislation, Now we have the Work Care Bill before us to legalise because this Government has been doing things and going back and then legalising things. For the past two years, they have been working, registering the complaints about work-related injuries at the Ministry without any legislation. Again, Mr. Speaker, I will say, I am not a lawyer, but these are some of the simple things that should have been picked up by then, when the Opposition was telling Government that this was wrong.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, let me interrupt you. Can you keep to the principles and the merits of the Bill presently before the House? You are weaving your way back into history. You focus on the principles as your colleague has rightfully done in the beginning.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The ACCF was created with a no-fault policy. This was first in nature, which is also part of this particular Bill, whereby no one had to prove the negligence of anyone else to get compensated. The ACCF was created because people were running for their third-party policies to be compensated, and they had to go to court, wait for a number of years, and most of the time, it was dependant on the court whether the victim is going to be compensated or not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to see all these sections that were part of Accident Compensation Act as well are a part of the Work Care Bill. As you know, the Workmen Compensation Act was one of the major issues why there was a lot of delays. It was outdated, there were a lot of bureaucratic processes, you had to go through tribunals and courts, and some people had actually passed on before it was decided that they were going to be compensated for their injuries. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this new legislation, we hope to remove all those bureaucratic processes, ease the process and expedite the payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another good thing about this Bill is that similar to the Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill, it also has fixed amounts. If you are injured at the workplace, if there is a death at the workplace, there is a fixed amount that you are going to get and that, again, relates to no-fault policy. All this was done by ACCF to assist the victims, and it is good to see that these clauses are there in villages as well to assist the victims who will now come to the Ministry under this legislation to get compensated. Although it is a little bit late, it is good to see that this Bill is here because there are a lot of people out there who are suffering and they need to be compensated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for bringing this Bill for a second reading and we look forward to the report that will be formulated by the Committee for third reading.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per the rule, I had already alluded to the principles and the merits of the Bill. I have the answers to all the questions that have been raised by the honourable Members of the Opposition which is in the substantive Bill.

I want to very briefly go into the history of this. The Accident Compensation Commission was established in 2017 to look after motor vehicle accident payments. That was its role. It was paid through the levies that were imposed on the owners of the vehicles. That is where it was paid.

In 2019, when the former Minister for Economy, whatever he was called, I cannot remember the full title and I apologise for that because I have high respect for him, but he announced all of a sudden in that Budget. There was no consultation, and it was not even known to his Government members. It was announced in the Budget that thereafter, ACCF would take over the responsibility of the No Faults Team for paying compensation to workers who were injured at the workplace including school accidents.

That is how ACCF came to take that responsibility away from the Ministry. Even after they had taken it away, the Ministry was still doing 70 percent of the work because we had the Standard Operating Procedures, we had the people and the staff who were competent with doing the work.

All the investigations were conducted by the Ministry and all the two-thirds payment that was supposed to be made to the workers while they were injured, waiting for compensation, was made on sick leave, medical leave and was policed by the Ministry. So, all ACCF did was do the administration.

That also was outsourced to Veritas. Sir, ACCF was writing the cheques. Veritas was charging \$900,000 a year – an outsourced administration. I do not know where Veritas is and who owns it but you can always find out – Google will help you.

When the interim Board was established, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the honourable Minister for Justice and appointment was made, that is when the interim Board started looking after the whole thing, and the responsibility came to the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to effectiveness and expeditious early processing, we processed twice as many cases in eight months as ACCF was doing it in 12 months – so expeditious, efficient and everything. They did not even have any SOP and KPIs. We have now developed all that in the Ministry. These are some of the key points that I want to briefly relay to the honourable Members.

It is not that the Permanent Secretary is going to take the entire responsibility, there is going to be a tripartite Board, like all other Boards, such as the National Occupational Health and Safety Board, the Employment Relations Advisory Board and the National Employment Centre Board. There is also going to be a tripartite Board where the workers', employers' and the Government representatives will be present and will make decisions.

The administration will be for the Permanent Secretary and the staff of the Ministry. That is how it is going to operate. I thought I would briefly advise the honourable Members not to get overly worried. Everything is there and your concerns are taken care of. When the Bill is fully discussed, we will be able to further explain to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is going to go to the Sector Committee, so, there is a lot more room for consultation. As far as consultation is concerned, honourable Joseph Nand, my Ministry – from 7th

to 20th February – the entire country, people and the public were consulted; the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation and the Fiji Trade Union Congress were consulted separately. Apart from that, there is a National Employment, National Occupational Safety and Health Board, which is a tripartite Board, and that Board has approved it. It has gone through that Board.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can I just interrupt your conversation (referring to the honourable Members of the Opposition). I can hear your exchange from here, it is quite audible. Can you, please, keep it down or go outside for that purpose?

Parliament will vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Work Care Fund Bill 2025, moved under Standing Order 51, is referred to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and to report back to Parliament in the June Sitting]

ACCIDENT COMPENSATION (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 85(1) I move:

That the Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 08/2025), be read a second time.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call upon the mover of the motion, I remind honourable Members that pursuant to Standing Order 85(1,) the debate will be on the principles and the merits of the Bill only

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF) was established under the Accident Compensation Act 2017, with the intention to compensate the victims of motor vehicle accidents under a no-fault compensation scheme. The amendment Bill is aimed at providing compensation to victims of motor vehicle accidents in a timely manner.

The purpose of this amendment Bill, Sir, ensures that ACCF solely focusses on processing the motor vehicle accident cases, which was the reason for its establishment right at the beginning. Secondly, the payment of motor vehicle accident cases will be sourced from the motor vehicle accident levies, which is paid by motor vehicle owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key principles of the amendment Bill is:

- (1) to maintain the no-fault compensation whereby the victims of motor vehicle accident cases can claim for compensation with ACCF.
- (2) that the amendment to the existing Accident Compensation Act 2017 provides for the transfer of employment and school accident-related components, which will be processed by my Ministry under the Work Care Bill 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment of the legislation also comprises the transitional provision of any proceeding, claim or action for compensation for personal injury or death, as a result of an accident that is pending before the commencement of the proposed amendment Bill. Consequently, it will amend the Accident Compensation Regulations 2017 to delete provisions that relate to

employment accidents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill will significantly improve the processing timeframe for motor vehicle accident cases, as ACCF will now solely focus on motor vehicle accident cases only, as it was initially set up for in 2017. Secondly, the ACCF will now be able to focus more on conducting road safety awareness, which is a very important role, considering the increasing number of road accidents that we see nowadays. That will also be a very helpful initiative.

That is all that I have to say on for now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have the speakers on my list, but I think given the time, we will have a break and suspend proceedings for dinner. I understand that dinner is ready and served in the Big Committee Room.

At this point, we will suspend proceedings for dinner. Parliament will resume proceedings in an hour's time.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.25 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.30 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the second reading of the Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill 2025 has already been introduced by the Minister and now the floor is open for debate on the motion. I have the list of speakers and they are allotted 30 minutes each.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I rise today to speak on the Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill 2025. Sir, before I continue, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his assistance. Four or five people approached me for assistance and I referred them to the honourable Minister, and all have been paid, so thank you honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill brings many changes, but not all of them are positive. As I have said earlier during my contribution to the Work Care Bill 2025, any legislation we pass in this Parliament must be for the good of the people, and it must be fair and effective. Unfortunately, this Bill raises serious concerns, and I believe we need to take a closer look at its impact.

Mr Speaker, Sir, this Bill makes important changes to the Accident Compensation Act 2017. Let me highlight the key points:

- (1) Narrowing the scope - the Act will now only apply to motor vehicle accidents. Other types of accidents, like workplace or school-related ones, have been removed and will now fall under the Work Care Bill 2025.
- (2) Revoking regulations - the regulations for employment and school accidents are being revoked. The responsibility for these accidents is now being handed over to the Ministry of Employment through the Work Care Framework.
- (3) Transitional arrangements - any claims for school or workplace accidents that are still pending will be dealt with under the existing Act, but the compensation will be paid from the new Work Care Fund,
- (4) Appeals to the High Court – A decision by the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF) can now be appealed to the High Court, but only on the question of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while these changes may seem straightforward, they leave us with some serious issues that cannot be ignored. First of all, let me ask, why is the Government dismantling the ACCF? The ACCF has done so much for the people of Fiji. It is there to help individuals and families when they needed it most.

Since its creation, the ACCF has paid out over \$9 million compensation for motor vehicle, workplace and school accidents. That money has helped thousands of people and their families during very difficult times. Why are we shutting down a system that has worked so well? Would it not be more sensible to strengthen the ACCF to make it better and more efficient?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by limiting the Act to motor vehicle accidents, we are creating a gap. Accidents that happen in schools or workplace will now depend entirely on the Work Care Framework. That creates confusion for people who are already dealing with enough stress after an accident. It also raises the question, why can we not keep those responsibilities under ACCF, the institution that already has the expertise and experience to handle them?

Another problem, Sir, is the restricted appeals process. People can only appeal to the High Court on the question of law. What if the problem is not about the law and about the facts or the process? What if someone feels that they are treated unfairly but it is not an illegal issue? The limitation could deny justice to many people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the transitional arrangements are also unclear. How will we ensure that

pending claims are handled quickly and fairly? What systems are in place to make sure that no one falls through the cracks during the handover? The lack of details is very concerning.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not making the most of ACCF's knowledge and data. Over the years, the ACCF has collected valuable information on accidents and compensation. This data could be used to improve our systems and make them more effective. Instead, we are throwing it all away as we move to a new framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill has too many flaws. It fails to recognise the success of ACCF and the trust it has built with the people of Fiji. It narrows the scope of compensation, limits the appeal process, creates confusion during transition and wastes valuable data. We cannot support a Bill that dismantles a system that has helped so many people. Instead of breaking the ACCF apart, we should be working to improve it. We should be building upon its success, not starting over with something new or unproven. The ACCF has been a lifeline for many Fijians. It has helped families rebuild their lives after tragic accidents. This is an institution that deserves our support, not our dismissal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the consultation committee to take a closer look at this Bill. These weaknesses must be addressed before it can move forward. We owe it to the people of Fiji to get this right. Let us not rush this process. Let us make sure that the system we put in place truly deserves the needs of our people.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief because my reservations on this particular Bill will be the exact same on the earlier ones, basically saying that this is a facilitative Bill responding to the Work Care Bill. But there is something in here that is rather worrying, Mr. Speaker, Sir that probably needs to be vetted and I refer to clause 4(2) of the Bill where they are deleting sub-clause 2 and substituting it with a provision that says "any person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Commission under this Act has a right to appeal that decision to the High Court on a question of law."

