

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 29TH APRIL, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 29TH APRIL, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.34 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 Monday, 28th 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 - School of Law and Politics, USP

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming another group of PL100 School of Law and Politics students from the University of the South Pacific.

(Acclamation)

Under the doctrine of separation of powers, governmental authority is divided up into three distinct branches, as you probably will know. The Executive being the Government - the Prime Minister, his Cabinet and the President; the Judiciary is Chief Justice and Courts of the country; and the Legislature is Parliament which represents you, the people.

You are most welcome to your Parliament. May this visit provide valuable insights into the work of Parliament for you.

Response to Written Question

For the information of honourable Members, pursuant to Standing Order 45, the Secretariat has received written responses from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to Written Question No. 27/2025,

asked by honourable P.D. Kumar.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report on Ministry of iTaukei Affairs 2017-2022 Annual Reports

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Standing Committee on Social Affairs Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs 2017-2019 and 2019-2022 Annual Reports.

The review highlights some of the Ministry's ongoing projects, such as the digitalisation of the VKV Vola Ni Kawa Bula (VKB) registration, including the *i Taukei* residing abroad and the continuation of the Cultural Revitalisation Programmes.

The Committee noted that the Ministry is strategically looking at ways to address its challenges. Firstly, the preservation and management of cultural registers which consist of managing land and customary titles, records and reinforcing partnerships by validating i Taukei Data for Development.

Secondly, the Culture and Heritage involves safeguarding *i Taukei* language, cultural awareness, advocacy and environmental sustainability. The concern of climate vulnerability for the *i Taukei* communities, especially those in the coastal and maritime areas, are particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change.

The Committee commends the Ministry's revised Strategic Plan 2025-2030, which provides a strategic pathway to align with the values, teachings and development of the *i Taukei* communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to sincerely thank the Permanent Secretary and the Acting Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and their officials for their valuable contributions to this review process.

Finally, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs - honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, honourable Alipate Tuicolo, honourable Viam Pillay and honourable Parveen Bala for their valuable input and support. I would also like to thank honourable Ketan Lal for the assistance rendered on several occasions as an Alternate Member.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- 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. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Agreement under UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report is the review of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, also known as the BBNJ Agreement, tabled in Parliament on 14th March this year.

The adoption of the Agreement in 2023 marked a defining moment in the evolution of international ocean governance. For Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a nation whose identity, economy and way of life are inextricably linked to the ocean, this Treaty is not just a legal milestone, it is a clarion call for collective action, innovation and leadership.

The BBNJ Agreement establishes a much-needed framework to conserve marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, those vast areas of the high seas that, while outside of any one nation's control, are crucial to the health of our planet and the wellbeing of us, especially the Pacific peoples. It fills longstanding gaps left by UNCLOS, enabling cooperation on marine genetic resources, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and the creation of marine protected areas.

In response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a whole of society dialogue has unfolded across Fiji, from Government Ministries and civil society to academia and the private sector, we have heard a huge range of views, resoundingly supportive, yet thoughtfully measured. These perspectives reflect our nation's deep-rooted connection to the ocean and a shared recognition that the effective implementation of the Treaty will require legal reform, institutional coordination and significant capacity building.

As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends that Parliament ratify the BBNJ Treaty without reservations, while also taking note of the issues raised under “Other Recommendations” in this Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members of Parliament, during the consultations, the Committee identified several critical measures for effective implementation, including amending key legislation, addressing legal ambiguities and developing EIA procedures tailored for areas beyond national jurisdiction. Stakeholders further emphasised the importance of education, regional and inter-agency cooperation, and investing in national scientific capacity.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the members of the Standing Committee for compiling this bipartisan Report. I extend my appreciation to honourable Alipate Tuicolo, who sat in as an Alternative Member and, as always, to the Secretariat for their dedicated support. I now submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to Standing Order 121(1)(b) and Standing Order 130(4), the Standing Committee has now reported back. This, of course, is the prerogative of the honourable Attorney-General to give notice that he wishes to move a motion for the Treaty to be approved by Parliament under Standing Orders 130(4).

Consolidated Review Report - Fiji Development Bank 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Development Bank 2022

and 2023 Annual Reports.

In 2023, the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) showed remarkable improvement in its financial performance, achieving a net profit of \$3.83 million, which is still below the pre-COVID-19 level. It was noted that FDB's market share declined from 7.35 percent to 5.5 percent, which indicates that the private sector prefers other commercial banks.

The reason for that is the high interest rate currently offered by FDB which is not competitive. In addition, FDB has a high operational and funding cost, resulting in a lending rate of 5.3 percent, making credit expensive for borrowing. To compete in the market, FDB needs to lower its operational costs. There was a slight reduction in non-performing loans from \$152.31 million in 2022 to \$116.94 million in 2023, which is still high, in comparison to the Government guarantee of \$150 million.

In the 2021-2022 National Budget, the Government made available \$200 million for the COVID-19 Recovery Credit Guarantee Scheme and also approved \$5 million for the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) to manage the Guarantee. Under that Scheme, \$63 million was disbursed to 4,567 customers and currently, 42 percent are non-performing loans which is \$28.2 million. In the 2022-2023 National Budget, the Government allocated \$40 million to the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

While those achievements are commendable, the Committee identified areas of concern. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB had not undertaken a significant independent review to modernise its operations to better serve its customers and to support the Government's development agenda.

The Committee recommends a thorough review of FDB, considering the last review was undertaken in 2004 by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. Currently, the Bank's financial focus appears to be heavily tilted towards staff benefits rather than focus on its core value of leveraging finance to develop key focal sectors as prioritised by Government. The absence of clear performance targets makes it difficult to assess the performance of FDB.

The Committee met with FDB representatives in public hearing to seek clarifications on key findings and issues raised in the Annual Reports, and to assess FDB's performance through its clients. Additionally, the Committee visited several FDB loan recipients, including those with non-performing loans and applicants whose loans were rejected. That exercise provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by clients in securing and repaying loans, helping to identify areas to improve FDB's services and better support the Government's economic growth objectives as outlined in the National Development Plan.

Following those visits, the Committee engaged with FDB Officials and key stakeholders, including Business Assistance Fiji (BAF), Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) and Ministry of Trade, Commerce, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications. Unfortunately, key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Fisheries and Forests, did not turn up for the roundtable discussions, even though an invitation was sent for them to attend.

The discussions focussed on issues raised by FDB clients, challenges related to non-performing loans and strategies to strengthen partnerships with Government agencies. The Committee also explored ways to streamline the referral of the project-ready applications to FDB for consideration and to use training and mentoring programmes for projects that are facing difficulties. The meeting with the agencies will ensure better outcomes for loan recipients and economic development.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the FDB staff for their cooperation through the review process. I also acknowledge the valuable contributions of my fellow Committee Members - honourable Premila Kumar, honourable Semi Koroilavesau, honourable Aliko Bia and honourable Salend Kumar, as well as former members, for their support in producing this Report.

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 the 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 the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

Consolidated Review Report – Fiji Revenue and Customs Service 2020-2022 Annual Reports

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament its Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 Annual Reports. These Reports were formally referred to the Committee on 10th March this year.

The Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) plays a critical role in supporting Fiji's economic and social development by effectively collecting revenue, facilitating trade and safeguarding national borders. As the Government's principal agency for tax administration and customs enforcement, FRCS ensures compliance with tax laws, administers import and export duties, and combats smuggling and financial crimes.

In addition to revenue collection, Sir, the agency promotes voluntary tax compliance, provides taxpayer education, and fosters business growth by streamlining border operations and reducing trade barriers. Through those core functions, FRCS contributes significantly to national development by securing essential Government funding and promoting a fair and transparent economic environment.

As part of its review process, Sir, the Committee invited FRCS for a public face-to-face submission on the 1st April this year. That was livestreamed via Parliament's *Facebook* page and aired on the *Walesi* Parliament Channel.

The Committee also conducted site visits to FRCS Offices in Nadi, Savusavu and Labasa between 9th and 11th April this year. Those engagements revealed several important matters not previously covered during the oral submission, all of which are reflected in this Report. The Committee presents nine recommendations for Parliament's consideration, and the Committee wishes to thank FRCS for compiling and submitting its Annual Reports from 2020 to 2022.

I thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, including honourable Alipate Tuicolo, who served as an Alternate Member, for their contributions in

producing this bipartisan Report.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, 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.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (2) Minister for Environment and Climate Change;
- (3) Minister for Fisheries and Forestry;
- (4) Minister for Youth and Sports, who will deliver two separate Statements;
- (5) Minister for Education; and
- (6) Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport.

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.

Fiji's National Digital Strategy

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, the people of Fiji who may be listening to this broadcast through Walesi or live streaming, or listening on the radio today; *bula vinaka* and a good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to inform this august House of a significant milestone in our national development agenda – the official launch of the Fiji National Digital Strategy 2025-2030, which took place on 3rd April, 2025. This Strategy is a pivotal step in our journey to build a digitally empowered society and a modern economy.

For too long, the vast potential of technology has remained partially tapped; one that was not fully embraced. That is no longer the case. This first ever National Digital Strategy demonstrates this Government's commitment and ease our national compass in charting a course forward towards

improving service delivery, driving inclusive growth and to ensure that all Fijians can participate in and thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally, we see the rapid adoption of digital technologies. We see the number of internet users that have surged from one billion in 2005 to 5.5 billion last year. Today, the global digital economy is growing faster than the global GDP, which is expected to reach US\$16.5 trillion by 2028. Some estimates show that over the next 10 years, more than two-thirds of new value creation will come from digitally enabled platforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also witnessing transformative opportunities in Fiji. The Google subsea cable investment, for instance, is expected to create over 3,600 jobs across various sectors and contribute about US\$250 million to Fiji's GDP by 2030. These are not just numbers, Sir, but they represent real opportunities for our people, especially our youth, our communities and businesses. The approval of Starlink is transforming communication and access to commerce in our isolated rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's digital economy is already showing commendable growth. According to the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) ICT Development Index, Fiji remains one of the most developed economies in the Pacific Island region in terms of ICT infrastructure, with a global ranking of 107th out of 176 nations. Fiji has made significant progress in e-government development, where it has climbed to 93 out of 193 nations, a jump of four places from the last assessment in 2022. However, just being good is not enough is not our end goal. We are working tirelessly on all fronts to ensure that digital access is universal, secure, meaningful and truly transformative for every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Strategy, which I have presented a copy to all honourable Members of Parliament yesterday, is actually a very ambitious and bold vision and plan. By 2030:

- 80 percent of all Government services will be accessible online and 10 percent of Fiji's real GDP will be derived from contributions from the ICT sector;
- digital inclusion rates will reach 80 percent across all demographics;
- the creation of over 40,000 jobs in ICT will occur over various sectors;
- we will achieve 50 percent 5G coverage;
- we will roll out and adopt a National ID and establish a mature cyber security profile for Fiji; and
- promote gender parity and inclusivity across all digital initiatives.

The above goals are not just ambitions on paper, they are carefully aligned with the broader development goals, including the National Development Plan of 2025-2029 and Vision 2050, reinforcing our aspirations for a prosperous, technologically advanced and inclusive society.

The development of the National Digital Strategy 2025-2030 was the outcome of an inclusive and consultative multi-stakeholder process, including Government Ministries, agencies, the private sector, civil society organisations, NGOs, academia and our development partners. This collaborative approach has ensured that the Strategy is not only technically sound, but is also reflective of the aspirations, challenges and opportunities unique to our beloved country.

The National Digital Strategy rests on five powerful pillars, each strategically crafted to maximise the benefits of digital transformation while addressing our own unique national context. On Pillar 1 - Digital infrastructure and Cyber Resilience, as more Fijians embrace the online world, a resilient and robust digital infrastructure, underpinned by strong safeguards against emerging cyber security threats, is key.

The Strategy places a strong emphasis on cyber security and resilience, bolstering cyber security postures and diplomacy, and contributing to regional and global frameworks to promote secure and trusted digital environments. Fiji has completed its second National Cyber Security Maturity Model assessment, which highlighted our strengths and areas we need to work on. We are currently developing our National Cyber Security Strategy. We are also operationalising the National Computer Emergency Response Team, which will be our first responders during national cyber threats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to us becoming party to the Budapest Convention earlier last year, Cabinet has endorsed the signing of the second additional protocol to the Budapest Convention and the United Nations Convention Against Cybercrime. These international instruments will enhance our criminal justice capabilities, and it widens our cooperation network to the full United Nations' 193 members who are planning to ratify this Convention. In parallel, we are progressing the development of a National Data Protection Policy, which will lay the foundation of a future legal and regulatory framework to safeguard personal data.

On Pillar 2 - Data Inclusion and Empowerment, the digital transformation must be inclusive by design. It is not enough to build infrastructure or launch platforms, we must also ensure that all Fijians have the opportunity, means and capacity to participate meaningfully in the digital economy. This means, expanding digital access to digital tools, ensuring affordable connectivity, and prioritising investments in digital literacy.

The Strategy outlines targeted programmes to reach women, rural communities, persons with disabilities and the underserved groups, ensuring no one is left behind in the digital transition. On 25th March, Fiji joined the international community, celebrating the United Nations Year of Cooperatives. This has reaffirmed our commitment to strengthening cooperatives as a vital agent for sustainable and inclusive development. By integrating cooperatives into our digital ecosystem, we empower local communities to innovate, access markets, and thrive in an ever-connected world.

On Pillar 3 - Innovation-led growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to remain competitive in a fast-changing global economy, Fiji must foster a vibrant ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship. The pillar focusses on supporting MSMEs in their digital transformation journey and creating an environment where ideas and technologies can flourish. We recognise the role of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain and Internet of Things, which is shaping global value chains. The Strategy aims to ensure that Fijian businesses are not left behind, but instead equipped to harness those innovations for growth, diversification and job creation.

Our recently launched National E-Commerce Strategy provides a tailored roadmap for unlocking the potential of digital trade. In parallel, we are also developing an MSME Strategy, which is, obviously, going to support the MSME sector.

On Pillar 4 - Smart Governance and Digital Public Services, an effective government must be responsive, transparent and citizen and business-centric. Through this pillar, we are seeking to digitally transform how government operates, improving service delivery, reducing bureaucracy and enabling greater accountability and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we get this right, we will transform how business is done in Fiji. The key digital initiatives already underway include businessNOW FIJI, which has streamlined business registration across 16 Government agencies. In September 2024, Phase 1 - Starting a Business System, was launched. We are now working on Phase 2 - Building Permits and Approvals Systems, which designs an online platform to streamline the building permit approvals process by

automating the various stages, reducing paperwork and enhancing coordination between Government agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another cornerstone of this pillar is the National ID Programme. This will enable the development of a secure national digital identity system. This builds on our e-profile functionality and will serve as a foundational layer for enabling diverse e-services, improving tailored services and reducing fraud, while ensuring that privacy and the rights of individuals are fully protected. The implementation of the National ID Programme has been endorsed through Cabinet, marking a significant step towards Fiji's digital transformation journey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure a strategic and coordinated approach in public services, we will embark on a whole-of-government service mapping exercise in the coming months. This stocktake will assess the existing services across Government Ministries, identify the ones in need of digital transformation which is pretty much the whole lot of us, and highlight opportunities for integration and process reengineering. The findings from this exercise will form the development of a digital government strategy and roadmap, guiding the phased digitisation of key public services to ensure impacts, efficiency and inclusion.

On Pillar 5 - Sustainable Development and Global Cooperation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the digital transformation is not only a national imperative, but also a global one. With 17 percent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) currently on track to be achieved by 2030, the role of digital innovation in accelerating sustainable development cannot be overstated.

We will continue as well to engage strategically with development partners, regional institutions and global platforms, to align to our digital efforts and our broader goals of environmental sustainability, social equity and economic resilience. In doing so, Fiji will position itself as a beneficiary of the global digital transformation but will also become an active contributor and leader in shaping the digital future of the Pacific and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to the ITU, which provided invaluable technical support and strategic guidance from the early stage of the diagnostic work, including stakeholder engagements and the finalisation of the Strategy.

The Strategy reflects a shared vision, a whole-of-country approach that recognises the critical role that each sector plays in driving digital transformation. This is not just a government document, it is a national roadmap co-created with and for the people of Fiji.

Through this shared ownership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are confident that its implementation will enjoy broad-based impact and support. A strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter how well-worded and well-intentioned, is only impactful as is its implementation. That is why the Digital Strategy is accompanied by clear implementation plans and actual robust governance framework and monitoring and evaluation framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, would like to call on this august House to take ownership of the shared vision as Government's commitment to working in unity with everyone. As I have said, we have distributed a copy of the National Digital Strategy to every Member in this august House. Let us all work collaboratively across sectors to realise the full potential of digital transformation for Fiji. Your support, leadership and engagement in this House will be fundamental or pivotal in delivering meaningful outcomes for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought I would finish with a story. I recently went to Rotuma where we launched the Smart Islands Programme. We saw in Rotuma the potential of what digital

transformation can unleash. We have launched a smart classroom at Rotuma High School. At that smart classroom, 171 young bright minds are gaining access to cutting edge digital tools, breaking down geographical barriers to education, and it will also offer community WiFi hotspots for training as well. I was honoured to be there in Rotuma with the ITU Regional Director, Ms Atsuko Okuda, underscoring the strength of our relationship with ITU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this programme plans to roll out a programme dedicated to 84 young girls in Rotuma to bridge the gender digital divide and build a future ICT workforce. It plans to roll out dedicated communitywide services and look at other areas of digitisation beyond education, particularly the health sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my discussions with ITU have been clear - the meaningful last mile of connectivity and securing access to e-services are key priorities for the Government of Fiji. This is not an isolated project, and we hope to roll this out to remote islands around Fiji as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, as I was talking to the 181 students of Rotuma High School, I mentioned to them, “If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail”. To realise the potential as a nation where digital technology unlocks new opportunities, reduces inequality and drive sustainable growth, our preparedness has been demonstrated through this National Digital Strategy. I look forward to working with you all in a realising the vision in this document.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the honourable Minister for introducing this wonderful digital strategy. This is actually good, and it is good for Fiji. What we must realise is that the Strategy is supposed to be effective and complete around 2030, which is five years away.

In that Strategy, in the booklet given to us, we have got a roadmap that starts from 2025 and then goes through to 2030. Mr. Speaker, as mentioned by the honourable Minister, it is ambitious and bold. The question that we ask is, is it left for too long? Maybe not or may be so, we will see in about 12 months’ time. Please, remember we are actually in support of all these.

Mr. Speaker, because I have limited time, I will stick to the actual roadmap that is being put together with respect to 2025. One of the most important issues with respect to any digital strategy is that we have the right legislation. We have the surrounding laws, commerce laws and digital laws that need to be put in place. This is going to be a tremendous task that the Attorney-General's Chambers will have to undertake to do all of these.

We are going to create a huge platform for the government in which it can be used, which citizens can use; talk about data protection and all of those things. That is why I ask, are the ambitions lost? In order to make sure that they have not, we must make sure that the legal landscape surrounding the Digital Strategy is in place and ready to roll out. That is one of the words of caution being presented from us to the Government to ensure that it is done and checked on a regular basis.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to what is actually happening on the ground, and I am sure the honourable Minister has been made aware of this. There are issues that still exist - small issues, with respect to each Government Department, the sharing of information and whether the actual system is up and running. Our Govnet – is it still working? Our Government ICT, is it up to speed?

We just spoke about Rotuma. In our recent trip to Taveuni, there was a lack of penetration with respect to internet facilities, et cetera. We must remember that this is a tool for the future of every single child that is born in Fiji. It is going to be able to access all of these things and get it done easily. Every single business that is actually born in Fiji, and every single business that actually enters

Fiji will make this an easier platform.

The word of caution really is that with respect to these ambitions and exercises that are going to take place, the Government mapping exercise needs to be done urgently and very forensically. A word of caution also with respect to that, Mr. Speaker, I hope and pray that every single Ministry is going to ensure that they front up, take part and ensure that they are truthful to the honourable Minister with respect to how it is being done and it is not being done, because for far too long a lot of Ministries have built castles of their own, sharing of information does not actually happen, so it makes the honourable Minister's job very difficult with respect to getting that done. I will give you a case in point, I am not sure if this still exists.

I remember that even the Ministry of Lands was getting a tough time from the Ministry of Justice in trying to get information at the Titles Office. They were being refused entry. Now, you tell me whether one Government Department should actually be doing that to another Government Department, and that sometimes is the cause of the problem. They created their castles with respect to their own information. Information was not shared between FRA and the Ministry of Lands so they can actually map it properly. All those things, unfortunately, Mr Speaker, Sir, still exist. The current digital space within the Company's Office and Titles Office, and I am not pouring scorn, that is the problem that is faced on a daily basis from businesses and people who actually say, "I cannot get it. I cannot access it. The system is broken down."

Forensic examinations will have to be an important part or tool for the honourable Minister to make that successful. We all want it to be successful, honourable Prime Minister. I hope and pray that the honourable Minister for Finance is also going to look at that and give the honourable Minister enough in terms of staff and money, to ensure that the National Digital Strategy which is actually a strategy that started a while ago, needs to be put into action with enough resources given to the Ministry, to make sure that we can proudly say that Fiji is a wonderful place to do business and we have ease of space in our digitisation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is an appropriate time for our morning break. We will now suspend proceedings for our tea break and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.26 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

Update on the National Anti-Litter Campaign

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide this august House with an update on the National Anti-Litter Campaign spearheaded by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Fiji is grappling with escalating waste management challenges that pose significant risk to our environment's health, our community's wellbeing, and our economy's sustainability. Fiji's environmental assets and unique biodiversity are our inheritance, responsibility, and the value we must protect and preserve for the benefit and wellbeing of our future generations. Our culture, constitutional laws, policies, recognise every person has the right to a clean and healthy environment and the requirement and responsibility to protect our natural world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that we continue to see various examples of irresponsible behaviour that contravenes this understanding. Plastic bottles and cans are tossed from windows of buses and cars. Waste is abandoned on beaches, scattered in drains, and deposited on roadsides. Waste such as plastic packaging is found in creeks, rivers, and the ocean. This practise is not perpetuated by all, but is normalised by many, and it is a shame. It is a shame to those who came before us, and it is a breach of our responsibilities. This treatment of waste, we are responsible for, is a waste in itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the ongoing challenge, on 21st January 2025, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change launched a "Do the Right Thing" national campaign, a call to action for a litter-free Fiji. This campaign has been formulated around the honourable Prime Minister's vision to unite Fijians in a shared mission to tackle the growing litter crisis. Through it, we seek to foster a culture of accountability and respect to our surroundings. We want all those who reside here in Fiji to work together to ensure that we do all we can to provide a safe, clean and thriving environment.

This campaign is not just about cleaning up, it is about building civic pride and a consensus around a common understanding of the collective responsibility to protect our pristine ecosystem for the shared benefit of all and the generations to come. Since the launch of the national campaign, the Ministry has advocated strongly on behavioural change through various media platforms, creating awareness among the public and ensuring the population is informed of the scope and scale of the intention, initiative and actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this campaign is more than an anti-litter initiative, it is a movement, it is a call on every individual, family, business and organisation to do the right thing, whether it is picking up litter, sorting waste, or saying no to single-use plastics, every action makes a big difference. The Ministry is mandated to enforce the Litter Act 2008, and the Ministry has taken this responsibility seriously in training and appointing 57 of our staff members as litter prevention officers, giving them required powers to enforce the Litter Act 2008.

To scale up enforcement of the Act, the Ministry has also trained 203 civil servants across government ministries in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions. The Ministry aims to train at least 500 litter prevention officers across government ministries and public authorities by the end of this year. In line with that, later this year, the Ministry will convene training sessions with the Fiji Police Force, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji and the Land Transport Authority, who by virtue of their offices, are deemed litter prevention offices for the purpose of the Litter Act 2008.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry is working with partners and stakeholders to develop and review critical policies and strategies to further address waste management and pollution issues in

Fiji, the Ministry has been proactive to date in meeting and inspiring the public to participate in clean-up campaigns. During Fijian Drua Super Rugby home matches this year, the Ministry staff and trained litter prevention officers were at the site, issued spot fines and conducted clean-ups after the matches.

This has been partly effective as we had seen some improvements in the litter management during the games. For example, 285 bags of waste were collected during the game against the Brumbies, held on 15th February, 2025, at the HFC Stadium. In the game held against the Crusaders on 6th April, 2025, only 63 bags of waste were collected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 15th March this year, the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, together with the Ministry of Civil Service, conducted a national clean-up campaign across all Government Ministries and business houses at the litter hotspot sites in the 13 Municipal Councils across Fiji. Following a successful turnout, 1,061 bags of waste were collected during the event. The Ministry worked with the Municipal Councils to properly dispose the collected waste after the event. Aside from the clean-up activities, my Ministry has facilitated and participated in a number of community and youth group-led clean-up exercises across three divisions, and has also provided clean-up materials, such as nylon bags and hand gloves, to assist in this good cause.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise that the crucial role of social media and other media platforms play in influencing people's behaviour. Following the launch of the national campaign, the Ministry has been actively participating in local radio and television talk-back shows, including the vernacular languages, to advocate and create awareness on the national campaign. To this extent, the Ministry also partners with the community, role models, and national celebrities to embody the do-the-right-thing ethos, showcasing their efforts to inspire others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another example of the Ministry's effort to stop pollution and littering is the Trash Boom initiative. On 28th February this year, a trash boom was installed at the Nabukalou Creek, funded by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. The trash boom includes the installation of floating barriers designed to intercept debris, plastics, and other pollutants before they reach the ocean, thereby reducing marine pollution and protecting aquatic life.

That collaborative effort addresses plastic waste and pollution in Fiji's waterways, particularly the hotspot areas and illegal dumping. By analysing collective waste, the initiatives seeks to identify the sources of pollution and promote sustainable waste management practices. The initiative aligns well with the Government's effort to tackle urban waste management and protect waterways. The Ministry continues to work with the donor partners as their goal is to reprepare this initiative in other hotspot locations around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our journey towards sustainability is backed by strong policies. This year is indeed a critical one for the Ministry as we strive to finalise two critical policy documents:

- (1) Container Deposit Regulation for Fiji; and
- (2) National Integrated Waste Management and Pollution Control Strategy.

The Container Deposit Regulation will be a practical and effective solution in addressing waste management issues in Fiji while offering multiple environmental, economic and social benefits. This will incentivise the return of beverages' containers by offering refunds for empty beverages' bottles and cans. It will directly address the pervasive issue of plastic pollution and will encourage more responsible disposal of containers, helping reduce the cost of waste management for the Government.

Additionally, to reduce the threats to Fiji's sustainable development, the National Integrated Waste Management and Pollution Control Strategy, 2025 to 2035 Strategy, will provide a 10-year strategic framework to address waste, chemicals and pollution challenges. This vision of a strategy is a cleaner Fiji for all. The strategy will address all waste and pollution control issues throughout Fiji, which includes, but is not limited to municipal solid waste, liquid waste, chemical, hazardous waste, air pollution, greenhouse gases, ozone-depleting substances, and other wastes, like disaster waste, tyres, and end-of-life vehicles. The regulation and strategy will play a significant role in redefining our perception of waste and approach to waste management in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, this initiative demonstrates our commitment in creating systems that empower every Fijian to contribute to a cleaner environment. Mr. Speaker, environmental protection and pollution prevention are essential to sustainable practises of commercial and industrial facilities and should be embedded in everyday operation practises of facilities and industries. It is also the responsibility of every facility or industry to comply with national standards and requirements related to pollutant discharge and emissions management.

The Ministry, through the enforcement of the Environment Management Act 2005 and the Environment Management (Waste Disposal and Recycling) Regulations 2007 mandates all commercial industrial facilities producing and discharging or disposing waste to have an approved water disposal or recycling payment from the Department of Environment.

The Department of Environment has been issuing fixed penalty and remittal notices, non-compliance notices, prohibition notices to a number of commercial and industrial facilities in the Central, Eastern, Western, and Northern Division who are operating without valid permits or were found in breach of conditions of the permit and discharging or disposing waste into the environment inappropriately. The Ministry will continue to raise awareness through our quarterly monitoring and compliance inspections, as well as business roundtables and trainings held across Fiji to support the full compliance of commercial and industrial facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry acknowledges that our current environmental laws are in somewhat respect not adequately addressing all the evolving challenges and issues we face in relation to waste management and other environmental issues. As such, the Ministry has taken a proactive approach in proposing the review of the environmental legislation and will be tabling a Cabinet paper in the next Cabinet sitting, to seek approval for the comprehensive review of our existing environmental legislations.

A comprehensive review of the waste management laws will be the means to improve alignment with the priorities outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2025-2029. This strategic alignment will ensure that the laws effectively support the key objectives of the NDP and its overarching aim to foster a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable Fiji.

By reviewing and proposing amendments to the current environmental laws, including waste management laws, we aim to create a pragmatic and robust legal framework that addresses the evolving challenges of waste management, environmental protection, recognition, and I would like to start by saying that we have made much of our environment legislation request updating and amendment to better serve the current context and the challenges we face. Through the review of the Litter Act 2008, we would also recommend a robust review of the litter offence penalties to ensure enforcement effectively deters littering and illegal dumping in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to conduct a nationwide public awareness campaign on waste segregation, litter fines and environment stewardship. The Ministry, through the PacWastePlus project implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment

Programme (SPREP), has assisted in a total of 25 informal settlements and villages through a communal organic processing programme to ensure the safe and sustainable management of waste, with due regard to the biodiversity conservation, reduction of marine litter, health and wellbeing of communities, and climate change mitigation and adaptation requirements.