I started to think, Sir, what would they appeal out of a decision made by the Commission wherein there is pretty much 100 per cent in terms of no fault-based compensation? Pretty much every case that comes before it, is compensated for. So, it could probably only be a quantum and it says on a question of law. I fail to see that. I know the honourable Attorney-General might be able to shed some light on it when he does speak.

At the moment, I really do not see the reason for that particular provision being put in there. Maybe I have not practised for a while, so that might be something. But just that particular one, and again, a perfectly running institution, the ACCF is taking away the powers that it has with respect to compensation for school accidents, work accidents, et cetera, removing it and creating another body and all those bodies that exist around the world where you have got compensation bodies, no-fault based ones, all of these things sit under the same roof again. We are doubling up on the same thing. I do not see any reason for it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are my reservations.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just briefly responding to honourable Joseph Nand, talking about the effectiveness and efficiency of ACCF. Let me inform this august House that we have inherited 14,000 cases that have been pending just because ACCF required the worker to also register his or her claim on a prescribed form. Whereas the employer is required to report, and when the employer reports, that is when we should activate it instead of waiting for the worker. These workers have all missed out now, that is why we have extended the time period from three years to six years so that we can see how we can assist them.

The other case of the worker appealing to the court, in the previous arrangement, if a worker was given a certain quantum award by ACCF and the worker decided to go to court because he or she was unhappy, and if the court made a decision against that appeal for a further increase in the

compensation, then ACCF would deny paying whatever they had awarded as well. So, all that has now being changed. So those are a couple of things I thought I would mention. As far as the processing of claims is concerned, I have stated earlier that we have processed almost double the number of claims that ACCF used to process in the period that we have been assisting.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Vote cast:

Ayes	-	33
Noes	-	11
Not voted	-	10
Abstained	-	1

Motion agreed to.

RATIFICATION OF UNCLOS AND BBNJ AGREEMENT

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purpose of Section 51 of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 130(4), I move:

That Parliament approves that Fiji ratifies the agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement).

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

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, the BBNJ Agreement is a landmark international agreement adopted on the 19th June, 2023, after nearly two decades of negotiations under the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It is the third implementing agreement of UNCLOS.

The agreement aims to enable the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ), namely the high seas, for present and future generations. To achieve this, the agreement sets out binding legal obligations and guidance related to four core areas, the Agreement -

- (1) serves to regulate activities related to the collection and use of marine genetic resources, ensuring the equitable sharing of the benefits of all those resources with all states;
- (2) regulates area-based management tools such as marine protected areas, ensuring these tools are deployed based on the best available scientific evidence and knowledge, while also ensuring that states utilise these management arrangements in alignment with agreed conservation and sustainable use objectives;
- (3) introduces provisions that require environmental impact assessments to be conducted on activities in the high seas; and
- (4) promotes capacity building and the transfer of marine technology to assist developing states to fulfil their obligations under the treaty and to support their conservation objectives.

Article 6 of the agreement, Mr. Speaker, clarifies the ratification of the agreement will not affect our sovereign rights or jurisdiction or indeed any existing disputes. This treaty is focused on providing a legal framework for the management of marine areas beyond the scope of national jurisdictions. To support these objectives, the agreement establishes critical mechanisms under part (6), including a

conference of the parties under Article 48, to function as the governing and decision-making body. A scientific body established under Article 49 to provide expert advice on technical as well as scientific matters. A clearinghouse mechanism established under Article 51 to share information, data, and to facilitate cooperation.

Under Article 50, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a secretariat is established to provide administrative as well as logistical support of the implementation of the agreement. Committees will also be established for key implementation activities including an access and benefit sharing committee under Article 50, a capacity building and transfer of marine technology committee under Article 46, and implementation and compliance committee under Article 55, and finally, a finance committee under Article 52.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's future is tied to the ocean, and we heard a few days ago the eloquent presentation of the honourable Leader of the Opposition who spoke about ocean issues. Our prosperity, our food security and resilience – in the face of the escalating impacts of the climate crisis are inseparable from the health of our marine ecosystems. It is with this understanding that I will now wish to emphasise the clear and compelling benefits of Fiji ratifying the BBNJ Agreement.

While the Agreement addresses areas beyond national jurisdiction, its impact is not distant or abstract for us. Ocean currents, migratory species and marine pollution move across boundaries. The state of the high seas directly affects Fiji's own marine spaces. By participating in this global framework, Fiji will help safeguard the broader oceanic environment on which our communities and economy depends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ratification will reinforce Fiji's leadership in global ocean governance. As custodians of the Blue Pacific, it is our duty and right to shape the future of our ocean. Early ratification will ensure that Fiji has a seat at the table where decisions are made on vital matters, such as the designation of marine protected areas in the high seas, as well as the development of new conservation measures. It will strengthen our voice and our influence both regionally and internationally.

Under Article 14, Fiji will be entitled to a fair and equitable share of benefits arising from the use of marine genetic resources that are found in the high seas. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these resources – which may contribute to medical discoveries, biotechnology and sustainable development progress will be shared in a manner that supports both conservation and global equity. Ratification will ensure that Fiji can be a direct beneficiary of these arrangements. It will also enable our participation in future scientific and economic opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ratification unlocks access to significant capacity building and technology transfer initiatives. Our marine scientists, policymakers and enforcement bodies stand to benefit from training, research partnerships, new monitoring technologies and scientific data, all of which, will enhance Fiji's capacity to sustainably manage and protect our precious marine environment. The Agreement strengthens environmental safeguards in the high seas. Activities such as deep-sea bed mining, industrial fishing and large-scale exploitation will be subject to rigorous environmental impact assessments. This will help preserve interconnected ecosystems vital to Fiji, including tumulus stocks and coral reefs, both of which are critical to our food security, economy and climate resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Agreement places traditional knowledge at its heart, recognising the vital role of indigenous and local communities. Our ancestral knowledge and practises – passed down through generations will be acknowledged and incorporated into global conservation strategies, ensuring that Fiji's heritage and knowledge informs international ocean governance. By ratifying the BBNJ, Fiji will contribute meaningfully to regional solidarity. Early ratification will position the Pacific as a united bloc, advocating for stronger protection, effective and sustainable marine resource management, and greater international action to support ocean resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will also open avenues for partnerships, investment and regional support that will complement both national and regional efforts. The benefits of ratification are clear, not only for Fiji today, but for future generations. The BBNJ Agreement represents an historic opportunity for us to further secure our future, uphold our stewardship obligations and lead by example in our effort to establish a sustainable and resilient Blue Pacific.

I turn, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the domestic legal implications of ratification. While the BBNJ Agreement primarily regulates activities beyond national jurisdiction, its implementation may require us to review and potentially amend or strengthen certain domestic legal frameworks, and these include the Marine Spaces Act, the Environmental Management Act, the Fisheries Act, the Maritime Transport Act, as well as the Offshore Fisheries Management Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's ratification would not require immediate legislative reform, but we must be initiative-taking in aligning our legal and institutional frameworks with the obligations in the agreement as the associated global regime develops. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the Maritime Affairs Coordinating Committee, of which the Solicitor General's Office is a member, will take a lead role in conducting a comprehensive review of national legislative frameworks with development partners to facilitate the implementation of the agreement.

On financial implications, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I advise or commend this to the honourable Parliament. It is important to address the financial obligations that will arise from Fiji's ratification of the BBNJ Agreement. Under Article 52, for example, parties will be required to contribute to the financing of the activities for the implementation of the agreement, including financing the institutions established under the agreement. These contributions are made in accordance with each party's capacity to pay, taking into account their national circumstances.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's contributions will be manageable, similar to scale to Fiji's assessed contributions under other multilateral environmental agreements. The agreement also establishes a voluntary trust fund and a special fund which will provide financial assistance to developing countries, and I hope also to SIDS in particular, to support participation in international meetings, as well as to provide capacity building and support the implementation needs of developing countries. Although financial contributions from parties are anticipated, they will not be burdensome, Mr. Speaker, Sir, especially as I have mentioned in the context of SIDS.

Additionally, Fiji will benefit from the financial support available through the agreement's funding mechanism. As addressed earlier, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits of ratifying this agreement far outweigh the financial contributions that will be required of us as a country, both in monetary as well as non-monetary terms, for both present as well as future generations.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, institutions that will be established under the BBNJ Agreement are still being formed. The early ratification of the agreement allows Fiji to play a pivotal role in shaping ocean governance, particularly in relation to activities at the high seas, development of rules for benefit-sharing and access to capacity-building and the required arrangements for monitoring and compliance. Ratification of this agreement is directly aligned with our commitment to ocean conservation as articulated across our national policies and plans, and will support Fiji's ability to meet the targets set under Sustainable Development Goal 14.

For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recommend the ratification of the BBNJ Agreement to this honourable House and would urge all honourable Members to support this motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers. Each speaker is allocated 20 minutes for their intervention.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before the floor, and also to lend my support on the motion that Parliament approves that Fiji ratifies the agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction or more commonly known as the BBNJ Agreement. The honourable Attorney-General has covered the issue in great detail, and I have no intention of repeating most of what the honourable Attorney-General has covered. But again, we all agree that this is very important not only for Fiji, but for the Pacific Island Developing States AOSIS and of course the friends of the Oceans as more known in the multilateral and regional forums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated by the honourable Attorney-General the BBNJ was adopted in 2023, but in terms of the international commitments this started way back during COP7 of Convention on the Biological Diversity (CBD), which was held in 2004 and was agreed then way back in 2004. It was agreed that there is an urgent need for international cooperation and action to improve conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in marine areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. Including the establishment of further marine protected areas consistent with international law.

As we are all aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this BBNJ occurs in the areas beyond national jurisdiction or ABNJ as more commonly known and I know that Fiji Navy used to provide technical assistance particularly in ABNJ to our office in New York over the years and I wish to acknowledge the Fiji Navy for their contribution in ABNJ work and then things developed over the years. From 2004 there was a UNGA resolution. In 2007 and most importantly Mr. Speaker, Sir, lately in 2020 there was an agreement amongst a few heads of states and that led to the adoption of the agreement on the BBNJ. I spoke at length the other day about why the ocean is so important to us.