This year, the Ministry, in collaboration with PacWastePlus project, also convened several trainings on key thematic areas under waste management, to enhance the capacity of our offices, including civil servants from the line ministries, with a similar mandate and a private sector representative, to effectively tackle waste management issues in Fiji. This includes capacity building in handling waste containing asbestos, e-management, healthcare waste, organic waste, curriculum development training for teachers and officers from the Ministry of Education to better equip them to design curricula that embeds waste management principles and expectations in national education. Training teachers and curriculum specialists is extremely important as educational institutions are key in driving change in our society through their ability to influence behaviour and perception that will shape our future leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reducing the current burden on our landfills is a key priority for our Ministry. The data from the recent years shows that waste going to our landfill is comprised mainly of organic waste which can be easily converted into useful farm manure at home. We appreciate the support and assistance of the Government of Canada and the Recycle Organics Programme to improve community uptake of composting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the programme is in partnership with the iTaukei Affairs Board and will kick off by implementing a Home Composting Programme in four villages in the Province of Bua that is in Vuya, Nabouwalu, Wairiki and Makolei. Sir, 200 composting kits will be distributed to these community workshops that will be held on 13th and 14th May, 2025, to educate and equip communities to be better environmental stewards. Composting is a win-win, supporting agriculture, reducing waste and supporting both our environment and climate change objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have continued to partner with municipal councils, civil society and the private sector to expand recycling programmes in urban and rural areas. The Ministry is further exploring possible partnerships and have also requested funding through the national budgeting process to place an adequate number of rubbish bins in public places, increasing accessibility for the public to do the right thing. The Ministry is also working towards introducing and formalising national colour-coded bins with clear signage for easy sorting of recyclables and waste. We call on the public to do much more and reduce the need for government to expand public resources to enforce legislation that requires behaviour that ideally should be perceived as a common sense.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I assure the honourable Members of this House that the Ministry remains steadfast in our commitment to protecting our national heritage, safeguarding our future, unlocking sustainable development potential and keeping Fiji's environment and public spaces clean and pollution-free. I also call on stakeholders to support us in our efforts to reduce the impact of littering and pollution on our environment and wellbeing. This is a shared responsibility, and we urge all Fijians to do the right thing in keeping Fiji clean.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important issue and I also like to congratulate honourable Bulitavu for his first Ministerial Statement which he delivered in the Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for donkey's years we have tried to tackle the problem of littering in Fiji. When we compare ourselves with Australia and New Zealand, we fall short. There, littering is heavily curbed, and a lot of credit goes to the educating of young children in schools because it is

the children who hold their parents responsible. It is the children who hold the elders responsible when they see them littering and out of shame, elders do not litter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not only education, but they also provide, combined with the proper waste collection services, reliable disposable infrastructure and well-managed litter bins in public places and along with that is the effective enforcement of the litter laws. When we travel abroad, we dare not throw a piece of paper anywhere. Very quickly we learn the law, we are told about it, and we fear not to throw anything. We are very careful, but that is not the situation in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we talk about litter awareness campaigns and education programmes, let us be honest, awareness alone is not enough and we have heard from the honourable Minister, he has dished out a number of strategies that can help. However, municipal councils must provide litter bins in strategic locations and enforcement of the Litter Act must be taken seriously. Without proper infrastructure and enforcement, no amount of posters or slogans or clean-up campaign will solve this problem. But the bigger issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the disconnect between what the children are taught at school and what they experience at home. We teach our children to protect the environment, yet when they go home, they are told by the parents, go outside and dump this rubbish. Why?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because there are households that do not have access to regular and reliable waste collection services, and we must change this behaviour. Municipal councils are already stretched, they provide services to ratepayers and also to informal settlements, and this comes at the cost of the ratepayers. Municipalities are further expected to take over waste collection responsibilities from rural authorities and while some government assistance is given, it is far from sufficient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem is, we do not treat solid waste management with the same seriousness as water and electricity. We do not price waste collection and disposal properly. Until we change that mindset, littering will continue to plague our streets, highways and communities. We have all seen household rubbish dumped along the Suva-Nasinu corridor, along the highways and in our side streets. This is not acceptable for a nation. Fiji markets itself as a tourist destination and then if we continue littering, it is an eyesore.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had already started a process to fix this. I am talking about action here. We directed the Suva City Council to manage waste collection in the Nasinu area under shared services model, which is allowed under the law. To eventually bring in Nausori and Lami municipalities, the ultimate goal was to create a professional waste management company owned by the municipal councils, operating like a private company on a user pay system. This would have allowed municipal councils to focus on developing vibrant cities and towns that attract investment and create jobs, rather than being burdened with waste collection. But what did we see?

A step backward when this government decided to go back to the old system with old mentality that the job of municipal council is to cut grass, clean drain and collect rubbish. We need to go beyond that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we want to clean up our streets and protect our environment, we need a real commitment to make waste management a national infrastructure priority and for that, money is needed, if you do not put money into collection services. Forget about just simple campaigns and this stock shop that we normally have.

Recent Accomplishments and Developments in Fiji's Offshore Fisheries Sector

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of

Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and all those joining us live on Parliament's *Facebook* channel. I would also like to acknowledge the members of the Retired Fijian Teachers Association who are seated in the gallery this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a statement on the recent accomplishments and developments in Fiji's offshore fisheries sector. Whilst there have been substantial achievements across the Ministry, I would like to touch on the accomplishments of the offshore fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when speaking about Fiji or the region's shared tuna stocks, it is important to understand the challenges that comes with managing tuna stocks. The sheer size of the ocean we manage makes it challenging to enforce laws and monitor fishing activities. This leads to the risk of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing that undermines the conservation efforts and poses a threat to the sustainability of tuna stocks.

With that in mind, last year, the Ministry of Fisheries, through the country partnership agreement with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, worked to improve Fiji's ability to monitor the movement of fishing vessels within our waters through the installation of the Fiji Fisheries Surveillance and Operations Centre. This was made possible through funding under the EU Programme for Environment and Urban Mobility or Pacific European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme. With the launch and use of this new Centre, we are on a transformative journey to enhance Fiji's Tuna Fisheries Management through cutting-edge technology.

The introduction of advance vessel-tracking and vessel-monitoring system, coupled with our ability to access satellite imagery, will revolutionise how we monitor and manage fishing activities across the Western and Central Pacific Ocean and within our own Fiji waters. As we all know, IUU fishing poses a significant threat to our marine ecosystems. The livelihoods of our fishing communities and the sustainability of our fisheries. With implementation of this modern tools, we aimed to address these refreshing issues head-on.

Mr. Speaker, our vision is clear - to improve and heighten the skills of our monitoring controls surveillance practitioners by utilising existing vessel monitoring tools. This will not only enhance our capacity to combat IUU fishing, but it will ensure that our tuna fisheries are managed sustainably for generations to come.

The Fiji Fisheries Surveillance and Operations Centre will serve as a hub of information and coordination complementing existing platforms such as the Fiji Navy, Foreign Fisheries Agency, Regional Surveillance Centre and the Western Central Pacific Commission System. Through collaboration, Mr. Speaker, we will create a comprehensive and cohesive approach to fisheries management that leaves no stone unturned.

Mr. Speaker, the opportunities that lie ahead of us are truly endless. By leveraging technology and fostering collaboration among partners and stakeholders we can create a safer or a sustainable fishing environment that supports our economy and protect our marine by diversity. This can only be achieved through partnership and collaboration to ensure our fisheries remain vibrant and resilient not just for today but for Fijian generations.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, while we continue to progress, we effectively monitor best selectivity within our waters and beyond. It is important that we ensure that the lives of crew onboard fishing vessels are well looked after. As a nation deeply connected to our ocean and its resources, we recognise that our fishing industry is not just a means of economic sustenance, it is a vital part of our cultural heritage and identity.

Mr. Speaker, the ocean has long been a source of nourishment, community and tradition for our people. However, with great privilege comes great responsibility. It is our duty to ensure that our fishing practices are sustainable that they respect the rights of our workers and that they contribute positively to the social and economic growth of our nation.

With that said, the Ministry of Fisheries last week launched the National Offshore Fishing Crew Policy of 2025 to 2028. The launch of this policy marks a critical steps in our commitment to promoting safe and fair employment conditions in accordance with International and Regional Standards. It is imperative that we ensure that every Fijian fisher, every officer on our fishing vessels is treated with dignity and respect. This policy will serve as a framework for vessel owners and operators to align their practices with Fiji's relevant labour and crew in laws as well as international obligations that we as a proud nation are committed to uphold.

Mr. Speaker, our focus action areas are designed to create a comprehensive and coherent approach to achieve in these objectives. Under work agreements we will establish clear, fair and transparent work agreements that protect the rights and welfare of our fishers. Every individual should have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities and rights within the fishing industry. Under governance strong governance is key to our success. We will ensure that our regulatory frameworks are robust, and they enforce accountability among vessel owners and operators.

We must work together to create an environment where compliance is the norm, not the exception. Under recruitment practices, we commit to promoting ethical recruitment practices that prioritise the wellbeing of our fishers. No longer will we allow exploitation or unfair treatment to tarnish our industry. We will work to ensure recruitment is fair, transparent, and inclusive. Under training, investing in our people is paramount. We will enhance training programmes that equip our fishers with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a competitive market while adhering to safety and sustainability standards.

A well-trained workforce is a backbone of a successful fishing industry. Under awareness and outreach programmes, education is the key to change. We will launch awareness and outreach programmes that inform our fishers about their rights and responsibilities, as well as the importance of sustainable fishing practices. Knowledge is power, and we will empower our communities to make informed decisions. By focusing on these action areas, Mr. Speaker, we are not only supporting our fishers but also affirming Fiji's position as a leader in regional and international standards for sustainable fisheries management.

Mr. Speaker, the progress outlined today demonstrates the Ministry of Fisheries' unwavering commitment to safeguarding Fiji's valuable tuna stocks and resources through enhanced surveillance and to ensuring the dignity and rights of those who work within this vital sector. We look forward to continually and consistently building upon those achievements in the coming months for the continued prosperity of our nation and its people.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry for her statement on recent accomplishments and developments in Fiji's offshore fisheries sector. In her Ministerial Statement, she highlighted the National Fisheries Surveillance Centre and additionally the National Offshore Fisheries Group Policy of 2025 to 2028.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Fisheries Surveillance operations is critical in the protection of our marine resources. The Centre oversees fishing activity, especially tuna in our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Also, I want to thank the honourable Minister for highlighting IUU as it is one of the critical issues that faces our fishing industry today. In this respect, IUU does not involve illegal fishing from overseas vessels. It also includes the illegal activities by the fishing vessels that

are licensed by our own Government. The IUU has always been attributed to foreign fishing vessels operating in Fiji, but it also includes foreign vessels that are operating in Fiji but doing illegal activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, surveillance is backed by two centers - the Fiji Navy, which has a Maritime Surveillance Centre and the FFA which the honourable Minister has alluded to, which is based at Honiara in the Solomon Islands. The Maritime Surveillance Centre in the Navy lacks the backup that is required by the Ministry of Fisheries due to the number of vessels and the capability that is presently within the Republic of Fiji Navy. The backup center by FFA at Honiara oversees the Pacific Islands and I thank the honourable Minister for bringing up the surveillance center for Fiji as it concentrates on the fishing activities within our EEZ. The Fiji Navy operates the National Surveillance Centre and looks after other vessels that are involved in other activities like commercial shipping.

I also want to thank the honourable Minister for bringing up the National Offshore Fishing Crew Policy. This has been outstanding for a very long time, especially for foreign vessels that employ our local crew. This policy will safeguard the safety and security of our crew serving onboard overseas vessels. I wish to highlight that Fiji provides the maximum number of fisheries observers on all fishing vessels trading within the Pacific Islands and through the Ministry of Fisheries, seconded our observers to overseas vessels which could not provide observers on the vessels that are licensed to them.

I thank the honourable Minister for bringing in this policy because there has been a lot of complaints about the treatment of our crew and observers onboard foreign vessels and I hope that the Ministry will look at our crew that are serving onboard overseas vessels serving in other countries in the Pacific are protected under this legislation.

Findings on the Tragic Passing of Ubayd Haider

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public sitting in the public gallery, I also welcome those who are watching from the comfort of their homes through livestream; allow me to first respond to honourable Maharaj's comment yesterday regarding the current lack of a structured pathway for our elite athletes from the Coca-Cola Games to representing Fiji at the international level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have already informed this House, Cabinet has approved the ongoing review of the Fiji National Sports Commission. As part of this review, we will establish the Fiji Institute of Sports - the crucial missing link in nurturing elite talent and providing a seamless progression to national and international representation.

Today, I rise before this esteemed House with a heavy heart to address the tragic passing of one of Fiji's most promising young athletes, Mr. Ubayd Haider, formerly known as Nathan Singh. Mr. Haider was a gifted boxer who carried with him the dreams of his family, supporters, and the nation. His untimely death in November 2024 sent ripples of grief through the Fijian sporting community. His loss is not only a blow to the sport of boxing, but to the country as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has not forgotten the gravity of what occurred, nor has it turned a blind eye to the need for accountability and reform. The tragic loss of Mr. Ubayd Haider remains a matter of national importance. We owe it to his family, the boxing community, and the Fijian people to present the findings of the Commission of Inquiry, address the issues raised, and

ensure that all necessary actions are taken to safeguard our athletes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the night of 26th October, 2024, Mr. Ubayd Haider faced Sydney-based Runqi Zhou in the IBO Asia-Pacific Super Featherweight title fight in Nadi. Mr. Haider fought bravely but lost by technical knockout. Soon after the match, he collapsed and was rushed to Lautoka Aspen Hospital in critical condition. Despite the tireless efforts of the medical team, he succumbed to his injuries in November 2024. His passing is an immense loss to the boxing fraternity and to Fiji - a nation proud of its sporting sons and daughters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognising the seriousness of the incident and its implications, the Government promptly established a Commission of Inquiry. The Commission was mandated to examine any lapses in safety protocols, assess the effectiveness of the medical response, and recommend improvements to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Despite delays due to the unavailability of key witnesses, the Commission has concluded its investigation, and I now present the key findings to this House, as follows:

(1) Pre-fight Medical Checks

Mr. Ubayd Haider underwent standard pre-fight medical examinations, which did not identify any concerning issues. However, the inquiry recommends more robust neurological screenings for high-risk bouts.

(2) Fight Protocols and Response

The referee acted according to international standards, stopping the fight under the Technical Knockout (TKO) rule, and medical personnel attended to Mr. Ubayd Haider immediately. However, the report flagged the lack of an on-site ambulance which delayed critical care.

(3) Post-Fight Medical Care

The absence of a dedicated emergency transport plan contributed to delays in treatment. The staff at Lautoka Aspen Hospital worked tirelessly and relentlessly to assess the severity of his condition, making recovery difficult.

(4) Regulatory Gaps

The inquiry calls for stricter boxing regulations, including mandatory post-fight brain scans for fighters involved in knockouts or TKO losses.

(5) Education and Awareness

There is a pressing need for better education among trainers, referees and medical staff to recognise any signs of head trauma, continuous professional development, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of the Commission's findings, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, in collaboration with the Boxing Commission of Fiji, will implement the following:

(1) Enhanced Medical Protocols

Mandatory pre-fight MRI or CT scans for fighters in national and international bouts; post-fight evaluations for all knockouts or TKO outcomes; and an improved ringside emergency preparedness.

(2) Regulatory Reforms

Stricter safety standards for professional boxing and regular compliance audits to align with international best practices.

(3) Medical Infrastructure Improvements

Ambulance availability at all major combat sporting events is a must and will be adhered to very strictly. The presence of trauma specialists or neurosurgeons during high-risk fights should be available, and investment in ringside medical equipment and support.

(4) Education and Awareness

National campaigns on the risks of combat sports should be done more openly to all boxers. Concussion management training for referees, coaches and ringside staff. There should be continuous education on trauma detection and prevention.

(4) Athlete Support and Wellbeing

Mental health and counselling support for athletes should be supported and a retirement and transition planning for boxers at risk of long-term health complications.

In conclusion, Mr. Ubayd Haider's tragic death is a sobering reminder of the risk in combat sports. While we cannot undo the pain of his passing, we can honour his memory by ensuring that such an incident does not happen again.

The Government is unwavering in its commitment to athlete safety and sports development. We will take every necessary step to ensure that Fiji's sporting landscape is not only one of excellence, but of safety and responsibility. Let Mr. Ubayd Haider's legacy be one of courage, inspiration and reform. May his soul rest in eternal peace and may his name be etched forever in Fiji's sporting history.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before, I invite the response from the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate at this late juncture, I recognise the students and teachers of the Institute of Indigenous Studies from the University of the South Pacific. Please, honourable Members, join me in welcoming them to Parliament. I hope you are enjoying the proceedings.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to Mr. Haider's demise and the Minister's update, the tragic death of a young boxer had shocked our community and the entire sporting fraternity. The honourable Leader of the Opposition and most of the Opposition Members had visited Mr. Haider's family upon this tragic news. Such incidents underscored the importance of rigorous safety protocols and health assessments to protect our Fijian athletes.

In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, boxing is a life and death sport. For most, it is their livelihood and Mr. Haider was passionate about what he did, and the people were aware of his love for boxing as he was up to date on social media for any developments and events he participated in. People were aware of his boxing history.

The Fiji Boxing Commission, to note, is a statutory arm under the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The date he passed away was in the early weeks of November 2024 and today is 29th April, 2025, almost six months. I would say a very poor reflection of actions of urgency under this Minister for Youth and Sports.

We have heard the honourable Minister for an update but under your leadership and the Boxing Commission allowing that fight to happen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has set a very dangerous precedence. It is not the athlete who should dictate the sport. In this case, it is not the boxer who should dictate to fight, it is you and your Commission, and the risk was taken.

Fiji lost a very young, a very passionate, a very determined fighter. If the requirements are not met, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for one to step into the ring, the fight should have been called off. If you

are speaking of referee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the referee makes real-time decisions on counts such as knockdowns, warnings and when to stop the fight. That judgment can influence the outcome and ensure the fights are conducted safely within the rules. In this case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the referee had the authority to stop the fight if the fighter was at risk of harm and prevent unnecessary injuries.

Speaking of drug testing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament has passed the Anti-Doping Bill, which is an Act to establish drug-free sports in Fiji and it was supported from both sides of the House. We need strict implementation and enforcement of drug testing protocols for all athletes and ensure a level playing field and prevent the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the boxing fight that happened yesterday with Chris Junior and Conor Benn, Chris Junior was rushed to the hospital by ambulance and was given little time to celebrate his career defining win. A fighter who had won was rushed to the hospital and in this case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister shared with this august House that there was no ambulance on standby. As part of standard protocol, Chris went to the hospital for precautionary checks to monitor his vitals and ensure everything is in order. Yet we do not have that in Fiji, I guess, as the honourable Minister stated because in this case, upon collapsing, then the medical team and people rushed to his wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister needs to ensure that the Boxing Commission needs to carry out mandatory pre and post competition medical examinations, including neurosurgical assessments to monitor athletes' health and identify any potential risks. The question goes to the Commission and the honourable Minister himself, was a proper medical screening done? Was he medically clear to fight? Did he meet all the requirements set by the Commission? Where is the checklist? The Commission should verify the health and fitness of boxers before and after they compete.

Those are some of the basic protocols and requirements that should be met by the Boxing Commission. Like I stated earlier, no athlete should dictate the sport. It is the responsibility of the Commission to ensure all requirements are adhered to. No amount of justification will bring him back. There needs to be support systems in place for the families of deceased fighters and for the fighters themselves. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and justice may be served.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when taking office, if the honourable Minister had addressed the importance of rigorous safety protocols and health assessments of our sporting events, this tragic incident could have been avoided. The honourable Minister and the Boxing Commission still have serious questions to answer and amendments to make to ensure this never happens again.

Easter on the Park Programme

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow citizens, first, I thank the honourable Member for his comments and for being emotional in his contribution. I was there grieving with the family, but I never saw him, yet he wanted to come and talk in Parliament. You have to be there with the family during their difficult time, that is, to be seen, to be sharing the sadness and loss that they are going through.

The honourable Member has always been trying to be a champion of youth in this House, but I have never seen him in any of our youth programmes. I do not know which youth club he belongs to, but it is very important that you act on what you say in Parliament. We are talking to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today with immense gratitude and purpose to share with this esteemed House the outcomes of an inspiring journey that began with the simple yet powerful idea. An idea birthed from our collective commitment during the Pacific Youth Ministers meeting under the concept of Casting the Net Anew. This transformative journey evolved into the Christmas on the Park Programme in December 2024 and further blossomed into the Easter on the Park Programme held on March 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it gives me great pride to announce that this initiative is now shaping into a comprehensive model for the rehabilitation of street dwellers and children in Fiji. Today, I wish to present the achievements of the Easter on the Park Programme and the vision it paves for the future of youth development in our beloved nation.

Casting the Net Anew: Mr. Speaker, it is important to reflect on how this initiative began at the Pacific Youth Ministers Meeting hosted here in Fiji 2024. Ministers recognised that youth work must evolve to become more inclusive, more compassionate and more innovative. The concept of Casting the Net Anew was adopted to reach the unreachable, to embrace those marginalized by society and to rebuild the broken pathways for young people living on the fringes. That was not merely a slogan, it became our call to action.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports, inspired by this vision, took the bold step of organising the first ever Christmas on the Park event in December 2024, reaching out to the street kids and marginalised youth in Suva. The success and overwhelming impact of Christmas on the Park laid the foundation for even more expansive project – Easter on the Park.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to briefly recap the Christmas initiative held at Ratu Sukuna Park. Christmas on the Park brought together Government agencies, NGOs, faith-based organisations, private sector partners and volunteers in a joint mission to share love, food, gifts, entertainment and most importantly, hope with the street dwellers and vulnerable youth. Key highlights included:

- Over 150 youth and children reached;
- Provision of warm meals, clothing and hygiene kits;
- Counselling sessions by young volunteer professionals at respective rehabilitation shelters;
- Inspirational testimonies from former street dwellers who turned their lives around; and
- Christmas carols and fellowship sessions reinforcing the spirit of community.

Christmas on the Park was more than a charity event, it became a movement - a movement of hope, restoration and belonging. It taught us valuable lessons and unveiled even greater opportunities for intervention and systematic support.

Easter on the Park - Building on Success: Riding on the momentum of Christmas on the Park, the Ministry expanded the concept through the Easter on the Park Programme. This time, we reached out to youths and street dwellers in the Western Division, particularly targeting Lautoka and Nadi - areas experiencing rising numbers of vulnerable youth population.

Key features of Easter on the Park include:

(1) Holistic Rehabilitation Focus

Beyond providing meals and entertainment, Easter on the Park introduced health screenings, life skills workshops, spiritual nurturing, counselling, pathways to vocational training and employment.

- (2) Community Integration
Easter on the Park deliberately involved local youth clubs, churches, NGOs, medical teams, and businesses. Ownership by the community was emphasised.
- (3) Sustained Follow-Up Mechanism
Unlike Christmas on the Park, Easter on the Park launched a systematic data collection process, capturing basic profiles, needs and aspirations of the youth and street children who attended.
- (4) Pathway to Programmes
Many participants were linked immediately to Ministry-led initiatives such as Skills for Life Training programme, counselling and health referrals, and employment opportunities.

Achievements - Impact of Easter on the Park: Mr. Speaker, allow me to share some of the key outcomes achieved through Easter on the Park Programme -

- (1) Outreach Numbers
 - Over 50 street youths, adults and children were reached across Lautoka and Nadi;
 - All completed full registration forms enabling targeted follow-up to undertake the Ministry's Easter on the Park programme.
- (2) Health and Wellness Intervention
 - All these youths underwent voluntary health screenings, including checks for TB, STIs, and nutrition assessments;
 - Referrals were made for those needing urgent medical attention.
- (3) Education and Skills Pathways
 - 49 youths enrolled in the Ministry's Skills for Life Training. The training included seeds of success, sexual reproductive health rights, skills training, youth camp, inclusive and diverse strategic planning programme, and finally the safe house rehabilitation;
 - 16 youths reintegrated back to their families;
 - 9 youths were coming from their homes;
 - 24 youths currently in a safe home in Tau Village.
- (4) Employment and Livelihood Opportunities
 - Partnerships with employers in Nadi and Lautoka led to:
 - two youths gaining casual employment post-event;
 - seven youths under 25 years will be sponsored by Viti Roofing to attend carpentry course at Nadave;
 - five youths are waiting for employment with Viti Roofing;
 - the rest of the youth will be going through a mini job fair to link them to the employers, through the Ministry of Employment.
- (5) Spiritual and Emotional Healing
 - Faith-based organisations played a vital role in conducting prayer sessions, sharing inspirational messages, and offering ongoing mentoring to interested youth;
 - The Methodist Church of Fiji through Reverend Iliesa Koroi did wonders in the spiritual empowerment of the youth;
 - We wish to thank the MYF of Lautoka Division for allowing our street dwellers to be part of their Easter Camp.

- (6) **Community Networks Strengthened**
- Easter on the Park resulted in the formation of the Western Street Kids and Youth Club, a community-based platform that will help support ongoing interventions.

Challenges Encountered: Mr. Speaker, while we celebrated the achievements, it is important to acknowledge the challenges faced:

- (1) **Mobility and Transience**
Many street dwellers are highly mobile, having them at a particular venue will always be a challenge.
- (2) **Substance Abuse**
Perhaps, one or two of the participants struggled with substance addiction, which may require specialised interventions beyond the Ministry's current capacity.
- (3) **Family Reunification Complexities**
Attempts to reunite some youth with families revealed underlying issues of abuse, neglect or extreme poverty.
- (4) **Resource Limitations**
Scaling up such programmes requires sustainable financial, human and technical resources.

Lessons Learned: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Easter on the Park experience reinforced several lessons:

- (1) Street youths need not just charity, but dignity and opportunity;
- (2) Holistic partnerships are critical - government alone cannot achieve success;
- (3) Consistency and long-term engagement are necessary to rebuild trust.
- (4) Youth themselves must be empowered to be part of the solution, not just recipients of aid.

Easter on the Park as a Rehabilitation Model: Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the measurable success of the Easter on the Park Programme, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is now formalising it into a Model for Street Youth Rehabilitation. The proposed model will include:

- (1) **Regular Outreach Events**
Quarterly events in different towns and cities to maintain momentum.
- (2) **Comprehensive Profiling**
Development of a national database for street youths, ensuring interventions are data driven.
- (3) **Integrated Support System**
 - Health, education, and skills training; spiritual, social, home integration, and economic support pathways.
 - A case management approach for personalised rehabilitation plans.
- (4) **Youth Champions**
Recruitment and training of former street dwellers as peer mentors.

(5) Safe Homes

Participants accommodation and further nurturing and empowerment in safe homes. We are working with other Ministries and stakeholders to acquire safe houses where we can keep the youths while they go through the rehabilitation programme.

Strategic Alignment: Mr. Speaker, Sir, this model supports several key national and regional strategies:

- Fiji's National Development Plan - building inclusive resilient communities.
- Pacific Youth Development Framework 2031 - leaving no youth behind.
- SDGs 1, 3, 4, 8 and 16 - ending poverty, promoting health, education, decent work and peaceful societies.

This is not just a youth initiative - it is a nation-building exercise.

Future Plans: Mr. Speaker, building on this momentum, the Ministry's next steps include:

- (1) Institutionalising Easter on the Park as an annual national event.
- (2) Securing budgetary support through Government and development partners.
- (3) Developing a national strategy on street youth rehabilitation.
- (4) Piloting transitional shelters or safe homes for youths ready to exit street life.
- (5) Scaling up volunteer mobilisation to sustain grassroots support.

In conclusion, the journey from Casting the Net Anew to Christmas on the Park, and now Easter on the Park, epitomises the Ministry's commitment to innovation, compassion and inclusivity in youth development. We are not merely celebrating events; we are laying foundations for lasting change. We are demonstrating that with faith, commitment and collective effort, every youth, no matter how marginalised, can find hope, dignity and opportunity.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reflect on a powerful story from the scripture that has guided and inspired this journey. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 21, we read of the moment when the risen Christ appears to his disciples. After a long night of fishing and catching nothing, Jesus instructs them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. In obedience, though weary and uncertainty, they cast their nets and caught a multitude of fish, so abundant that they could scarcely haul the net ashore.

That story teaches us several profound lessons. Firstly, it reminds us that something, despite our best efforts, success requires a fresh approach, guided by divine wisdom. Secondly, it shows that obedience to a new vision, even when it defies our tired expectations, can yield miraculous results. Thirdly, it assures us that when we act in faith and unity, the harvest is plentiful.

In the same spirit, Mr. Speaker, we, in the Ministry, have cast our net anew, not in the traditional waters, but into the streets, into the hidden corners of our communities, where forgotten youth dwell. Just as the disciples' net was filled to overflowing, so too have our humble efforts been blessed with fruitfulness beyond measure. Let us continue casting our nets with courage and compassion. Let us continue believing that every street dweller and every marginalised youth is a soul worth saving, a life worth lifting, and a future worth fighting for.