It is our life, our history, it is our culture, and it defines us and most of our economic development particularly for Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), we are heavily dependent on our oceans. It is encouraging to see that our brothers, a few of our sister states within PSIDS have ratified the BBNJ ahead of us. But there was high expectations Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji to ratify this earlier than the others.

The honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change talked about Fiji being the first country to ratify the Paris Agreement. It is the same expectation too on the BBNJ because UNCLOS as we are well aware of are very closely linked to Fiji, Ambassador Satya Nandan as you are well aware Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, we have very strong links to UNCLOS, not only that, but the honourable Attorney-General has talked about our leadership in ocean space globally. We have talked about Fiji, the honourable Koroilavesau, as the co-chairs of the first World Oceans Conference and we look forward to UNOC 3. And I know that the honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change and his team are preparing for that.

As I have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were high expectations that Fiji was going to be one of the first countries, or maybe the first country to ratify this BBNJ. But for whatever reason I must acknowledge again the Minister for Environment and Climate Change during the last Parliament sitting in one of his interventions he talked about our previous involvement in the ocean space. And after that intervention by the honourable Minister, I approached him and told him, "Please, if there is something that you can do for the oceans, let us ratify BBNJ before Nice in France in June." We thank the honourable Bulitavu for assisting and linking up with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now see this motion before the House today.

It is important for us, very, very important. There are high expectations. When we went to the UNGA last year in September, every friends of the oceans were asking us. When we went to COP29, every friend of the oceans were asking us, when will Fiji ratify? When will Fiji ratify BBNJ? Even the prime, Ambassador Tarakinikini asked us, myself and the honourable Naivalurua were not aware of the progress, but he was expecting us to come with the instruments for the ratification last September.

What is important now is for us to move forward and take responsibility as a responsible global citizen. For us, multilateralism is important and particularly when it comes to oceans, we are already there. The honourable Prime Minister talks about the oceans of peace probably through this ratification we can take that leadership responsibility again and bring the friends of the oceans into it as well because there is also a pending assignment that we started way back in COP23 during our presidency and that is to lend oceans into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process.

The Permanent Secretary, Dr. Sivendra Michael and the team would recall that when we had the pre-departure briefing last year for COP29, this is one of the questions that I raised. Who is leading the ocean negotiations because there is high expectations of Fiji when it comes to oceans agenda.

Mr. Speaker, I will not go into the benefits that has already been highlighted but I think we need to keep stressing that if we look at the benefits that is in the Report of the Committee, again, it is focused on the three pillars of sustainable development. They are economic costs, environmental costs and social costs as well. If we address these issues properly and for us where we lack capacity, technology, when we rectify this, we will be able to get these assistance from our partners and of course, hopefully ensure that we benefit from the ratification as well.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that when we talk about diversity, some are arguing that because of the migratory species but that is just a component of it. There are genetic biodiversity. There is a lot of other benefits that are hidden there that will come to the fore, once we ratify this and I hope that we will make the most of it.

Regionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have our oceans commissioner and now, that role has been separated from the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). We hope that this will also assist the office of the office commissioner in terms of bringing together the common interests of small island developing states within the Pacific. Not only that, Sir, because one of the early requirements when it came to international commitments is what we call the Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs). We have PIFS under the Ocean Commissioner and we have FFA as well. I hope that these organisations will benefit and our ministries, our agencies responsible will work collaboratively and ensure that our commitments and, of course, the operationalisation of this once it is ratified will bring all the necessary benefits to our beloved Fiji.

I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that with this, we will become to niche with pride and satisfaction as well and hopefully we will get back our position in terms of leadership in the global ocean space where we rightly belong.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It is new implementing agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, commonly known as the BBNJ Treaty.

This agreement is a landmark treaty that strengthens the sustainable management of our high seas, ensuring that marine resources, including highly migratory species such as tuna, are effectively conserved and utilised for the benefit of present and future generations. As alluded to by the honourable Attorney-General, the BBNJ Agreement addresses the four primary elements:

- (1) marine genetic resources;
- (2) area-based management tools;
- (3) environment impact assessment; and
- (4) capacity building and transfer of marine technology.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji has played a proactive role in shaping the BBNJ Agreement, and the Ministry of Fisheries, serving as a key driver in all four preparatory committee meetings and intergovernmental conferences throughout. Throughout these discussions, Mr. Speaker, Fiji advocated strongly on the interest of Pacific Island nations, the Pacific small island developing states on the seeds block at the UN, ensuring that regional perspectives on sustainable ocean governance were well represented.

During the prep comms, Fiji emphasised the importance of equitable access to marine genetic resources, regional capacity building, and robust compliance and mechanisms for high seas governance, while also emphasising the continued observance of resolution 69 of 292, particularly on not undermining existing institutions and processes.

The Ministry of Fisheries was instrumental in ensuring that the needs of developing island states were reflected in the agreements framework and played a critical role in providing technical expertise through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contributing to Fiji's delegation throughout the negotiation process.

Mr. Speaker, in the subsequent intergovernmental conferences, Fiji continued to push for the inclusion of strong environmental safeguards and financing mechanisms to support the implementation in SIDS in July 2024. Fiji hosted the Pacific Regional Workshop in Suva, which was organised by the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the sea in collaboration with the Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner (OPOC). This workshop provided a platform for Pacific nations to engage with the agreement's provisions and align their regional priorities for implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BBNJ Agreement continues to take shape. It is advisable for Fiji's Ministry of Fisheries to elevate its role in the process, given the pace of change in these discussions and the existing interplay of fisheries processes and institutions that need to be considered in terms of the impact the Agreement implementation may have on fisheries management and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if institutionalised in a separate regional governance structure, then Regional Areas Marine Biodiversity Organisations, known as RAMBOs, could be proposed to provide a dedicated non-encroaching regional governance structure to manage the key elements of the BBNJ Agreement. However, it should be noted that such entities or any BBNJ entity must not undermine existing processes of institutions, like Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) and to focus with clearly defined parameters, its work on ensuring biodiversity conservation in the areas beyond national jurisdiction that align with national interests, first and foremost, and how those interests operate on the existing regional stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I end my contribution, I strongly encourage our negotiators, under the BBNJ Agreement and all other future instruments, to take their places as stewards and look towards the benefit of our future generations. I encourage them to take on the consultative process with an open mind to the nation's needs and the benefits of our future generations, and to pursue discussions that encourage the protection of Fiji's sovereignty and sovereign rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries stands committed to working with key Government agencies, non-governmental organisations and regional bodies to ensure the successful implementation of this Treaty at the national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ratification of the BBNJ is also timely, as the Ministry of Fisheries is currently reviewing its Offshore Fisheries Management Act 2012 and its subsequent regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in noting that the BBNJ Agreement is open for signature and will enter into force 120 days after the date of deposit of the 60th Instrument of Ratification approval, acceptance or accession, I offer my support and reaffirm the Ministry of Fisheries commitment to ensuring that this

Agreement is effectively integrated into our national legislation, policies and frameworks. I thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the ratification of the BBNJ Agreement. This global treaty provides a long overdue framework to protect marine biodiversity in international waters, that is, areas beyond any single nation's jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Small Island Developing State, Fiji is not defined by the size of our land or economy, but by the vastness of our ocean, our identity, our livelihoods, our food security and our climate resilience that are all tied to the health of our marine ecosystem. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only right that we step forward and fulfil our obligation as custodians of the ocean. In that regard, Fiji must never remain on the sidelines. We must take our rightful place at the table when decisions are made about the high seas, decisions that will shape the future of our people, our economy and our sovereignty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Agreement is a step in the right direction, and I say this clearly, Fiji should ratify this Agreement. The benefits are clear, and they outweigh the risks -

- (1) It reaffirms Fiji's global leadership in climate and ocean diplomacy; it gives us a meaningful voice in how the high seas – which cover nearly half the planet – are governed; and it ensures that Fiji has a voice and a vote in how marine resources are governed far beyond our EEZ.
- (2) It opens doors for collaboration in science, technology and capacity building, which we cannot access alone. This Treaty helps level the playing field.
- (3) It paves the way for fair and equitable sharing of benefits from marine genetic resources. We just heard from our honourable Leader of the Opposition, that it is not about tuna, but also about those microorganisms in the high seas that are already being used in global research for medicine and for biotechnology. Without this Agreement, countries like Fiji, risk being left behind, as others commercialise what belongs to us all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not ratify with blindfolds. We must proceed with our eyes wide open. We must be wary of unequal implementation. Wealthier nations have more ships, more scientists, more satellites. If we are to participate meaningfully – not just symbolically – this Treaty must come with real support for small nations like ours. We must also ensure our future development is not unfairly restricted, whether it is in deep sea exploration or high seas fishing. Sustainability must not come at the cost of sovereignty or economic survival. Any restriction must come with safeguards, fair compensation, and viable alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must not allow this Treaty to become another burden on our overstretched institutions. Fiji must secure technical and financial assistance to meet its obligation. If not, what is meant to be a tool for equality, could turn into a new burden for Fiji to bear. Yes, we support the BBNJ Agreement because it allows us to shape global rules and protect our ocean heritage, but we must do so with clear priorities, strong advocacy and a firm voice in global arenas.

We must ensure this Treaty delivers, not just for the powerful, but for the vulnerable; not just for the wealthy, but for the ocean-dependent nations like ours. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us embrace this Agreement not with blind trust, but with confidence, vigilance and a strategy that protects Fiji's interests.

Let us be clear; ocean connects and it connects us all, but for Fiji, ocean defines us. Ratifying the BBNJ Agreement is not about protecting marine biodiversity but about protecting our sovereignty, our future, and the rights of the generations yet to come. I fully support the ratification of BBNJ.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to this important motion to support Fiji's accession to the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty. This is not only a legal step, but a generational one for our people, our region and for the future of the Blue Pacific and Ocean of Peace.

On the global and regional commitment, today, over 100 countries have signed the BBNJ Treaty and over 20 countries have ratified. In our region, 13 Pacific Island Countries have added their voice, reflecting the region's unity and shared values for the ocean.