May the spirit of Easter, of resurrection, renewal and restored hope, remain alive in our actions, policies, and hearts as we move forward together, leaving no one behind.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in replying to the Ministerial Statement, I find it quite amusing as the honourable Minister was talking about Easter and talking about youth, and then

to have a go at a youth Member of this Parliament who pointed out ways in which lives could be saved, I think that was belittling. You have too many old fuddy-duddys there, you need to listen to the youth who are on this side!

To say to people who are not here, he had a go, and I will say what I want in my five minutes - I have the right to do that. He said that Members of the Opposition did not go, but they went. They did not have people to take photos of them, for the sake of publicity. They went there to extend their condolences. We have to be very careful with what we say. We do not have people taking photos of where we are going, just to publicise for that time. When you are talking about Easter, remember the spirit of Easter, before you start denigrating a youth Member of Parliament who the youth of this country look up to. You need to think about what you are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has talked about the Ministry of Youth and Sports launching the Christmas on the Park and what it has done in terms of the Easter on the Park that was held in March 2025 in Lautoka and Nadi, with a focus on holistic rehabilitation, and I congratulate the Ministry for doing that. We all know the problems that we have with our youth, and I commend them for that. I am glad to see all those initiatives. One of the problems that we always had in the past is we do a lot of big events, and then we report on activities - just on the activities. However, if you really want to have outcomes, it must not be based on activities.

I am glad to see the work that the Ministry is doing, they are beginning to go into case management. They have identified people, they are profiling them, they are tracking them, and I think that is a good example of a system that we need to follow through. Too many times, you just do things for the sake of the *salusalu*, the photo and what not, then you forget about it. Obviously, in this case, there is a lot more work that has gone into that, and I congratulate the Ministry for getting into this particular programme.

We look forward to it being expanded because the reported success is not only the number of people who were there, it will be what happens to those people over time - the management on a case-by-case basis. I hope that there will be collaboration here, between the two different Ministries - Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Children, because children at risk will become the youth at risk. I know you are probably working together in terms of databases and the NGOs, but it is important for us to do this so that we are very sure what the indicators of success will be, not just the people at these events, but having some progressive enhancement in the wellbeing of the youth over time through a programme of management on a case-by-case basis of a number of people. I am glad to see the people that have taken them in. I have heard about the programme at Tau Village. I know that there is one gentleman somewhere in the West who has taken in 30 children, Mr. Nawaqa, if I am not mistaken. The initiative by ADRA, a network that is in the West. All of them are helping us to move towards long-term rehabilitation.

Vocational training, the temporary safe homes are commendable, but they are not enough. We need permanent housing solutions and sustained support systems. Many of these children are always at the risk of returning to the streets, and that is why I have called for a case-management approach for students and youth who have gone through these particular programmes.

Secondly, we also need to look at the root cause of homelessness. What is it that is leading to this homelessness among our youth? We know what they all are - issues such as family breakdown, poverty, lack of access to education, et cetera. A holistic approach is needed, one that not only provides immediate relief, but also tackles these underlying issues head-on. I hope that the honourable Minister for Finance is listening, that he is going to make sure that he allocates resources to these sorts of programmes, and we have a moral obligation to protect and uplift the most vulnerable members of society. It is not enough to celebrate partial successes while so many are left behind.

There are many homeless people who are in settlements that are not in the towns, settlements in the villages, the people who are left to the side. You need to demand better, and you must do better. I call on the Government to take that immediate action to address these shortcomings. I congratulate you for the work that has been done so far, but we take it to the last mile.

We must have these youth, manage them on a case-by-case basis. We need to invest in permanent housing solutions, strengthen family support systems, and ensure that every child has access to education and healthcare. Let us hold ourselves accountable to the vision of casting the net anew, a vision that promises hope and opportunity for all, not just a select few.

In conclusion, I urge this august House to prioritise the needs of our homeless youth. Let us work together to build, as the Minister said, “a society where no one is left behind, where every young person has the opportunity to succeed, has access to success, a chance to thrive, and the chance to contribute to our nation's future.”

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is a convenient point to suspend our proceedings for lunch.

Parliament is suspended and we will resume our proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the Bachelor of Law students from the School of Law and Politics at the University of the South Pacific.

(Acclamation)

This is your Parliament, and we welcome you here. May your visit provide valuable insights into the workings of this institution as one of the three arms of Government. We welcome you.

Update on the Review of the Education Act 1966

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and ladies and gentlemen;. I rise to brief this august House on the progress of the review of the Education Act 1966.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after 59 years, the Ministry of Education has finally undertaken a comprehensive review process of the Education Act 1966, officially approved by Cabinet on 10th September, 2024. I am pleased to report that the Ministry of Education review exercise is on track to submit a draft Bill for consideration by Cabinet in July 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Education Act 1966, the foundational law for pre-tertiary education in Fiji, has only been amended a few times since its promulgation, and has not undergone a comprehensive review. Therefore, it is imperative that this legislation be updated to reflect modern standards and address current issues within the education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Education Act was established during an era where education systems were predominantly traditional, centralised and relied on conventional learning methodologies. While this legislation has, undoubtedly, contributed to the development of education in Fiji over the decades, significant shifts in the global education standards, rapid technological advancements and evolving socio-economic developments have created a clear necessity for policy reforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world has changed considerably since the inception of the Act and our education system must reflect these changes to remain relevant and effective. Several challenges and gaps have surfaced, highlighting the limitations of the current legislation in addressing the complexities of modern education. Also, the outdated provisions within the Act do not adequately address critical areas, such as digital learning, special inclusive education practices, the professional development of teachers and contemporary education financing mechanism.

The Act does not sufficiently address emerging sector issues, like social assistance programme, such as the Free Education Grant, the curriculum reforms to incorporate modern needs, and the crucial aspects of parental engagement in education. Mr. Speaker, Sir, gaps have also been identified in school governance, management, raising concerns about due diligence, managerial accountability and role clarity within education institutions.

The current legal framework lacks a comprehensive approach to curriculum and assessment reforms, education structures and processes, and ensuring health and safety within schools. The absence of a comprehensive legal framework to ensure a robust teacher training, continuous professional development and adherence to ethical standards within the teaching profession also presents significant challenges. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, the Act does not adequately address early

childhood education, inclusive learning environments, or the establishment of safe school environment conducive to learning. Although the integration of digital learning, information technology and the safeguarding of cyber safety within the education system are also areas where the current legislation falls short. These identified gaps collectively underscores the pressing need for a revised Education Act that is fit for purpose in the 21st Century and capable of supporting a high-quality, equitable and relevant education system for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the Education Act has commenced through a structured collaborative process involving key stakeholders, supported by various institutions. In March 2025, the Education Review Team was appointed to facilitate this project. The team is led by the Commissioner of the Education Act Review, Ms. Rokobua Naiyaga, and Legal Drafters - Ms. Leanne Vaurasi Ratulele and Mr. David Solvalu. The review process has been overseen by the Fiji Law Reform Commission and the Office of the Solicitor-General, whose representatives actively participate in the review process. The Education Act Review is supported by funding assistance from the Global Partnership for Education with UNICEF as its monitoring agency, and also financially supported by the Fiji Programme Support Platform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Review Team commenced its work in March 2025, holding stakeholder workshops in Suva and Pacific Harbour to raise awareness in the Education Act 1966 and gather feedback on key policies. Targeted meetings were also held with other key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the iTaukei Affairs Board, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, Fiji Higher Education Commission and the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority. Those consultations and meetings have been valuable in identifying key issues that need to be addressed in the revised Act, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to reform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key issue that has emerged prominently during the consultations, particularly in the discussions with the Fiji Higher Education Commission, the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority and other stakeholders, was the pressing need for alignment of various education legislation, which became evident that several other crucial pieces of legislation under the education portfolio came into effect years after the enactment of the current Education Act.

Consequently, the existing Act does not adequately address these more recent legal frameworks, leading to overlapping laws and inconsistencies that hinder the smooth functioning of the education sector. To address that, the revised Education Act will seek to harmonize these legislations under my portfolio, promoting a more cohesive and efficient legal framework. This revision aims to resolve critical concerns raised by the Higher Education Commission which highlighted issues such as the fragmented legislation, institutional registration inefficiencies, a lack of prosecutorial powers, and inadequate funding models.

Furthermore, the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority advocated for aligning the Education Act with the Fiji Teachers Registration Act 2008, to ensure consistency in teacher licensing and addressing operational inefficiencies stemming from legal gaps, naming inconsistencies and inadequate delegation powers. The FTRA has also noted registration delays, unclear requirements and low teacher training completion rates, suggesting an expanded mandate to cover teacher welfare and professional development, contingent upon increased resources and clearer role delineation from the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the extensive stakeholder consultations undertaken for the review of the Education Act 1966 and related legislations have yielded significant insights, revealing several cross-cutting concerns and generating key recommendations that warrant our utmost consideration. These consultations underscore a clear imperative for modernisation and alignment, calling for an update

to the Act's language and structure to ensure its coherence with our National Development Plan, the Denarau Declaration 2023 and alignment with prevailing international treaties like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and others.

The discussions highlighted the need to broaden the scope of the Act to embrace a more holistic approach to education, encompassing a clearer classification of our schools, provisions for homeschooling and alternative educational pathways, the inclusion of tertiary institutions within its framework and a strengthened focus on technical and vocational education and training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the realm of governance, the consultations emphasise the importance of fortifying existing structures, addressing any power imbalances, revitalising the crucial Fiji Education Forum and ensuring more meaningful and consistent engagement with all stakeholders. The school management and control, the feedback stressed the necessity of clarifying the roles and responsibilities within school governance, ensuring due diligence in the appointment of managers, addressing potential bias in the investigation of complaints and streamlining the procedures for the establishment and closure of educational institutions. Our stakeholders also voice significant concerns regarding school facilities and student welfare, advocating for enhanced health and safety standards, improvements to infrastructure and the provision of comprehensive support for students' mental health, nutrition, first aid needs and those living with disabilities.

In the matter of finance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, funding, fees and audits were also prominent, with recommendations focusing on improving accountability for the utilisation of public funds, providing greater clarity regarding permissible fees and levies, ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and enhancing the transparency of audit reports. The consultation further eliminated the critical need to address curriculum and assessment. With calls for modernising curriculum definitions, ensuring its ongoing relevance to the needs of our students and the nation. Standardising the language of instructions where appropriate and integrating vital contemporary areas such as climate change awareness, digital literacy skills and comprehensive career guidance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pivotal role of teachers was also a key focus with recommendations addressing crucial aspects of their training, registration, licensing, welfare and opportunities for continuous professional development. The scope and enforcement of compulsory education requires careful reevaluation in light of current realities.

Sir, finally, the consultation underscored the importance of strengthening enforcement and monitoring mechanisms, including improving penalties for misconduct, clearly defining civil and criminal offences within the educational context and enhancing our capacity for robust policy monitoring and effective enforcement. These collective insights provide a comprehensive roadmap for the wider review of our Education Act and related laws

The Ministry of Education is committed to ensuring that the review of the Act is a participatory and inclusive process, reflecting the views and needs of all Fijians. The next crucial phase of the review will involve extensive nationwide public consultation, and these consultations will be conducted across all four divisions, nine education districts including our former capital, Levuka, reaching Taveuni, Rotuma and Rabi; reaching students, teachers, educators, parents, guardians, stakeholders and the general public through strategically organised clusters and community-based sessions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to reaching every corner of Fiji and engaging our diaspora. Recognising the challenges of geographical remoteness, we are leveraging digital platforms to conduct public consultations ensuring that opportunities are given to the most far-flung

communities to contribute their invaluable insights. Furthermore, we understand the significant role and interest of our Fijian brothers and sisters living abroad and we will establish accessible online channels to facilitate their participation in this crucial national dialogue. By embracing the digital tools, we aim to create a comprehensive and participatory review process that reflects the diverse voices and experience of all stakeholders both at home and across the globe.

The Ministry of Education strongly encourages all Members of this august House, all members of the public to get involved in this vital endeavour to modernise our education system. We want to hear from students, new students, teachers and communities all across Fiji to ensure that the new Education Act meets the needs of everyone. This is a significant opportunity for every Fijian to have their voices heard and contribute to shaping a more inclusive, safe and future-ready education system. The input from students is considered particularly critical in this endeavour.

In conclusion, the review of the Education Act 1966 is a critical step towards modernising Fiji's education system. The collaborative efforts of the Review Committee, key stakeholders and the support of our partners will ensure the reformed Act is responsive, equitable and aligned with the needs of our students and the future of Fiji. We are committed to creating an education system that is accessible, safe and fit for future generations.

I wish to thank our stakeholders, statutory bodies, government ministries, international agencies, Fiji Law Reform Commission and the Office of the Solicitor-General to name a few who have made a collaborative effort towards the current review process of the Education Act. Consultation and collaborations are key approaches that make our Coalition Government different from our predecessors. As we continue to process our review, we invite parents, students, teachers, NGOs, regional agencies and communities to make a contribution towards the review of the Act.

On that note, I am deeply honoured to be involved in this historic process, we are not only reviewing Fiji's Education Act but to ensure it aligns to updated legislations and is progressive, but it also becomes the blueprint that will encapsulate all aspects of education of our children from classroom learning to extra-curricular activities that includes sports. As the Minister for Education, I am well aware of the need to progress our children to a place which also addresses holistically the challenges of modern Fiji that prioritises the development of their skills for the job market, honing their skills for entrepreneurship and developing them to be good all-rounder citizens of Fiji. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to speak on this historical milestone, the review of the Education Act.

MR. SPEAKER.- I invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response. Honourable Chand, there were some musical chairs this morning. The movements, I am trying to find where you are now. I knew you used to be there. So, welcome to the front bench then.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Education for providing an update on the progress of the Education Act review. Schools, technical institutions and universities in Fiji strive to provide each student with a quality education that will be a stepping stone to a full life, where they can maximise their potential as individuals and contributing citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very good to note that the Ministry of Education is undertaking a comprehensive review of the Education Act 1966. While carrying out the review, the Ministry must ensure its alignment with current educational needs, best practises and international standards. I remember there was an Education Sector Plan being developed, which was funded by Global Partnership for Education (GPE) in 2022. The review of the Education Act was part of the plan.

The purpose of the review is to modernise the Act, address existing challenges, and enhance the quality and accessibility of education for all Fijian children. While reviewing the Act, it should not be rushed but carefully examine every section of the Education Act to find barriers for opportunities to improve, access and inclusion for students at all levels, starting from early childhood education to higher education, and also including students with special needs.

The review should be done very carefully, under the direction of a well-qualified Commissioner. The honourable Minister has informed that the Commissioner has already been appointed. The panel should look into what we can learn from research on the best ways to improve access and inclusion; what we can learn from the other countries; and reflections and advice that people share, including the many perspectives already sent through the submissions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the person who is leading the review, has the necessary skills and vast experience in human rights and education. The Commissioner should have wide experience in the education sector with good research background, and recognised expertise and experience in education policy and law. The review team should engage with the public, relevant key stakeholders, including schools, students, parents, and faith-based organisations. This should include face-to-face consultation, invitation for submissions and other modes to be determined by the expert team.