Fiji stands at the centre as a hub for the Western Pacific region, and a leader in advancing sustainable ocean policies over Pacific Island neighbourhoods that look to us for leadership, governance, for regional harmony, for peace and stability.

In aligning to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), this Treaty builds on the UNCLOS to which Fiji is committed to party, while UNCLOS lays the foundation for ocean rights and responsibility. The BBNJ Treaty strengthens what lies beyond our EEZ - those high seas that are vital to global ecological balance, but beyond any single nation's control. By supporting this Treaty, we protect our sovereignty, maritime rights within our EEZ, while upholding global obligations to the areas beyond. We send a message that Fiji values both, national stewardship and international solidarity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agreement includes provision for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of proposed activity in the high seas to assess significant or harmful impacts. Parties to the agreement can use existing national EIA processes for this assessment. The Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Environment, during the public submission, ensured the Committee that robust procedures are in place to strengthen national capacity for implementation.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, the Agreement urges parties to cooperate in supporting developing countries to enhance marine- scientific and technological capacity. Through this Agreement, we can strengthen our national capacity and capabilities, leveraging opportunities for research to support our ability to take base on the best available science.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, subsequently, we will move with urgency to amend legislation to clarify legal ambiguities and establish EIA procedures that are culturally relevant and scientifically robust. Our Navy and regulators must be adequately resourced and legally empowered to monitor and enforce the provision of this Agreement in areas beyond our EEZ.

Most importantly, let us ensure that our implementation is inclusive, drawing on traditional knowledge, protecting indigenous rights, and upholding the principle of fairness and sustainability for all Pacific Islanders. The BBNJ provides a structure for a fair and equitable sharing of marine genetic resources, important for biotechnology, food science and pharmaceuticals. It ensures that benefits do not accrue only to those with expensive research vessels and deep-sea mining tools, but also to developing States like Fiji.

This Treaty goes beyond conservation. It offers tools to improve our scientific research, data collection and technological capabilities. It includes strong provisions for capacity building and technology transfer, tailored to Small Island Developing States like Fiji. This allows us to fully benefit from ocean governance, not just as participants, but as leaders with access to knowledge, tools and innovation that build our resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is about our ocean, our culture, our children and our inheritance. The ocean is more than a space - it is our culture, our identity and our livelihood. It binds our past to our future. It is the classroom for our children, marketplace for many families, and a church where we

worship the beauty of creation.

By ascending to the BBNJ Treaty, we affirm that Fiji will not stand idle while ocean degradation continues. Instead, we will lead, we will engage, and we will protect. I join the previous speakers to thank all stakeholders who presented in person and those who presented virtually to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, Fiji has never shied away from bold leadership, whether in climate diplomacy, health preparedness or peacekeeping. This is another such moment. Let this Parliament say yes to the Treaty that support UNCLOS and our sovereign maritime rights, fair access to ocean resources, strong EIA framework, empowered Pacific policy making and resilient sustainable ocean future. Let us do this for our children, for our culture and for our ocean.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee Secretariat and all stakeholders, who contributed to this important report. I support the motion by the honourable Attorney-General and I look forward to future ratification and the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, boldly, wisely and with togetherness.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Committee and its Secretariat for their tremendous hard work through public submissions and scrutiny. We have gathered here at this very historic moment today to ratify the BBNJ Treaty and strengthen Fiji's position towards global ocean governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the advantages are widely spoken of, of the EIAs, the capacity building, the area-based management tools and the marine genetic resources. I have had the privilege to go line by line, article by article of this Treaty, and I have definitely learnt a lot.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some grey areas that was brought by the stakeholders and the Committee had put questions forward as well. I would like to highlight this to Parliament and the people of Fiji as well on these grey areas that need amendment and where Fiji could request COP for amendments using Article 72.

One of the concerned areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of this Treaty is Article 11 where activities with respect to marine genetic resources of areas beyond national jurisdiction, Clause 4, states that no state shall claim or exercise sovereign or sovereign rights over marine genetic resources of areas beyond national jurisdiction. No such claim or exercise of sovereignty or sovereign rights shall be recognised. This is something a few stakeholders have put to the Committee's attention. PAFCO called for a greater deal on their marine protected areas under the Treaty which affect tuna fishing and the nature of tuna and its commercial risks if the stocks become inaccessible, but it works two ways. One is the tuna leaving our EEZ and the other one is the tuna travels through the high seas and comes into our EEZ.

The Pacific Ocean Commission has been a crucial coordinator in the BBNJ negotiations and when asked about youth participation, they stated that there was youth voices heard but it was not mandatory. But I thank the Committee for ensuring that many youth groups and networks were coming forward to the Committee for their submissions.

Another keynote to Parliament is that under the United Nations, there is a body, the International Seabed Authority (ISA) which has issued 32 licences to 22 deep sea mining contractors. Questions were asked as to who will benefit from this expedition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stated this to a few stakeholders that its extraction for those who benefit, exploitation for those who are at a loss, and Fiji should never be in a position to lose its resources. I also raised the question about who gets the most of the mining, and there is a formula to calculate this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were concerns raised about deep sea mining effects and even case studies for expedition that mimics deep sea mining because upon environmental degradation, there needs to be compensation and restoration will take years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that small nations do not fall vulnerable to any sort of exploitation when it comes to deep sea mining, that is quite later on.

Lastly, we had a really good submission from the Fiji Navy who support Fiji's Accession to the BBNJ Agreement. Some of the key advantages for the Navy include:

- improved conservation of shared marine resources;
- support of hydrographic data collection in deep sea regions; and
- strengthen regional partnerships and enhanced enforcement capacity through monitoring tools and international co-operation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noted that during the pandemic, there was a lot of movements in two pockets of the high seas, and our Exclusive Economic Zone is up to 1.3 million square miles. That is quite difficult for our authorities have whole coverage. And in fact, for a 14-day monitoring trip, costs about \$70,000 to \$80,000. What I see with this Treaty is the ability to cover most of our Exclusive Economic Zone if we are talking about monitoring the high seas. In terms of public nationwide consultations that we have done, I am urging the Government on the need to protect and protect our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to give some figures with our high seas in the Pacific region. In Queensland, Australia, a man was charged over 140 kilogrammes of cocaine importation. Another case, 90 kilogrammes of methamphetamine found at Auckland Airport. Another case, four tonnes of methamphetamine our drug bust in Fiji and packets of cocaine that came to our shores in 2018 and 2019 because the high seas were not monitored and due to that, there was major exploitation which this Treaty will ensure to protect our high seas and Exclusive Economic Zones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is, if this is happening to a neighbouring country, Fiji is of course not immune of this. The Fiji Navy emphasizes the strategic importance of these areas west of Fiji, often subject to illicit activities that sees the BBNJ as a tool to strengthening surveillance and governance in the high sea pockets.

Finally, this is a historic moment for Fiji, and I am glad I was a part of the ratification process at this edge. I support the ratification as the benefits weigh out some of the challenges which Fiji can negotiate at the COP, as Article 72 of the Treaty allows for any amendments in all efforts to boost Fiji's commitment for ocean resilience, sustainability and governance.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion that Fiji ratify the BBNJ Treaty. At the risk of repeating a lot of what has already been said, and this is a risk I run as someone who is speaking probably halfway through the list, I will carry on because I feel it is really important that Fiji becomes the 22nd country to ratify.

As I had said last Tuesday while presenting the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence's Report on the Treaty, our identity, our economy, and our way of lives are inextricably linked to the ocean and the BBNJ Treaty represents a landmark international commitment to protecting the biodiversity of the high seas, vital to global ecological balance. To repeat what the honourable Attorney-General has said, by ratifying this Treaty, Fiji will reinforce our leadership in ocean governance, building on our proud legacy from the UN Ocean Conference and COP23.

Mr. Speaker, from a technical standpoint, this treaty establishes four key pillars that we have already heard from the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, the honourable Attorney General and the honourable Leader of the Opposition. These are Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs) which will create a framework for access and equitable benefit sharing of valuable resources such as deep sea organisms used in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, with a focus on transparency and fairness. Area-based management tools, including our Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), will introduce mechanisms to designate and manage protected areas in the high seas, which will enhance the ecological resilience of our ocean ecosystem. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), the treaty requires activities in international waters to undergo rigorous assessments, ensuring that environmental considerations are fully integrated into decision-making. Also, capacity building and the transfer of marine technology.

Mr. Speaker, this is a critical component for countries like Fiji, and it assures that shows that Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have access to scientific tools, technical training, and data to participate fully in ocean governance.

Mr. Speaker, ratifying this treaty will not place a financial burden on Fiji. On the contrary, dedicated funding mechanisms have been incorporated and these include a voluntary trust fund under the BBNJ framework to support developing countries in attending meetings and negotiations. It also includes financial assistance for capacity building projects, including marine research, monitoring, and the deployment of new technologies, and the collaboration of the Global Environment Facility, or the GEF, and other international donors to support the implementation and compliance. So Fiji's ratification, Mr. Speaker, will position us to access all the support and more, build national capacity in marine science and law, and continue to lead on global ocean policy.

It is important to remember that the deep sea, Mr. Speaker, is a vast and complex environment and our understanding of it continues to grow through research and exploration. Palau ratified on 22nd January, 2024, the Federate States of Micronesia on 3rd June, 2024, and the Marshall Islands on 12th March, 2025. Therefore, in closing, I urge all honourable Members to support the ratification of the BBNJ Treaty tonight, making Fiji the second country to ratify.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the BBNJ Treaty. I think I am the last speaker on this agreement and my speech is going to be very short, since a lot has been said by those who spoke before me.

One of the objectives of this agreement is to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, by the present and in the long term through effective implementation of the relevant provisions of the Convention and further international cooperation and coordination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BBNJ Treaty offers Fiji an opportunity to strengthen multi-lateral diplomatic institutions and promote international cooperation towards global conservation efforts. The Treaty clearly establishes core obligations and principles for high seas conservation and sustainable management. The BBNJ Treaty will advance global collaboration around common goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Treaty will mitigate many challenges and inefficiencies inherent in the current regional and sector-based governance regime by creating a platform for working towards more cohesive integrated management. Strengthened biodiversity protections through a strong BBNJ treaty can enhance ecosystems, health, preserve genetic diversity, and improve fish stocks, leading to economic benefits for ocean-related industries. The ocean supports a wide range of renewable economic activities, generating shipping and biotechnology.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many coastal countries, including the Pacific Small Islands Developing States are motivated to explore how to grow their ocean-based economies. The benefits of a growing blue economy will only be realised if regulations and governance adequately protect the ocean's capacity to provide ecosystem goods and services in a holistic manner. While most of this ocean-based economic value comes from coastal areas, biodiversity protection in the high seas will enhance ecosystem services stemming from ABNJ, with benefits that can spill over and lead to more prosperous coastal sectors.

The BBNJ treaty will also promote global equity, a goal of the UN, and many of its member states. Currently, opportunities to explore, extract, and acquire wealth from ocean-based resources are not fairly considered or distributed among nations. Only a few wealthy nations possess the legal, institutional, or research capacities to access high seas, leading to disproportional benefits sharing from what is meant to be the global commons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the national level, the objectives of the BBNJ Treaty align with Fiji's national ocean policy and other national legislations and policies. Fiji is a party to United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), being the first country to sign the Convention when it opened for signature on 10th December, 1982. The BBNJ Treaty falls under UNCLOS, and as both instruments are aimed at conserving and sustainably managing our resources, both within national jurisdiction, and now in areas beyond national jurisdiction – meaning high seas – it is critical that Fiji also signs and ratifies the BBNJ Treaty.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am mindful of the hour, so I will try to keep the comments as succinct as possible. I rise in strong support of the recommendations by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the BBNJ Treaty. Let me begin by commending Madam Chairperson and the Members for their comprehensive and inclusive work.

The Committee's consultations has reached across Fiji, from government ministries to the academia, private sector, youth and traditional leaders, reflect a wide-ranging national interest in this Treaty, and what it represents for our sovereignty, our economy and our global standing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BBNJ Treaty is a once-in-a-generation legal instrument. It closes the gap in international law by providing binding rules for conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The high seas and the deep seabed, areas which make up nearly two-thirds of the global ocean. For a nation like Fiji, whose geography and destiny are deeply oceanic, this Treaty is not an abstract or symbolic document. It is a vital platform for defending our interests, advancing equity and asserting our identity as a large ocean state. The high seas, while beyond our Exclusive Economic Zone, are ecologically connected to our coastal waters.

What happens there – be it unregulated fishing pollution or the reckless exploitation of marine genetic resources – it directly affects our food systems, fisheries and our future. Fiji's leadership on ocean governance did not begin with this Treaty. At the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Fiji has played a prominent and principal role in shaping global rules to discipline harmful and fisheries subsidies.

The adoption of the WTO Agreement on fisheries subsidies in 2022 – known as “Fish 1” – was a historic milestone. It marks the first time that the WTO members agreed to prohibit certain forms of subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, particularly in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Fiji actively supported and championed that outcome because we understand that unchecked subsidies distort markets, incentivise overfishing and erode the viability of our coastal economies.

The WTO Agreement was a long overdue correction, albeit a partial one. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji continues to play a leadership role in the ongoing negotiations for the successor

agreement, known as “Fish 2”. The BBNJ reinforces and complements this work. Its provisions for high seas marine protected areas, for robust environmental impact assessments and for regulation of access to marine genetic resources all contribute to the same global objective to end the over-exploitation of our shared ocean commons and to empower coastal and island nations to participate in their stewardship.

In essence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the agreement for fisheries subsidies at the WTO and the BBNJ Treaty at the UN are part of the same global realignment. One that seeks to curb excesses, restore balance, and ensure that the benefits of the ocean are shared more equitably. Ratifying the BBNJ Treaty is entirely consistent with Fiji's long-standing positions with the blue economic future which we are committed to shaping.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes without saying that the BBNJ Treaty holds some promise in terms of stimulating Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the broader blue economy. It also dissects very powerfully with a national digital strategy, particularly in the area of data governance, digital public infrastructure, and scientific sovereignty.

As marine genetic material is increasingly digitised, stored, and analysed in global databases, Fiji must assert its place in the governance of that information. The BBNJ Treaty includes provisions for digital sequence information and creates a clearinghouse mechanism. So, this is not about just conservation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is who owns the marine data, who profits from it, and how the benefits are shared and the opportunities it bears for Fiji.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the ratification is essential, it is only the first step. As the Committee noted, implementation will require a concerted whole of government approach. We must review and amend key pieces of legislation, the Marine Space Act, the Environmental Management Act, and the Fisheries Act to ensure alignment with BBNJ obligations.

We just have to look at what happened to the Climate Change Act to understand how critical this role is. We must invest in scientific and enforcement capacity, especially in areas such as hydrography, ocean monitoring, and marine domain awareness. Other agencies, particularly the Fiji Navy, Ministry of Fisheries, Department of Environment, and our own Ministry, must work in close coordination, supported by academic institutions like USP, FNU, and the University of Fiji.

The capacity gaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are real, but so too is the regional and international support available to us through the BBNJ Framework, the Green Climate Fund, and trusted development partners. Implementation must be inclusive and culturally grounded. The Treaty recognises traditional knowledge and the rights of the indigenous peoples and local communities. In Fiji's case, our *qoliqoli* owners, our coastal communities, and our traditional custodians of the sea must be engaged not only as stakeholders but as partners and knowledge holders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BBNJ Treaty is not a distant abstraction. It is a direct response to a deeply unequal and unsustainable status quo in the global ocean governance. It speaks to the principles that Fiji has long championed - fairness, stewardship, innovation and equity. Ratifying this treaty affirms our leadership, not only in Geneva and New York, but here at home in the Pacific. It enables us to participate fully in the BBNJ Conference of the Parties and shape the global rules that will govern the high seas for generations to come. It allows us to stand up for our rights, protect our biodiversity, empower our people, and drive forward a blue economy that is both sustainable and sovereign.

I, therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, join the Committee in strongly urging the honourable House to ratify the BBNJ Treaty. Let us do so with unity, purpose and vision. Let us claim our rightful place as stewards of the global ocean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully commend the Report and its recommendations before the House.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing further to add.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put

Motion agreed to

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT –
REPUBLIC OF FIJI MILITARY FORCES 2019-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces 2019-2022 Annual Reports which was tabled on 13th March, 2025.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to present a summary of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence findings and recommendations following its review of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces' (RFMF) Annual Reports for the years 2019 to 2022. The Committee acknowledges the RFMF's essential role in national security but also notes areas requiring urgent improvement to ensure transparency, professionalism, and alignment with constitutional values.

One of our primary concerns is the RFMF's significant delay in submitting Annual Reports to Parliament. The last known submission prior to this review dates back to 2005. While recent reports have resumed, inconsistencies in formatting and the absence of audited financial statements in earlier years hinder proper scrutiny. We recommend the timely and standardized submission of all reports, in accordance with the Financial Management Act 2004. The Committee also addressed growing concerns around public trust in the RFMF, particularly given its history. We commend the introduction of a new strategic plan in 2022 and urge the RFMF to strengthen its commitment to the rule of law through leadership development and independent oversight mechanisms.

We noted the absence of a whistleblower policy and outdated military justice procedures must be addressed through legal consultation and policy reform and I know that former officers of the RFMF will also be speaking after me. Maritime security emerged as a critical issue. With Fiji's vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and rising threats such as drug trafficking and illegal fishing, we recommend increased budget allocation to the Republic of Fiji Navy (RFN), currently only receiving less than 20 percent of RFMF resources.

Furthermore, the establishment of a comprehensive maritime law enforcement framework, closer interagency coordination, and investment in modern surveillance technologies are vital for securing our borders. On the welfare front, the Committee calls for a review of compensation, benefits, and career progression to retain skilled officers. We also advocate for the development of a structured mechanism to reward officers returning from further studies, alongside a review of veterans' benefits under the Ministry of Defence.

Finally, we encourage the continued expansion of public relations efforts and cadet training programmes to enhance community engagement and discipline amongst our youth, while instilling values of integrity and service. The Committee believes that by implementing these recommendations,

the RFMF will not only enhance its operational effectiveness, but also reaffirm its commitment to democratic principles, transparency, and public accountability. On that note, Mr. Speaker, I commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers. Each speaker is allocated five minutes each.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to contribute to the debate on this Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee Review Report on the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). I thank the Chairperson, Members and their support staff for this very comprehensive report. At the outset, I would like to thank the men and women of the RFMF and their families for the work that they do, for the sacrifices they make. It is a job where in most cases you spend more time away from home especially for those on peacekeeping duties. It is the families that sacrifice, the soldiers and sailors that are just out there doing the job. It is one of the few jobs that you are required to swear an oath to do.

In the military we have a saying, ours is not to ask the reason why, ours is to do and die. The military functions through a structured rank system and a very strict chain of command. And it also has its own military justice system. There is a saying in the military that if the military is a machine, the chain of command is the oil that it runs on. It is quite an important part of the military.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendations in this Review Report are forward-looking and thank the Committee for the Report. I have questions and issues around Recommendation No. 3, whistle-blowing policy. That is not for me, it is for the current leadership in the RFMF and also for the Ministry to have a look at it. It is something that other militaries also have and I leave it to them.

I would like to speak very quickly on one recommendation which is on cadet training. I agree totally. I think it is about time that the RFMF and the Ministry of Education sit down together and look at cadet training to make sure that it has a positive impact on the children and where they do cadet training. I think the syllabus of the cadet training that they are doing now is the same one as the honourable Prime Minister went through when he did cadet in Queen Victoria School (QVS) at the time. Time has changed. I think there could be a separate programme for those in boarding schools, a separate curriculum for those who are in day schools.

The reporting period was during COVID and it is an amazing time to watch RFMF how they adjusted to COVID. The military they work in teams and the smallest team is a team of 10. And they had to create bubbles of 10 or in a platoon of 30. And the problem was when one of them got the COVID, the whole 10 or the whole 30 was down. I watched the officers plan around it and to ensure that they were able to still do the job.

One of the capabilities that RFMF now has because of COVID is the ability to do contact tracing and that is an ability that is now there. Good for the Ministry of Health to know that if there is a pandemic in the future, they can tap into RFMF to do contact tracing for them.