The outcome of the review should provide three key papers:

- (1) The discussion paper to support engagement and consultation, outlining the initially identified barriers and opportunities for changes to the Act.
- (2) An interim report to be provided to the honourable Minister for Education during the consultation period for the review identifying and summarising emerging themes.
- (3) The final report provided to the honourable Minister for Education at the conclusion of the review outlining final findings and recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Act needs to be thoroughly audited into what has worked, is working and serving purpose and what is not relevant and what gaps are there to embrace the evolving dynamics. The Act needs to be aligned to global ratifications and guiding documents such as SDGs, regional instruments such as Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) and analyse data to predict trends. The review of the Education Act is timely, considering the new National Development Plan in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, the review process should be transparent, accountable and inclusive of all stakeholders. I would like to thank the honourable Minister and the Ministry of Education for their effort.

Strengthening Rural Electrification and Renewable Energy Development in Fiji

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Members, honourable Assistant Ministers, all Members of the Parliament. I also greet the people of Fiji and our guests in the public gallery.

I rise to provide this august House with an update on the Ministry's progress and achievements in strengthening rural electrification and renewable energy developments. Energy is at the heart of development. It enables investments, innovations and new industries that drive employment, inclusive growth and shared prosperity. These initiatives reflect Government's commitment to expanding access to a just inclusive, reliable and sustainable electricity, particularly for rural and remote maritime communities. They are part of our broader effort to improve quality of life, reduce energy poverty and support inclusive national development.

The Ministry, through the Department of Energy, has tried its best to implement the programmes planned in the 2024-2025 Budget, with a total of \$9.5 million, out of which \$5.79 million is for capital projects and \$3.41 million for operations. I wish to provide an update to this august House on the progress of these Energy Programmes in this Ministerial Statement.

Government Funded Projects are as follows:

(1) Supply and Installation of Solar Home Systems

Under the Government-funded initiatives, the Ministry has implemented several critical projects. The supply and installation of Solar Home Systems Project, with a budget of \$3 million, is expected to benefit 900 households across Provinces, including:

- Bua - 93 households;
- Macuata - 91 households;
- Cakaudrove - 109 households;
- Ra - 69 households;
- Ba - 162 households;
- Kadavu - 167 households;
- Lomaiviti - 48 households;
- Nadroga - 9 households; and
- Lau - 152 households.

We have successfully received the Government Tender Board approval awarding the contract. The supply of equipment is expected to be completed by the end of July and installation plan from August to December 2025. This project will enhance energy access for households in some of our most remote areas, promoting safer, cleaner, and more reliable lighting for homes and small businesses.

(2) Solar Home System Maintenance Project

The Solar Home System Maintenance Project, in parallel, valued at \$900,000 is underway. The project contract, which includes the provision of 900 batteries, will benefit households in the provinces of Lau, Kadavu, Yasawa, Beqa, Tailevu and Naitasiri by maintaining reliable and sustainable energy access. These maintenance works will ensure the longevity and functionality of existing systems, providing Fijians with uninterrupted power for essential household needs.

(3) EFL Grid Extension Programme

Progress has been made under the Rural Electrification Extension Programme, run by the Department of Energy, and works closely with EFL to extend the grid network to rural communities and settlements. From January 2025 to 31st March, 2025, a total of seven grid extension projects were completed, benefiting 27 households at a value of \$300,000. These include households residing in the following communities:

- Malawai Heights, Votualevu, Nadi;
- Votavota Settlement, Tavua;
- Kabisi, Nadroga;
- Lomawai, Nadroga;
- Nabuni, Naitasiri;
- Navunimono, Tailevu; and
- Yaladro, Navua.

In addition, a total of 50 grid extension projects were completed in 2024, with a total cost of \$12.7 million, benefiting a total of 1,232 households. Some of these major

projects include:

- Welagi to Naselesele, Taveuni;
- Tavuki Village, Taveuni;
- Naikilikoso, Wainikoro, Labasa;
- Tikina Navatusila, Navosa;
- Nalawa District, Nasau, Ra;
- Low Cost, Vatukoula, Tavua; and
- Rara Village, Ba.

Furthermore, a total of 73 projects are currently under construction and are expected to be completed by the end of 2026. That will provide grid electricity to an additional 1,636 households with a total investment of \$15.9 million. These projects are in Vitilevu (Central – 24 and Western – 38) and Vanua Levu and Taveuni (11 projects).

The projects are fully paid to EFL for implementation. Most of these projects have passed the design and procurement of material stages and are under construction. Some of the major projects are as follows:

- Mali and Vorovoro Island;
- Nabukanikavula Settlement, Dramea and Draunivau, Labasa;
- Soa and Matuku Villages, Ra;
- Wailase Settlement, Naitasiri;
- Waisali Settlement, Savusavu, Cakaudrove;
- Vunidawamoli, Natuvu and Natua, Wailevu West, Savusavu;
- Nabalebale, Matakunea, Nasavu and Natuvu Settlement, Savusavu;
- Abaca Village, Lautoka;
- Lololo, Lautoka;
- Lau Settlement, Rakiraki;
- Naihau Settlement, Navutu, Sigatoka;
- Navakuru and Suweni Settlements, Korotari, Labasa;
- Waitavala Settlement, Taveuni;
- Drekeniwai and Burotu Settlement, Taveuni.

That will significantly reduce reliance on fossil fuels and produce connectivity to education, health and economic opportunities for rural families.

(4) House Wiring and Connection

A total of \$2 million was allocated to connect 1,655 houses to the EFL grid. To date, 1,150 homes have been successfully connected, significantly improving household access to electricity. These houses/new customers are from the three major islands - Vanualevu, Vitilevu and Taveuni.

Some of the major projects which were energised are as follows: Naselesele, Matei, Tavuki in Taveuni; Nakilikoso, Labasa; Navuniyaumunu and Waidradra, Ra; and Nukuilau in Navosa. By enabling a safe and legal connections, these programmes empowers families with access to lighting, refrigeration and other essential appliances, bringing dignity and opportunity to their daily lives.

(5) Generator Maintenance and Repair

To ensure the continuity of power supply to rural and maritime communities, the Department has been carrying out regular generator maintenance and repair works. Most of these generators were installed more than a decade ago, and due to operational

status, most have developed mechanical and technical problems over time. We are providing maintenance, and some of these communities will be now, and in the future, supported with Home Solar System Programmes and Solar Diesel Hybrid Projects under the Rural Electrification Fund, while phasing out fossil fuel dependence.

A total of 13 generators have been repaired with a total project cost of \$250,000. These include: Waitabu, Lakeba; Raviravi, Natokalau, Matuku; several villages in Koro, including Tuatua and Nakodu; Sawaieke in Gau; Lomanikaya in Vatulele; and Saqani Secondary School. That has greatly assisted households in those communities in accessing electricity and in terms of children's education.

(6) Upgrading of Muana Hydro Plant

We are progressing with the upgrade of the Muana Hydro project in Wailevu, Cakaudrove, with a total cost of \$401,000. Works have been awarded to the contractor which include:

- (1) the upgrading of the powerhouse turbine and control systems;
- (2) wiring of 38 new houses along the Muana grid;
- (3) installation of 173 electrical postpaid meters; and
- (4) improvement of access roads to the water catchment and powerhouse.

In addition, consultation is underway to establish a local business venture that will manage the system under a new tariff regime or model. The full commissioning of the upgraded Muana Hydro system is expected by August 2025. Once completed, the project will provide a clean and stable energy source for the Muana community, fostering local enterprise and improving everyday living standards and, of course, a business model for replication at similar projects, depending on the outcome.

(7) Review of the Petroleum Act 1938

Our commitment to modernising outdated legislation is also reflected in the ongoing review of the Petroleum Act 1938, which governs petroleum storage and carriage. The review involves a gap analysis and assessment report, a regulatory impact assessment and drafting of new legislation. The Ministry has engaged an organisation to lead the work and key stakeholder have been completed, with the second draft of the gap analysis now developed. The revised legal framework will improve safety and compliance, protecting the environment and ensuring more secure fuel distribution for all Fijians.

(8) Legislative Gap Analysis Study

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know Fiji's transition towards integrated renewable energy for electricity generation has, perhaps, not been up to speed and in comparison, to the Government's transition targets and commitments. For that reason and with the aim to increase private sector participation, renewable energy deployment and climate resilient energy efficient power generation, we had engaged the technical assistance of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), to undertake a gap analysis studies of Fiji's framework legislation to facilitate the accelerated uptake of renewable energy in the electricity sector and identify barriers that create unsuitable conditions for private investment.

The study ensures that our legal and regulatory framework supports Fiji's renewable energy goals and the legal and governance framework in Fiji's energy sector is harmonized. The draft report has been completed, despite some delays, related to clarity of recommendations and is currently going through finalization by the Department of

Energy and IRENA. We are anticipating of submitting the final report to Cabinet for approval by the end of May 2025.

(9) Fiji Rural Electrification Fund (FREF)

Sir, FREF is a special purpose entity designed to attract private sector investment in rural electrification, accelerate project development and support the Fijian Government's efforts in expanding sustainable energy access. It operates under its constitution, a board of trustees and the FREF Advisory Committee. Under Cabinet Decision, the FREF support Project Initiation Plan (PIP) was signed between the Government of Fiji, represented by the PS and UNDP, with technical support from the Department of Energy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to thank our donor partners who have provided the funding support to FREF. They include New Zealand MFAT, Australian DFAT, United Kingdom and the US Trade and Development Agency, to name a few. A total funding to the tune of \$21.2 million has been provided to support the implementation of the programme.

A total of around 300 communities in Fiji still rely on intermittent and limited power supply mostly from diesel generators. The Department of Energy with the technical support of Arizona State University in the USA, the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) and UNDP have carried out the feasibility studies of 75 communities all around the country for solarization. In the first phase of implementation, a total of three communities will be assisted which include Yacata, Cakaudrove, Yadrana, Lakeba, Salia and Kioa. The projects are expected to be completed by December 2025.

In addition, the second phase of the programme will cover 17 additional communities and is scheduled to commence in January 2026. These communities have been categorized geographically for ease of implementation, minimising traveling and logistics, and making it cost effective. The communities include:

- Levuka-i-Gau, Qarani, Vione and Nawaikama in Gau;
- Sinuvaca and Nasau in Koro, Lomaiviti;
- Batiki;
- Tavuki in Kadavu; and
- Salia in Nayau.

These projects will enable Fijians in these remote communities to transition from costly and polluting diesel power to clean, affordable, and climate resilient solar energy systems.

Donor Funded Projects are as follows:

(1) LaKaRo Project for Upgrade of Government Stations

You may have heard of the LaKaRo Project which stands for Lakeba, Kadavu and Rotuma. I would like to update the House that the LaKaRo Government Station Upgrade covering those three islands is progressing under joint funding from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and New Zealand Government, amounting to US\$2.5 million.

The initial support for LaKaRo was provided by the UAE under the previous government, and we thank them for that, with a total funding of US\$5 million. That includes installation of the solar system to meet the daytime demand, as you could have seen in Rotuma, Vunisea and Lakeba. However, the system started to develop problems

with high power fluctuations, which causes the inverters and controllers to go offline and, therefore, more pressure on the diesel generators to supply power.

Our successful dialogue with the UAE Government and New Zealand MFAT has resulted in an agreement for redesign and to revive the project. In the proposed redesign, the following components will be upgraded:

- Replacement of Photovoltaic at all three locations.
- Addition of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), the latest ones.
- Removal of low-load generators and replace with synchronise generators.
- Replacement of power electronic and protection devices.
- Upgrading existing powerhouses of the Government system.

As we speak, the Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) contract was signed last month between Masdar - the UAE multi-billion-dollar renewable energy State-Owned Enterprise, the Department of Energy and the contractor regarding this particular upgrading. Materials are currently enroute, with arrival expected by mid-July and project completion anticipated to be December 2025. This upgrade will strengthen public service delivery and improve working conditions in our island administrations of Rotuma, Lakeba and Vunisea in Kadavu, ultimately benefiting citizens who rely on these services daily.

(2) International Solar Alliance

We have ratified an agreement with the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2017, and ISA is very supportive in the transition to solar technologies. Under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Climate Initiative, a grant agreement valued at US\$1 million was endorsed by Cabinet for solar systems in selected healthcare facilities and solar storage infrastructure. This includes health centres and nursing stations in Bua, Kadavu, Yasawa, Lomaiviti, Beqa, and cold storage facilities in Lau, Lomaiviti, Macuata and Bua. These installations will ensure continuous healthcare delivery and improved food and vaccine preservation. This will be rolled out this year (2025).

(3) ADB/JFPRAP Project

Cabinet has also approved a partnership agreement between the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Ministry for the upgrading of the Buca Micro-Hydro Project and the implementation of the Tiliva Solar Hybrid System. The funding was directed from the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific (JFPRAP) and managed by ADB.

The ADB supported the Department with the feasibility study of the project sites and the preparation of the Project Design Document, which forms as the basis to access the funding from JFPRAP. A total of US\$3.4 million was allocated by the funding agency to support the upgrading of the Buca Village Micro Hydro Project in Tukavesi, Vanua Levu, and the installation of a solar-diesel hybrid system for Tiliva, Nakasaleka, Kadavu.

Project implementation will start in the last quarter of 2025, with contracts expected to be signed in September 2025. In terms of the long-term plan, ADB has been supporting Government in our effort to provide sustainable and reliable power supply. These long-term projects will ensure we reinforce energy security and resilience for our rural communities.

(4) United Nations Industrial and Development Organization Project

Finally, under a partnership with the United Nations Industrial and Development Organization (UNIDO), the Ministry successfully completed a 40-kilowatt solidgrid connect demonstration project for the Nausori Market in March 2025. It is currently finalising the installation of a hybrid system for Lomanikaya Village in Vatulele, expected to be completed by July 2025. Sir, UNIDO carried out feasibility studies in 2015 and later years whereby a number of communities and public facilities were assessed for solar diesel hybrid system and grid connect solar system under the last government which we have continued.

Lomanikaya Village and Nausori Market were shortlisted as potential sites for installation and the successful implementation of those projects will provide UNIDO the confidence to roll out similar projects in Fiji. Those achievements are a testament to the Coalition Government's continued investment in energy access and the empowerment of our rural and maritime communities through strong partnerships, sound planning and a clear vision for a resilient energy future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are making measurable progress towards our development goals. Ultimately, our collective efforts are helping to uplift the wellbeing of our people in the maritime and rural areas, ensuring that these areas remain attractive for our people to remain rather than to move to the rural areas.