There is some discussion in the report on the GMMC, the ICU that is built over there. That was built because there was a lesson learned during Ebola crisis. They found out that the frontliners were not willing to go to the front because when they got sick, when they came back, they found out that there were no beds for them. They were all full. So we offered our courthouse which is now the ICU. The engineers renovated it and then the equipment provided by the Ministry of Health and it was there initially so that those that go to the frontline know that if I get sick there is a bed and a ventilator that is there that I can go and get treated. It is now an asset, I think, that could help the Ministry of Health in that ICU capacity. Again, I thank the team at the Foreign Affairs and Defence for this Report, and I support the motion that is before the House.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the motion before us regarding the recommendations from the Consolidated Review Report of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Annual Reports for 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022. This report provides us with a roadmap to strengthen the governance, transparency, and operational efficiency of the RFMF, and I wholeheartedly support this motion as it addresses critical issues affecting our nation's security and public trust. As members of Parliament, we have a duty to ensure that our institutions, especially those tasked with safeguarding our sovereignty, are operating at their very best.

The recommendations outlined in this Report, shine a spotlight on areas that urgently need our attention. Today, I will focus on the three most pressing issues identified – delayed reporting and accountability, public trust and human rights compliance, and maritime security capability gaps. These are fundamental to the progress and integrity of the RFMF and dissolving them will set the foundation for a stronger and more resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us first address the issue of delayed reporting and accountability. The RFMF's failure to submit its annual reports to Parliament since 2005 has raised serious concerns. This lack of transparency undermines public trust and prevents us from providing effective oversight of an institution that receives substantial funding from taxpayers' money. Without timely reports, how can we assess whether funds are being used appropriately or whether the RFMF is meeting its constitutional mandate? The report highlights those delays in financial audits which contributed to this issue, but subsequent reports have made progress by including audited financial statements.

However, the Committee has rightly recommended that the RFMF standardise its reporting format to improve readability and compatibility. Consistent, timely reporting is not just a bureaucratic requirement, it is a cornerstone of accountability and integrity.

We must remind ourselves that transparency is the bedrock of good governance, by ensuring that the RFMF adheres to fixed timeframes for submitting annual reports as per the Financial Instructions 2010 and the Financial Management Act 2004. We can restore the faith of the people in this vital institution. This is not just about meeting legal requirements, it is about building a culture of accountability that will guide the RFMF in every aspect of its operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second issue is perhaps the most pressing from a national security perspective, the capability gaps in maritime security. Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone spans 1.3million square miles, yet our ability to monitor and protect this vast area remains limited. The Republic of Fiji Navy (RFN), tasked with safeguarding our maritime border, faces significant challenges due to inadequate resources and outdated equipment. The report highlights the need for increased budget allocations to the RFN and the acquisition of modern patrol vessels.

These steps are essential to combat illegal fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking and other illicit activities that threaten our maritime security. We are an archipelagic state and our maritime resources are vital to our economy and livelihood. Strengthening the RFN's capabilities is not just about national security, it is about protecting our people, our environment and our future.

The establishment of the Maritime Essential Services Centre in Lami is a positive development, but we must do more to ensure that the RFN has the tools it needs to fulfil its mandate effectively. I commend the Committee's recommendations to develop a comprehensive maritime law enforcement framework and establish a Department of Maritime Affairs. These initiatives will streamline operations, enhance inter-agency collaboration and address our over-lapping responsibilities that currently hinder efficiency. The challenges we face in maritime security are complex, but they are not insurmountable. With the right investment and strategic planning, we can transform the RFN into a force that not only protects our border but also contributes to regional stability.

In conclusion, the recommendations outlined in this report are not just suggestions, they need to be implemented. Delayed reporting, public trust and maritime security are just some of the issues that require our immediate attention and collective effort. By addressing these challenges, we can strengthen the RFMF, restore public confidence and safeguard our nation's future.

I stand here today in full support of this motion not just as a member of Parliament but as a citizen of Fiji who believes in the power of accountability, integrity and progress. We must ensure that the RFMF is equipped, to fulfil its constitutional mandate and serve the people of Fiji with honour and professionalism.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate for the motion on the floor. At the outset, let me just state, I would like to make it absolutely clear that the Coalition Government has done something that has not been done for some time. It has completed a National Security Defence Review and that is very important. It now has a draft National Security Strategy for 2025 – 2029. This is a prime document in shaping what we hope to see our key agencies, especially the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. The challenge will be how these key agencies or organisations like the Republic of Fiji Military Forces will align itself to achieve the intention of the Government especially in safeguarding our national sovereignty.

I would like to thank the Chair and her team for the wonderful work she has done. I see this Report as not only forward looking but refreshing and reassuring. On that, I would like to thank the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces for his bold leadership and vision to step forward. It is about stepping up to the mark nowadays, in any place that you serve, it is about stepping up and I thank the Commander for doing that on this report.

The Report basically highlights the RFMF's commitment on:

- Safeguarding Fiji's sovereignty;
- Reflects our commitment to our regional security commitment; and
- Footprint on the global front.

I recognise the importance of the SDG and of the RFMF committing itself to the SDG. That it is a good thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I am so happy to see the RFMF's commitment to gender equality and I think that it is an important part of the RFMF, that they recognise the importance of gender inclusion and women's role in women peace and security. This is in my view, an area that needs to be advocated more and there is huge potential in this particular part for the RFMF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the 13 recommendations, I fully support 12. I have strong reservations for one of those, that is, the Whistle Blowing Policy. Naturally for someone who has served and spent time like the honourable Prime Minister, and the former commander who sits next to me, in my personal view, the whistle blowing policy is better suited for perhaps a civilian organisation. The military is not a civilian organisation. It is unique and different in many ways in how it is led, how it is trained and the role and the function it does. So, I have strong reservations for this particular part of the recommendation. Apart from that, I fully support the other parts of the recommendation.

When we read this Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and when we try and fast track it forward, it sends a good signal. It is good to see that there is a light at the end of the tunnel for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), compared to the past years in the way it was led. I hope and pray that we do not go back that way. The RFMF's future lies on good, strong leadership, a very clear direction, and above all, a God-fearing organisation where the community and people can trust and believe in to look after them and serving the best interests of our nation. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House and the recommendations of the Committee, although I have one issue that I would point out in the end. I would like to thank our men and women behind the uniform for ensuring national security and stability, regional cooperation and security, to support Government and national wellbeing, for the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and international peace and security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just speak on one recommendation and I thank the two speakers before me. The Committee recommends that the Government increase the Fiji Navy's budgetary allocation to address capability gaps in the maritime surveillance, law enforcement and combating illegal activities, enhancing national security in Fiji's maritime borders. I have been highlighting the entire week about securing our domestic borders and our EEZ.

If I refer to page 16, concerns were raised about the monitoring of Fiji's EEZ, drug infiltration and the challenges of ensuring full surveillance. The EEZ spans to 1.3 million square miles, but monitoring is limited due to the availability of only one patrol vessel and two smaller boats. The cooperation with regional partners, local communities and Government agencies, helps to address these limitations.

The issue that I found here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in 2023-2024, the total budget for RFMF was \$103.1 million and Fiji Navy's allocation which is within that, received \$18.3 million. In the 2024-2025 Budget, the Fiji Navy only had an increment of \$1.9 million. I feel that that is not justified looking at the complexities or the challenges before our men and women in the uniform. I urge the Government to really consider in the upcoming Budget of increasing the funding for Fiji Navy. That is one of the major things I wanted to highlight to Government for the upcoming budget.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in my capacity as the Acting Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs. I welcome the Committee's Consolidated Report on the Fiji Military Forces 2019-2022 Annual Report.

The Committee's Report, Mr. Speaker, comes at a very critical period when the National Security Strategy is soon to be released and when the RFMF is undertaking various programmes to strengthen professionalism within the Force.

The first recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the timely submission of RFMF Annual Reports. What we have to say is, we have to be very strong, new leadership within the RFMF and the Commander of the RFMF is determined to ensure that there is timely submissions of its annual accounts in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges the significance of independent oversight, particularly concerning compliance in its financial expenditures, as well as the legal and human rights standards, which are required by various laws, including the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Act 2009.

In relation to the Whistleblower Policy suggestion in the Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you would find from the Report, it was an issue that was suggested by the RFMF that will be considered and further discussion is necessary, but it must be understood, as the Minister for Policing has said, that the Military operates in the grid of trust and the chain of commands within the ranks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the maritime security challenges, we all know the ongoing issues we are facing in relation to maritime security, whether it is in relation to drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal fishing, or the increasing number of vessels entering our waters undetected. We

totally agree with the recommendation by the Standing Committee to address the capability gaps in the RFMF's maritime command. There is a clear need for sustained and, where necessary, increased investment to ensure our forces are equally equipped to meet these challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the work that have been undertaken by the RFMF, especially in safeguarding us from the growing threats of our maritime space. These are real issues that we face today, and I commend the men and the women of the RFMF, who continue to do their jobs quietly and effectively, often in difficult and remote conditions. Their work matters, and it is only right that we continue to support them with the resources and infrastructure that they need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the recommendation with RFMF undertaking a job evaluation exercise in the review of RFMF Compensation and Benefit Scheme so that it retains skilled forces, that is something that the RFMF had previously undergone, an organisational review in 2003. Therefore, this current review is going to ensure that has bolstered RFMF's Strategic Plan beyond 2022 and will support its ongoing role in addressing those emerging threats identified.

The Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also recognises the importance of a robust public relations strategy for enhancing RFMF's image and fostering public confidence. The Ministry will assist the RFMF by prioritising the establishment of a strategic communication plan, aimed at effectively showcasing RFMF's positive contribution to national security, community development and humanitarian efforts. This will help build confidence and strengthen public trust in the RFMF.

The Ministry fully agrees with the Committee's recommendation to establish a system where RFMF officers returning from further studies or training have their salary bands reviewed and adjusted based on their enhanced qualification set. The Ministry agrees with the Committee's recommendation that the development of a comprehensive national maritime law enforcement framework is critical to improving the Navy's role and their responsibility. I am running out of time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In conclusion, the Ministry fully supports to expand the Navy's attachment programmes with regional and international partners. These exchanges will provide invaluable operational experience for personnel, expose them to best practices and strengthen bilateral relationships, thus enhancing Fiji's maritime security cooperation.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to thank all honourable Members for supporting the motion before the House and also join the speakers before me in thanking all the women and men of the RFMF, including the Maritime Command - the Fiji Navy, here and overseas, especially those on peacekeeping tours of duty.