In conclusion, the Coalition Government reaffirms its commitment to SDG7 – universal access to affordable, renewable, sustainable modern energy and, of course, to the target of reducing emissions in the energy sector by 30 percent in 2030 and achieving net zero emissions by 2050. I commend this Ministerial Statement to this august House.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was listening to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister and it is interesting. Previously, when a Ministry needed funds, they go to Treasury. Now, we note that when most Ministers stand up and talk about new projects, they talk about development partners and donor agencies. Is the Ministry of Finance not giving the funds?

(Laughter)

The honourable Minister for Finance does not have the money to give you, so you have to run to the embassies to collect the money and do the capital projects for this nation?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Do you understand what you are saying?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We understand.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very interesting how these people are trying to portray themselves on, 'money is not an issue, we have funds,' but on the other side in their Ministerial Statement, we hear that they go to the agencies, they run to the embassies, so it seems like we beg for money from others because the Ministry of Finance cannot fund this kind of capital projects. Very bad, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

The other issue I want to bring to the attention of this august House is the renaming of Rural Electrification Programme to Electrification Programme. The Rural Electrification Programme started in 1993 whereby a community used to pay 10 percent, and the Government forks out 90 percent. Then in 2008, it was changed to 5 percent contribution by the community and 95 percent by the government. Then came 2015 whereby the government decided to fully fund all the electrification programmes. Why? Because while we were undertaking grid extension to the rural parts of Fiji, we realised that there are people within urban and peri-urban areas who still do not have electricity, so the name of the programme was changed. The honourable Minister might want to talk to his civil servants so that they can give him the correct information, especially when doing this kind of Ministerial Statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we started in 2016, we used to give \$42 million for the electrification programme. Unfortunately, at that point in time, there were only 20 licenced contractors and the fund that was utilised was around \$20 million to \$25 million. Come 2018, because there was low utilisation, it was reduced to \$20 million from \$25 million, and there was 100 percent utilisation of these funds to do grid extension to places where solar energy was needed. Whenever we were not able to reach through the grid extension, solar panels were installed and even that was upgraded to 300 kilowatts capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister tried to explain that he has done seven grid extensions and there are 73 projects in line but let me take him back to the budget estimate. The 2023-2024 Budget Estimate says \$6 million and no list where this money is going to be used. In 2024-2025 Budget Estimate, \$5 million and again no list. When we divide that in Budget Estimate 2023-2024, house wiring was \$3 million and solar home system was \$3 million.

In the 2024-2025 Budget Estimate, the house wiring was \$2 million, and the solar home system was \$3 million. Where did he actually fund this grid extension? That money was paid back then by the FijiFirst Government to EFL, through the Department of Energy. These people have come in and just complete it. Go and check your budget statement, there was no funding for this project. This funding was done back in 2022, we continued with the grid extension even during the COVID period.

He tried to act very clever in trying to portray that we were the ones doing it, but I must tell the people of Fiji who are waiting for the grid extension in places like Dakuimoto, Boca in Bulileka, Sausaubau, Nasarowaqa, Korotari, Lekutu and Valelawa who are waiting for funds from the honourable Minister of Finance, given to the Ministry of Public Works Department so that they can be connected to the grid extension and light bulbs by switching a button. Mr. Speaker, my time has run out, I would have loved to have more time, but this Government needs to prioritise providing energy to everyone.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Revival of Coffee and Banana Plantations
(Question No. 28/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the intentions of the Ministry to revive banana and coffee plantations?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for raising a matter of such significance. Today, I will outline the Ministry's vision for reviving the banana and coffee plantations in Fiji. These crops are not just commodities, but symbols of our agricultural resilience and potential.

As I stand here, I am reminded of our farmers, those men and women who toil under the sun, tilling the land to provide for their families and strengthen our economy. It is for them and for the future of Fiji, that this Ministry is committed to not only reviving these commodities but transforming them into pillars of sustainable economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I move on, I would like to speak on some historical significance on the demise of most of our industries, so to speak. Some of them were partly due to the deregulation policy that was introduced in the 1990s. Even though the deregulation policy led to private sector-driven and export-oriented growth, most of our industries which were at their infant stages at the time, particularly in agriculture, sort of dwindled, or some of them went dead altogether. These two crops are part of those crops that I mentioned.

The banana sub-sector revival, Mr. Speaker, Sir, banana farming has long been an integral part of Fiji's agricultural foundation, supporting nearly 10,000 households. Despite the challenges posed by recurring cyclones and bio-security threats, the banana sub-sector has shown incredible resilience, particularly in the Central Division where production has grown by an impressive of 60.2 percent annually. Yet while our bananas are cherished in markets like Australia, New Zealand and Canada, as well as across the Pacific, export volumes have fallen sharply.

In 2016, Fiji exported 21 tonnes of bananas. Today, that figure has dwindled to less than a quarter of that amount. This decline is not just a statistic, it is also a call to action. To restore Fiji's position as a leading banana exporter, the Ministry has developed a comprehensive strategy. One of the strategies is the strengthening of our capability to mass-produce disease-resistant high-quality seedlings that will give our farmers the tools they need to increase yields and protect their crops.

The Ministry has also moved into demonstration sites and training, in collaboration with the Navuso Agricultural Technical Institute and Jack's Farms Limited in Nadi, where farmers are provided with hands-on training and access to tissue culture starter plants. Science and innovation are being brought directly to the farmer's field.

Recognising the need for a robust value chain, the Ministry has revitalised the Nasau Road Banana Ripening Facility. This Facility, for your information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been lying idle for many years when all that was needed was to connect it to three-phase power source, and that has been done.

The Ministry is conducting a thorough review of the Banana Export and Marketing Act 1962 to modernise our legal framework and align it with industry standards. Our 2025-2026 budget submission allocates FJ\$200,000 for Research and National Food Orchard Programme, enabling us to scale production and commercialise banana farming across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I spoke earlier on modernising our legislative framework. The Banana Export and Marketing Act 1962 was groundbreaking in its time, but it now lags behind modern global standards. Today's leading banana exporting nations prioritise private sector leadership, allowing market-driven models to foster innovation and competition. Quality and traceability standards have to be adopted as part of international food safety norms, such as those set by the World Trade Organization and Codex Alimentarius.

Quick technologically advanced responses to plant health threats, as part of dynamic biosecurity measures have also got to be implemented. Most important is the empowerment of farmers through the support of the established co-operatives, organic certification and fair-trade practices to access high value markets. Our current legislation fails to address these areas adequately, and it does not accommodate traceability systems, digital marketing or the swift responses required for modern biosecurity challenges. Modernising this Act is imperative, not only for our farmers but for our economy and Fiji's international reputation.

On coffee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a crop with extraordinary untapped potential. Wild coffee grows abundantly in the highlands of Navosa and Naitasiri. Over the past decade, coffee exports have quadrupled yet imports still outweigh exports tenfold. Fiji consumes over 550,000 kilogrammes of coffee annually valued at FJ\$8 million. Most of this money leaves our shores, imagine the opportunities if this demand could be met domestically or even better, if Fiji could become an exporter of premium coffee.

The Ministry's comprehensive approach includes a 10-year national coffee industry plan. This phase strategy begins with rehabilitating old farms, introducing high value radical varieties, and creating a sustainable research platform. Two organic certification initiatives. By targeting niche international markets, we aim to maximize returns for our farmers. Strategic partnerships, collaborations with enterprises like ONA Coffee and Bula Coffee companies are providing farmers with market access and specialized training.

On processing and rebranding, we are developing centralized processing Apps for consistent quality and a distinct Fijian coffee identity that emphasizes premium organic origins. Once these measures are in place, the Ministry will introduce legislation to establish a coffee industry statute. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the heart of this revival strategy is the empowerment of our farmers. As I have said before, from our co-operatives, we are encouraging the formation of co-operatives to improve bargaining power and resource sharing. Export standards and financial literacy training will ensure that our farmers are well equipped to compete globally. We are also prioritizing sustainability through climate resilient practices and environmental stewardship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Ministry is investing FJ\$2.75 million in targeted interventions for the banana and coffee industries and this is not merely a financial commitment, it is a transformative shift in our approach. We are redefining what it means to be a Fijian farmer in the 21st century by leveraging global best practices, modern legislation, and climate smart innovations which will strengthen Fiji's agricultural backbone, create jobs, deliver prosperity to every farmer, and households touched by these industries. Let us seize this moment, let us be bold, let us ensure that Fijian bananas and coffee, symbols of our land, labour, and resilience earn their rightful place in the global market.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a question for the honourable Minister with respect to these two commodities that are quite well known in Fiji. My question relates to the organic status of these two commodities. In light of what you just said to us, which other countries and markets have we begun negotiations with or tried to clear the pathway with, in respect to the export of our organic coffee and our organic banana? I say that, bearing in mind that these would be high-end good income products for us to be exporting to different countries.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already stated that these two products, we are really going for the niche markets - New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Apart from these three countries, we have yet to establish new pathways or any other countries outside of those three. That is something that we need to consider, to widen the market potential for our coffee and bananas.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I thank the honourable Minister for his answer to the question and we do convey our well wishes as well in the continuity of these projects. The question to the honourable Minister is, perhaps on banana, you have talked about disease-resistant and high-quality yields. You are well aware of the Sigatoka disease and the problem that we have in relation to bananas. A few years back we brought a Chinese expert to help us in this area and I would like to know what contribution and how far this has progressed and with the use of the tissue culture in improving the varieties.

On coffee, I am aware of the wild coffee that we have in Navosa and other places in Fiji. What are the plans, particularly, are there any plantations, given that particularly with Bula Coffee we worked with them on processing. Are there any plantations already in place to assist with the wild harvest that we are getting out of Navosa and other areas?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the question. Right now, the Ministry is working with Bula Coffee in the supply of seedlings for new planting, apart from the established orchards that Bula Coffee has established earlier. Last week we supplied 5,000 coffee seedlings to Bula Coffee.

And as for bananas, I think the Minister is well aware that we have brought in tissue cultured Sigatoka disease resistant varieties, but the presence of Sigatoka resistant disease varieties does not guarantee that we really can export our bananas straight away. We have to re-negotiate the pathways given the problems that we encountered earlier with the export of bananas due to that disease.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am aware that there is also coffee in Cogeia, Bua, and in Taveuni. Are there any plans to further expand upon that, and further grow on the production that is taking place there?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Coffee is almost everywhere in Fiji, because they were brought in by our missionaries. Right now, we are working with the two companies that are our major coffee processors, and their orchards are based mainly around Viti Levu, much closer to them in terms of logistics and costs.

As for moving to Vanua Levu and Taveuni, Taveuni used to be strong in coffee. When I started working in the 1990s in the Ministry, there was a big coffee plantation owned by Carpenters in Nayalayala, Taveuni, but in Cogeia in Bua, we will have to revisit those areas according to the expansion plans that we have regarding the commodity.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, this is a question regarding the organic certification. Have we now got the ability to put Fijian organic certified on our Fijian organic labelling, so that it is acceptable in those countries that accept our organic banana or coffee or are we still in the process of relying on Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom)?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- We are still working with POETCom on the organic certification, but I can assure the House that we will have to come up with our own local organic standards. We cannot depend on POETCom for good because that is a regional certification body. We need our own.

MR. SPEAKER.- Given the hour and also the fact that we have a long way to go, yet this afternoon and evening, I will now move towards Suspension Motion. For the purposes of Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

That 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 still have few Oral Questions to complete, from Question No. 29/2025 to Question No. 37/2025, and the Motions for Debate on the Annual Reports of Lautoka City Council, Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption and the Fiji National Sports Commission.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for tea break and Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.51 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.32 pm.

QUESTIONS

Global Sourcing Derogation Under IEPA (Question No. 29/2025)

HON. RATU R.S.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 update Parliament on the operationalisation of the global sourcing derogation for fish under the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, do allow me to provide an update on what I feel is a very important development in Fiji's trade and fisheries sector, namely, the operationalisation of the globalisation of the EU Pacific Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA). To assist the honourable Members and the public in understanding the developments on IEPA, if I may be allowed to, firstly, provide a brief and simple explanation of its significance and how it supports Fiji's economic development.

The IEPA is a trade agreement between Fiji and the European Union (EU) that provides preferential access for Fijian exports into the European market. In practical terms, it means that certain Fijian products can enter the EU countries without paying high import taxes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one key product area of interest for Fiji and, of course, the Pacific is processed fish, particularly canned tuna and processed Tuna Loin which have the potential to create jobs and generate income for our people. However, to enjoy duty free access to the EU, these fish products must comply with the rules of origin, which typically requires that fish be caught either by Fijian or EU vessels.

Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not have a large domestic tuna stock compared to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other Pacific countries. In essence, this makes it difficult to meet the origin requirements and take full advantage of this trade deal. However, to overcome this, Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) provides a special mechanism called the global sourcing, which allows countries like Fiji to source fish from other compliant vessels operating in the Pacific, so long as the fish are landed and processed in Fiji and meet the EU standards for food safety and sustainability requirements.

The EU is the world's largest market for processing tuna products. Fiji, despite not being a major tuna resource holder compared to some of the Pacific neighbours, holds competitive advantages when it comes to our geographic and strategic position as a processing hub.

I wish to advise Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fiji has submitted the required notification to the EU to activate the global sourcing provisions earlier this month. The EU has formally acknowledged receipt of our notification and has advised that it will require a two-month period to consult with its member-States before derogation is activated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a major milestone made possible because this side of the House took decisive steps to implement IEPA which, for some reason, was not taken advantage of by the previous administration. For years, Fiji was unable to access the full benefits of IEPA, including global sourcing because the agreement had not been implemented. This meant that our fisheries industry

was denied opportunities that other IEPA countries, like Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, are already enjoying.

By operationalising IEPA, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has unlocked access to global sourcing, which could potentially pave a greater way for greater investment in domestic fish processing, and enhanced export competitiveness and job creation for Fijians, especially our women. I am reminded of the processing factory in PAFCO in Levuka. This derogation, allows PAFCO to utilise its excess capacity, which, as I understand, is around 30+ percent.

We are now engaging closely with the EU to finalise the processes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which will allow the use of global sourcing. Once fully operational, that will position Fiji as a serious player in regional fisheries value chain. This is not only a significant opportunity to strengthen our domestic fisheries industry and value add locally, but also a strategic step forward in diversifying our trade portfolio. By reducing our heavy reliance on a single market and unlocking preferential access to the world's largest importer of canned tuna, we are enhancing Fiji's economic resilience and long-term export sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the effective uptake of this important market access opportunity, the Ministry is working very closely with the EU delegation in Suva to organise capacity building and information workshops with relevant stakeholders. That will complement broader engagement under the upcoming first EU-Pacific Business Forum in September, where opportunities for expanding Pacific exports to the EU, including IEPA, will be discussed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also goes without saying that certainly from my perspective since the signing of IEPA, we have seen an elevated level of engagement from the EU. We have started discussing opportunities around sugar collaboration in terms of the sugar restructure, we have started discussing more investment from the EU into Fiji and that, Sir, is the outcome of actually signing up to IEPA, as I have mentioned.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a reminder to the honourable Minister, the conversations with respect to the derogation started quite a while ago. I think the pushback also from the EU deals was from the people involved in the EU, who actually pushed us back quite a lot before we got to this stage. That being said, Sir, this is a wonderful opportunity for Fiji. Obviously, we will need to tick off all the boxes with respect to the rest of the EU partners.