I thank the leadership of the RFMF for their support of the work of the Committee, in particular, during our site visits. With that I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

AUDIT REVIEW REPORT – FOLLOW UP ON HIGH-RISK MINISTRIES AND DEPARTMENTS

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the review of the Audit Report on Follow-Up of High-

Risk Ministries and Department which was tabled on 13th March, 2025.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report covers the outcome of follow-up audit of the audit recommendations provided in 2018-2019 audits by high risk Ministries and Departments. Those Ministries include, the:

- (1) Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development;
- (2) Republic of Fiji Military Forces;
- (3) Fiji Police Force;
- (4) Ministry of Education;
- (5) Ministry of Health and Medical Services;
- (6) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation;
- (7) Ministry of Agriculture; and
- (8) Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport

These agencies were classified as high-risk due to various factors, such as large number of year-end transactions, high budgetary funding implementing agencies for government policies, extremely complex transactions and the specialised nature of operations. It may also include lack of good internal control practices which have been highlighted in previous audits.

In 2018, only 81 percent of the recommendations were fully implemented, 14 were partially implemented and five were not implemented at all. In 2019, only 72 percent of the recommendations were fully implemented, 24 percent were partially implanted and 4 percent were not implemented at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we compared these results, together with the 2022 audit, as well as the status in 2025 after deliberation with the eight Ministries and the Office of the Auditor-General. While a few Ministries had improved on implementation, there are few that I wish to highlight, that have yet to implement even after the audit of their 2022 Accounts and the 25 deliberations and those include:

- (1) Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development - 4;
- (2) Republic of Fiji Military Forces - 4;
- (3) Fiji Police Force – 8;
- (4) Ministry of Education - 1;
- (5) Ministry of Health and Medical Services – 6;
- (6) Ministry Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation - Nil;
- (7) Ministry of Agriculture – Nil; and
- (8) Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport - 2.

There are few recommendations there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as follows:

- (1) All Ministries to strengthen supervision and monitoring of the accounting function.
- (2) Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Agencies should have –
 - (i) unmodified opinions of accounts;
 - (ii) the implementation of the office of the Auditor-General’s recommendations; and
 - (iii) timeliness of accounts as part of their KPIs.
- (3) The Ministry should prioritise digitisation of their current manual records, especially in reconciliation, and the records are currently on Excel.
- (4) The monthly or quarterly updates on audit recommendations to be done and to be submitted by Accounting Heads as required by the Finance Instruction 61 to the Office of the Auditor-

General, as well as to the Public Accounts Committee. This is to ensure the audit recommendations are implemented on a timely basis.

- (5) The Permanent Secretary must ensure that they establish internal audit committees to monitor the implementation of recommendations made in reports prepared by the Office of the Auditor-General.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commit this Report to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson for Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me. Each of the speakers will be given five minutes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on High Risk Ministries.

Mr. Speaker, the Chairperson has clearly defined all that needs to be done. I would just like to comment on two issues that we found out and it was quite surprising for us when Permanent Secretaries came before Public Accounts Committee and we were talking about digitization of records.

Some of the Permanent Secretaries went ahead to tell us that they now have a database and everything is stored in the database. But to our surprise, when we asked them which particular software they are using, it was very surprising that some of the Permanent Secretaries told us that they use Microsoft Excel. That is the level that some of the Permanent Secretaries are trying to understand the whole digitization programme that Government is trying to implement. Microsoft Excel is not a software. For them, they think that they are moving from manual to digitization and keeping things in Microsoft Excel is keeping things in a database. When we asked them where they actually store their data, they said in a computer or in a hard drive.

That is the reason why these Ministries are in the state at which they are because some of the Permanent Secretaries do not take the recommendations seriously. That is what the Chairperson has alluded to. Some of them have only done partial implementation. Some of the recommendations have not been touched. Some of the recommendations that were implemented are reoccurring in the Ministry again. I think this is something that we should be concerned about as policymakers because the amount of money that these high-risk Ministries deal with is quite massive. We cannot continue year in, year out and actually have modified or disclaimer of opinion on some of these Ministries.

During my time as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee as well as during Mr. Sudhakar's time, one thing we noticed is that whenever any Ministry comes up with an internal audit team, they try to change the name into something, for example, monitoring and implementation unit because when its monitoring and implementation unit, whoever is heading that unit reports to the Permanent Secretary but for the internal audit whoever is actually in it, the head of internal audit directly reports to the Minister.

Permanent Secretaries are trying at all their levels to ensure that all those issues that are identified through internal audit should not reach the Minister. That is something that we need to do, and we have been putting that in all our Public Accounts Committee recommendations. As Ministers, you need to ensure that your Ministry comes up with an internal audit team.

Currently, the internal audit team is based at the Ministry of Finance. It was just for Ministry of Finance. However, because all other Ministries do not have an internal audit team, they are trying to capitalise on the internal audit team at the Ministry of Finance. They do not have resources to cater for all other Ministries. So, Mr. Speaker, one of the things that we recommend is that we need to have

internal audit teams who can look into processes and who can actually verify some of the issues that can be reported directly to the Minister.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of quality and timeliness of the audit, that needs to be part of the KPI of all the Permanent Secretaries. This has also been a recommendation, unfortunately, I am not sure why Public Service Commission (PSC) to-date has not implemented to be part of the KPI. This is something that needs to be looked into, and as the Government, I urge that someone needs to talk to the Chairman of Public Service Commission, so that it can be part of the KPI.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to deliver my response to the motion tabled by the honourable Chairperson, Standing Committee of Public Accounts regarding the review of the Auditor-General Follow-up Audit Report for High-Risk Ministries and Departments for the financial year 2018 and 2019.

I commend the Committee for its thorough analysis and for highlighting the needs to improve internal control mechanisms, accountability, and transparency in our ministries. The honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services acknowledge our classification as a high-risk agency and view this as a responsibility to drive reform in financial compliance, service delivery, and performance management. With the free medicine programme, Mr. Speaker, on the recurring issue of anomalies within the free medicine programme operation at the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services, the free medicine programme from the Ministry's point of view is fit for purpose, as it is an avenue whereby members of the public have access to medication when stocks run out at Government Hospital Pharmacies. It is another avenue for patients to access their medication.

The Committee recommends that retail pharmacies that are operating on the old model to transit to the new model M-supply system. A reform model was introduced in 2022, moving away from the central stock model to a reimbursement-based model. To date, 50 out of 90 private retail pharmacies are now operating under this framework. Undersigned agreement vetted by the Solicitor-General's Office, participating pharmacies dispense their stock inventory and submit claims to the Ministry of Health. The verification of this claim is performed by the verification team of their free medicine programme before payment is processed by the accounts department.

Budget utilisation in the last financial year was at 63 percent of the allocated \$11 million, which also covered logistics support and overtime to support ongoing free medicine awareness programmes and registration. The free medicine programme budget utilisation as of today stands at 92 percent, which is equivalent to \$9.9 million. The Ministry supports the recommendation for a comprehensive review of the scheme and is actively encouraging all remaining retail pharmacies to transition to the new M-supply reform model.

Audit at the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services, the following developments has commenced at the Ministry of Health. Stock and expiry reports are generated through this new digital M-supply system, which enhances visibility for management and audit purposes on real time, at the same time, avoid wastages. In addition, the opening of two new storage warehouses have been established, one in the Central Division and the other one in the Northern Division. I am happy to inform that both these new warehouses are now connected to the M-supply system. Discussions are ongoing with development partners regarding similar warehouses to be positioned at the Western Division - some lessons learned from COVID-19.

We acknowledge the Committee's recommendation regarding the potential corporatisation of the bulk purchase scheme. This scheme provides medicine support for GPs and private dental practitioners in the private sector. The Committee's recommendation to this matter will be reviewed with the Ministry of Finance as part of a broader service delivery reform.

On the fixed asset register, it is now being updated through ongoing effort across cost centres and the Ministry continues to draft Standard Operating Procedures which is under review now to standardise submission and reporting. Regarding arrears of revenue, we are working with the Ministry of Finance's Debt Recovery Unit to pursue long-standing age debt, while enhancing collection procedures at various cost centres.

On the condition of health facilities, we acknowledge concerns regarding the state of our health infrastructure. No one can deny this. Maintenance remains constraint due to neglect over decades by previous governments. The Ministry of Health has now recruited technical personnel at some locations. Nevertheless, in the past two years, the Ministry of Health is now being vigilant in conducting routine inspections, scoping, and timely repairs being conducted at rural and maritime medical areas to address urgent facility needs and ensure patient safety within its allocated budget provision.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services takes seriously the recommendations by the Office of the Auditor-General and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We are determined to move from partial to full implementation of all audit recommendations. I reaffirm the Ministry's commitment to prudent financial management, institutional transparency, and effective service delivery. I thank the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for its oversight and scrutiny, together with its constructive guidance, as we work together to strengthen public confidence in our health system.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute on the motion. First of all, I would like to thank the Committee for coming up with a very comprehensive Report, with some very good findings and recommendations. The follow-up audits were carried out during the audit of 2023-2024 Agency Financial Statements on the eight Ministries and Departments. Those eight Ministries and Departments are classified as high-risk audits due to various factors, which include lack of good internal control practises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the recommendations of the Committee is that Permanent Secretaries must ensure to establish Internal Audit Committees to monitor the implementation of recommendations made. I will confine my contribution to major responsibilities of Permanent Secretaries in ensuring that good internal controls are practised and audit issues are addressed. The Permanent Secretaries of respective Ministries are responsible for leading and managing their Ministries, including policy support and advice. Permanent Secretaries are also responsible for the efficient, effective, and economical management of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the responsibility of the Permanent Secretaries to ensure that they establish Internal Audit Committees, which can provide independent and objective assurance about the effectiveness of risk management, governance and internal controls. The feedback from the Internal Audit Committee will help the Ministry understand how well it is meeting its objectives. The internal audit provides insights to improve operations and manage risks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's consultation with the respective eight Ministries and Departments in 2024 and 2025, has confirmed that some Ministries and Departments have not resolved the issues yet. There is a possibility that Permanent Secretaries of some Ministries have not been regularly updated on the status of the implementation of recommendations by the Accounting Heads as required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Permanent Secretaries play a pivotal role for Ministries, and if they carry out their delegated duties effectively, issues that we have with high-risk Ministries can be addressed. In order to meet deadlines and practise good internal control, Permanent Secretaries, as Chief Accounting Officers, must ensure the following:

- (1) There is a monitoring mechanism within their respective ministries to be able to monitor and assess how well Accounting Heads have implemented the recommendations made.
- (2) Monthly updates on audit recommendations are submitted by Accounting Heads as required by Finance Instructions.
- (3) Relevant processes are put into place to ensure audit recommendations are implemented on a timely basis.
- (4) Controls are continuously implemented to avoid repeated audit findings.
- (5) Performance indicators of Accounting Heads and other staff include timely implementation of audit recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the onus is on the ministries, especially on the Permanent Secretaries, to ensure that all effort is undertaken to address the concerns raised by the Committee. Permanent Secretary positions are very vital. Therefore, while recruiting Permanent Secretaries, the Public Service Commissions should ensure that the selection is purely based on merit so that most meritorious persons are appointed to lead the Ministry and is able to carry out the duties effectively. Organisation thrives when you have a highly competent CEO or Permanent Secretary. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note the comments from the honourable Members and hope that the eight ministries continue to work on implementing all the recommendations and put in place processes and procedures, so these audit issues do not happen again. We wish to thank honourable Sharma and honourable Chand, again, for raising the issue of internal audit as well as the need for KPIs for the Permanent Secretaries of all the ministries. As well as honourable Ravunawa for pointing out the reform that has been done at the Ministry of Health and its pharmacy. We look forward to better coordination at the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sorry that I did not highlight the recommendations for each Ministry due to the shortage of time, but I wish to advise that specific recommendations for the eight ministries are in the Report and hope all the ministries pick them up from the Report, some of which has been picked up by the honourable Assistant Minister for Finance.

I also wish to thank the Permanent Secretaries and their staff for acknowledging the needs for improvement and they are ready to fully implement the outstanding recommendations. Some will try to complete by the end of 2025.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2018-2022 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Justice Annual Reports 2018–2022 which was tabled on 13th March, 2025.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member moving the motion, I rise to make a short contribution on the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Justice from

the years 2018 to 2022. Briefly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the roles and responsibility of the Ministry are to administer justice and deliver services through its main legal registries for registration of documents, maintaining official records and legal documents. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is done through the Office of the Administrator-General, Office of the Registrar of Titles, Registrar of Companies, Office of the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages and the Office of the Official Receiver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee thoroughly reviewed the Annual Reports and identified a few pertinent issues. Most of these issues were addressed and clarified by the Ministry and any information on these can be retrieved from the Committee's Report.

I will now go straight into the recommendations put forth by the Committee for the consideration of Parliament and these include the following:

The Committee recommends:

- (1) That the Ministry create a stronger planning system. This system should include both a strategic plan and a cost operational plan for a particular year;
- (2) That the Ministry create a step-by-step plan to decentralise all of its services in Fiji which the Committee believes that the decentralisation will reduce the burden on central offices;
- (3) That the Ministry work on increasing the use of e-services. This can be done through various methods such as effective promotion and outreach and exploring partnerships with community, organisations to reach a wider audience; That the Ministry should keep working on its REACH programme and further strengthen and improve it as the programme has shown positive results and has helped many people in the community;
- (4) That the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection to work in collaboration to effectively achieve 100 percent registration of the civil registry vital statistics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. I thank you, Sir for giving me the opportunity and I urge all the honourable Members to support the motion that is before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of three speakers of five minutes to each of them.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have prepared a 20-minute speech but I will try to be within the five minutes. I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Ministry for Justice Annual Report for the years 2018-2022. At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the marvellous work done by the Committee at the Ministry during the period of 2018-2022. The introduction of digital services, the modernisation of registries and the establishment of online birth, death and marriage registrations and the move towards decentralising services were significant achievements. These reforms brought justice closer to our people and demonstrated a clear vision of a modern, efficient and citizen-centered ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must place on record our appreciation for the leadership, foresight and hard work that made these changes possible. However, it is disappointing to note that while these foundations were laid with great effort, we are not seeing the same momentum today. The rapid digitalisation that once gave hope for an even more efficient justice delivery system seems to have slowed, if not completely stalled. We live in a modern era where innovation technology is advancing every day. Justice systems around the world are embracing Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Smart Courtrooms and remote access for citizens. If we are to keep the pace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot afford complacency. We must build on the success of the past, not allow it to gather dust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that spirit, I wish to put forward a few more recommendations.

- (1) Recruit and appoint more Justices of Peace (JP). There is an urgent need to appoint more JPs particularly in rural, maritime and underserved areas. JPs must also be provided with digital tools and training so that they can efficiently serve citizens even through remote means where necessary.
- (2) Expand Rural Digital access, accelerate efforts to make all services mobile accessible and integrate them into user-friendly platforms that can reach even the remotest communities.
- (3) Smart courtroom pilots, begin pilot programmes for small courtrooms incorporating digital case management, video conferencing and e-evidence handling to improve speed and reduce backlogs.
- (4) To strengthen cyber security and data protection. As more services go online, it is critical to invest in robust cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive citizens data.
- (5) Develop a comprehensive digital Justice Roadmap. Set a clear five-year milestone to transition the Ministry of Justice into a fully digital and citizen-centred organisation. One critical office that needs to transition quickly to digital space is the Register of Titles Office.
- (6) Launch an online appointment, JP Appointment and Service Portal. Citizens should be able to easily book appointments, submit documents, and receive services from JPs through a secure online platform, reducing delays and increasing transparency.

Mr. Speaker, justice today must not just be accessible physically, it must also be accessible digitally. In the age we live in, digital justice is real justice. The hard work done between 2018 and 2022 must not be felt to fade. It must be protected, enhanced and expanded upon. I urge the honourable Minister and his Ministry to take bold steps forward, reunite the momentum we once saw, and make Fiji's justice system a regional leader once again.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to talk to this particular Report, in particular the recommendations. One of the things that is important from the Report and one of the issues for which there has been some progress in terms of the registration of children and the registrations of deaths, the rate at which it was progressing was not very good. I hope, I know that there are steps to try.

As the Chairperson had suggested that needs to be closer co-operation between the different bodies that are involved such as the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and so forth. And I hope that that is really, really strengthened because of course if people are not registered then your data and their rights as a human being per se being a citizen of this country are affected. The thing that struck me the most about this and I know I think the Minister is working on it now and now in this Ministry you have a Minister, Assistant Minister and a Permanent Secretary or a very small group is very interesting. There is a lot of good heads there hopefully they will put it together and fix this issue that we found.

The Ministry did not have good plans. When the plans were there, they were not set out well, the indicators were not clear. And when your plans are not clear, how you determine whether you have been successful or not is anyone's game. That is what happens in a Ministry. When this happens, you will find that Annual Reports are full of activities. But performance is reflected in targets and good indicators. That was one of the major things that I found. I know that probably the Minister and all of these people are working it. This must be fundamental for all Ministries.

You must have good strong plans, with good strong indicators that relate directly back to the targets you are trying to establish. Sometimes you have good targets, the indicators are wrong, you measure the wrong thing, you get the wrong performance. I think if there is one thing I am going to hope for this particular Ministry this particular point and recommendation, I believe is very important

together with a very strong performance management system. If you have a plan of sitting there without a strong performance management system, it is just going to be a document that decorates walls.

Now this is a challenge for all of us. We are in the executive part of Government to get this done and done well. So, I commend the report to the House and also to the Ministry and I look forward to the implementation of the recommendations.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, being the last speaker for tonight, thank you for the positive comments that have been raised. I also thank the detailed report for 2018 to 2022. So, the plans that honourable Usamate was referring to is referring to the plan that was set by the former Minister for Justice, the Minister for Everything. Let me say, the Minister for Everything, no report. So, we completed that, and I think with the new leadership, there is fresh air, there is energy. Let me just address some of those issues being raised by honourable Ketan.

For Justice of Peace, you will note in the report that the Ministry relies on the Ministry of Regional in terms of JP application, no more. We do it ourselves. For example, there has been two ceremonies of swearing-in of JP, and there will be another one next month. That is only possible through positive outcome.

We are not reactive, we are taking positive steps in going to the community and even to the point of bringing the JP applications to them, even though it is available online. So that is the difference, that is what the honourable Prime Minister said. We listen, we care, we walk the talk, we deliver.

In terms of ROT, Mr. Speaker, Sir, two failed implementations. A wastage of government resources. The whole of this week we have been talking about Government resources put to waste. What we have done, we have engaged ADB, they have completed the report, and there are four phases of digitalisation. So, we are grateful that hopefully that can be implemented in the near future and the processing time, too, has reduced from three months to one month.

But if there is a need for urgent applications, we are more than welcome to forward to our office and we will deliver. In terms of collaboration with other ministries, we do not restrict ourselves to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at 3 p.m. Monday to Friday, all the new registrations for VKB are sent to the iTaukei Affairs. So now for iTaukei, they do not have to go to iTaukei Affairs so that their names can be recorded in the VKB. It is done from our office, and it should have been done, but very soon one of our offices will be based at the Ministry of Health. So before birth, or immediately after, because this is where the gaps are, that affects the registration of new births. So we are working together, I promise you that.

Yes, service delivery has improved. There is continued training. Last week the ministry was in Pearl. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was told that was the first time that the staff of the Ministry of Justice went out and train out in a hotel. As I said yesterday in my Ministerial Statement, the Ministry of Justice was kind of neglected. Why, I do not know, but this Government, I promise you, is going to deliver.

We are so thankful that with the changes going on, with the positivity with the visibility of our services, and people do understand and help. They know what to do, and even through a phone call, they can be assisted. I fully recommend the recommendations in the Report, and I assure this Parliament, Mr. Speaker Sir, that we will strive, we will continue to improve our services and accountability. I fully endorse the recommendations.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Members who may have contributed to the motion on the floor, especially to the many more recommendations from the Shadow Minister of Justice. We welcome your recommendations and the honourable Minister

has gladly informed this House, that they are looking forward to work on that. Other than that, I have no further comments.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. It has been a long day. I thank you all for your contribution, and I wish all honourable Members a restful, peaceful evening. The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.06 p.m.