My question to the honourable Minister is, in light of the fact that we are getting a derogation from the rules of origin, in terms of the full IEPA with the EU, will you continue to pursue this derogation with respect to all our fish products, or will it be limited? So, our negotiation with the EU is for the full IEPA, or it is going to probably take a little bit of time? However, there are other fish products that can be included so that we get the full benefit out of the derogation. Are we going to just sustain it on the basis of what we have now? I know that it is a difficult task to get into the EU with respect to these products.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, it goes without saying that there are other opportunities to apply global sourcing to other fish products we sell. Just to, sort of, give a bit of context, Sir, in terms of the opportunity at the moment, if we look at metric tonne exports to the EU from the Pacific, PNG is about 37,100 tonnes, Solomon's is 10,000 tonnes and Fiji is only 73 tonnes.

In terms of tuna alone, there is a massive opportunity there but, of course, if there is a requirement to apply the derogation on other products, as well as tuna or other fish products, we will certainly do that because it means that we are opening up a market that has been under our noses for

some time. In some respects, Sir, a low-hanging fruit in terms of what can be done to broaden out our trade with our various partners.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not sure whether the honourable Minister will be able to answer this for me or the Minister for Fisheries, but one of the biggest challenges that we face when it comes to IEPA and our ability to access the EU market is the status or the quality or the standards of our fleet and value chain. That has been a major constraint and in terms of reinvestment by the operators themselves, there were limitations. How has that been addressed, or is this going to be part of the assistance that we will get because they demand very high standards when it comes to food safety and the other regulations around it?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for the question. In terms of our requirements to produce the right standards in terms of EU standards, I think the way I always look at opportunities, once you identify market opportunity and it is real, private sector mobilizes to actually access the opportunity. Before the derogation took place, I did have some conversations with one particular bank in Fiji, and they were already sort of making intimations that they could probably assist in terms of funding of new vessels.

I guess the answer to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's question is, when there is market opportunity, the private sector generally finds a way to capitalize on the opportunity, and certainly, in my assessment, particularly with the bank that I spoke to, they have an appetite to sort of look at new brand of foreign vessels in order to raise standards. The great thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we have a unique opportunity to access a market that was not available for some time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- My question to the honourable Minister is, based on phytosanitary requirements, we know that EU has a very high standard and how do you intend to address that so that the private sector can deal with this particular issue?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the final parts of my statement alluded to some technical assistance, which will involve engagement with potential exporters. There are two at the moment in Fiji, which is PAFCO and Food Processors, I think. There will be discussions around what is required. For PAFCO, they already export to Bumblebee in the US. They are complying with pretty high standards in any event.

I would say for PAFCO, probably without knowing the specifics around the requirements between the two, my expectation is that PAFCO certainly would be well positioned to take advantage. With 30 percent lifting capacity, it will mean an ability to invest in more CapEx, improve the factory, et cetera. In the next couple of weeks, there will be some handholding in terms of those who wish to take advantage of the global sourcing derogation.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, will there be some legislative changes that will be required?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for raising that question, honourable Koya. As you will appreciate, we are guided by the Department of Fisheries in terms of the legislation. As far as I am aware right now, there has been no flag around any legislative requirements, but we do know that with the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), they do extensive monitoring of our waters in terms of fishing sustainability. I suspect that that overlay of oversight is already there.

What Fiji will probably have to do is have a closer look at what that means in terms of our own fishing stock but then the derogation allows us to move into other waters. In terms of the sustainability issue, I think we are comforted by the fact that FFA does extensive oversight over all

the fishing stocks at the moment. It is being regarded as one of the best monitoring entities in the world. But should that be their requirement to look at legislation, I am sure that between myself and the honourable Minister for Fisheries we will flag that to Cabinet and get that done.

Fiji's Capability to Conduct Forensic Tests
(Question No. 30/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Policing inform Parliament whether Fiji has the capability to conduct forensic tests, such as DNA analysis?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by the honourable Member. On Fiji's capability to conduct forensic tests such as DNA analysis, the simple answer to that is, yes, we have the capability.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr Speaker, Sir, if Fiji has the capability to do the DNA testing, my question to the honourable Minister is, why two families had to wait for DNA test results to get their deceased buried. They had to wait for four months, and they had to pay \$5,700 for the mortuary fee. And to pay that mortuary fee, after eight days, the cost per day is about \$67. I would like to understand why these two families had to incur such heavy costs when DNA testing abilities are in Fiji?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as it is now, those two cases have been resolved. There are other complications, but we deal with those types of cases. One is the Police ability to identify, the requirement is that if the bodies are decomposed, we have a DNA test for relatives. With those two cases, we had some difficulty in acquiring that, at this point, those two cases have been resolved.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in terms of evidence, is our police force capable of accessing DNA analysis when conducting investigations?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major hindrance here is the current laws that we have. We need to modernize the law. We cannot compel anyone to do a DNA test. It is by voluntary. To modernise our laws, there are quite a few gaps and right now, for the information of the House, we now have a dedicated team employed that works with me at the Policing Ministry. It has the full support of the Coalition Government to ensure that all our laws are well ahead of where we are, and we are committed to completing that before the third quarter of this year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, can the honourable Minister confirm that if this sort of incident happens again, and families are expected to pay in excess of \$5,000 for something that they are not to be held liable for, is it going to continue in that way, in which the families themselves have to pay exorbitant amounts of money for something that is beyond their control, while waiting for a DNA test?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been great lessons learnt from those two particular cases, and we have picked up those lessons. The Police is working extremely hard to improve the provision of our services. If I would also like to use this opportunity to inform this august House that through our close collaborations with our regional partners - Australia and New Zealand, Fiji has now been identified as the centre of excellence for the forensic centre. It will be built here in Nasova, and these are avenues that we can improve our services in the near future.

Progress Mount Kasi Mining Operation
(Question No. 31/2025)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the progress of Mount Kasi Mining Operation?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is only right for me to, perhaps, make some distinctions between the mining terms so that we can all understand, and for the benefit of the public who might be listening to this afternoon's session.

The Mount Kasi operation is not a mining operation. Mount Kasi is, at the moment, an exploration project, so there is no mining activity. It is a licence or permission to a company to do exploration work which is different from actual mining work.

I make that distinction, Mr. Speaker, because quite often, there is always some misunderstanding. Mineral exploration, granted under an exploration licence, and mining, usually granted or approved under a lease. By order, the operation of the exploration occurs first, and that is when the explorer looks at the mineralisation patterns in the land that is identified. In the exploration, if he finds that there is a yield of mineralisation of gold or silver or any of the minerals that he or she or the company wishes to mine, then they would then apply to get a mining lease. So, first that distinction between the two terms, exploration and mining.

I want to state at this point that Mount Kasi, at the moment, is not a mining operation, it is in its exploration phase. What does it mean when there is exploration and when there is mining? Again, for everyone's information, mineral exploration is when a company is issued with the right to look at, explore minerals within an identifiable area while the mining phase, it actually involves the discovery and extraction of mineral deposits through the prospecting and also involves advanced exploration activities.

The rights to undertake mineral exploration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, within the Mount Kasi prospect was granted to Vatikoula Gold Mines Pte Limited (VGML) under Special Prospecting Licence (SPL) 1519 on 20th June, 2024, and it is for a term of three years. The VGML was awarded the right to apply for an exploration licence after the company was rated first among seven in a competitive tender process that was done in December 2020. The tender award was based on VGML's meeting the criteria and having fulfilled the tender scope that was advertised.

That simply means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the VGML was identified to have possessed technical proficiency, financial capability, and a sector-wide experience to undertake what is needed. As part of the application that they had sent to the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources in 2020, the VGML had proposed an exploration expenditure of \$50 million for the three-year duration of the SPL.

By way of update, Mr. Speaker, Sir despite the issue of the exploration licence for the last 10 months, VGML has not been able to commence the proposed exploration work that they had identified in their work schedule. We are still working with the landowning unit who are proposing the grant at the moment, and we are closely working with the elders of the landowning unit, a series of meetings, five of which I personally attended myself in Dawara, and they have been very fruitful meetings. We are positive that the issues they are raising will be sorted in the not-too-distant future.

In conjunction with my office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Director of Mines will be convening a meeting with the landowning unit upon the conclusion of the internal meetings with the landowners, and they will be facilitated by *Roko Veivuke* in Wailevu who is stationed in Savusavu, Cakaudrove. We are working out the provisions of the Mining Act 1965 at the Ministry, because we are dealing with landowners' expectations and emotions on land and minerals, we are taking a very diplomatic approach to deal with these types of sensitive matters.

The intention of the Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to provide a very cordial environment for the investor to work within the Government-approved tenement area, without any issue whilst also respecting and coexisting with the ownership of the landowners in the area. With the VGML's announcement, our major investment for the operation in Vatukoula, I am also very keen to make sure that the matter in Kasi is sorted out at its earliest so that exploration could commence to confirm the viability of the Mount Kasi mineralisation prospect that could lead to mining operation.

I say this because if we take the Tuvatu Operation as an example, mining operation in Mount Kasi, if it starts after the prospect is finished, it will mean automatically work for between 300 to 400 immediate jobs for the young men and women, particularly in the Wailevu area. That means in terms of money, an immediate \$500,000 to \$600,000 per fortnight with pay alone. In Tuvatu, there are 473 employees in the mine. Their pay every fortnight is around \$650,000. So that is the kind of money, Mr. Speaker.

There are 473 employees in the mine. Their pay every fortnight is around \$650,000. So that is the kind of money, Mr. Speaker. Imagine new money that is going to be localised in to the Savusavu and particularly in the Wailevu district economy, by workers and if exploration moves to mining, new jobs, new roads infrastructure, new opportunities and of course, new context for families to grow.

Mr. Speaker, for example, in Tuvatu, they spend \$6 million in operational costs every single month. Imagine that kind of money circulating in logistics, catering, services, supplies in the Savusavu and the Wailevu economy. Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the honourable gentleman, for the question that he had raised, and I remain very positive that we are going to make sure that the DGML's prospect is going to be a successful one. And when it graduates into mining, it is going to create a lot of jobs for people, particularly for young people in the Wailevu community.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there any supplementary questions?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I would like to thank the honourable Minister for elaborating on that. Honourable Minister, you said a few things about Vatukoula Gold Mine and it is to my interest as well. There are issues of complaints of sulphur dioxide as pollution and acid mine drainage. I can be corrected, Vatukoula Gold Mine is also running on a loss for the past few years. You talk about exploration. Yes, exploration leads to extraction. Is there any EIAs on the exploration? And if it turns into extraction, is there any restoration mechanisms in place, or that is part of the discussion, once the extraction process begins?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I am trying to understand the question. Is it in relation to Mount Kasi or elsewhere?

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you clarify, honourable Sharma?

HON. R. R SHARMA.- Yes, it is related to Mount Kasi. Has an EIA been done on the exploration bit? When you explore, there are mechanisms, or you mimic mining? If it proceeds to

extraction, there is close coordination with the Ministry of Climate Change, in terms of restoration efforts. The point I am trying to drive across is, Fiji should not be a trade-off with these natural resources in terms of income generation, that can have impacts on the future generation going forward.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I think the question is really out of context with the explanation that I have just made. The SPL has been issued, they have not even started. There is a regiment of work schedule that they need to meet and until we sort out the landowner issue, we are not there yet. Also Mr. Speaker, at the moment, they have what is required by the Ministry, and part of that is, there is going to be a very stringent environmental regulatory framework and aspect to it and until they tick that box, they will not be able to graduate to prospective mining. Everything is watched at periodic between the MRD staff and those who work on the ground by the company. Very early days.

HON. I. B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, my question to the honourable Minister is, we have issued the exploration licence, but they cannot start because of the landowner issues. Were the landowners part of the initial consultation, or are these new issues brought up by the landowners, after the exploration licence has been issued by your Ministry?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, as I identified in my reply to the question, the tender was put out in 2019. It was awarded in 2020. Consultation continued to happen after the award was done between 2023-2024. When we took office on 24th December, I could recall that I met with the landowners about five times. I think before that, there was a series of meetings that possibly have been attended to by the previous Minister for Lands. To an extent, there has been some interference by companies who were not successful in the application process in 2020. Those are the things that we are trying to make sure that it does not affect the proper administration of the issuance of licence that was properly awarded in 2020.

International Flights - Nausori International Airport
(Question No. 32/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the anticipated timeline for the resumption of international flights from Nausori International Airport?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member on the question relating to the anticipated timeline for the resumption of international flights from Nausori International Airport. A matter of significant importance to the people of Fiji, particularly those in the Central and Eastern Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Members are aware. Nausori International Airport serves as a vital aviation hub for the southeastern region of Viti Levu. Given Suva's status as Fiji's administrative and commercial capital, Nausori International Airport serves as a key entry point for government officials, diplomats, and officials of regional and international organisations based in Suva. It is also the preferred entry point for students within the region who are linked to institutions such as the USP, FNU, and additionally many individuals with ties in the Central and Eastern Divisions of Fiji choose Nausori International Airport to avoid long domestic transfers, making it a convenient option for those returning home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Nausori International Airport operations are more limited compared to the Nadi International Airport. But ongoing infrastructure developments by Airports Fiji aim to enhance its capacity and role in Fiji's aviation network. As of 2019, Nausori International Airport handled approximately 37,394 international passengers annually, accounting for about 10 per cent of Fiji's total international traffic.

That figure reflects the airport's role as a secondary international gateway, primarily serving travellers to and from destinations such as Sydney and Auckland. The airport underwent a substantial upgrade with a \$60 million investment by Airports Fiji, which was completed in 2021. The upgrade included the extension of the runway from 1,670 metres to 2,140 metres and widening it from 30 metres to 45 metres. These enhancements has enabled larger aircrafts, up to the size of the B737 to operate to Nausori International Airport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in October 2022, Fiji Airways made a strategic decision to focus its international services through its hub, Nadi International Airport, where passenger demand is significantly higher. Consequently, services from Nausori to Sydney and Auckland, which had commenced in 2010, were discontinued in 2020 at that point due to low traffic on these international destinations. Nausori International Airport is well-positioned to expand its role as a regional hub, providing greater accessibility for neighbouring Pacific Island nations and support broader regional travel and development objectives. Fiji Airways currently provides three weekly flights to Funafuti, departing from Nausori Airport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government of Nauru has reached out to the ministry with a request to establish a weekly flight service between Nauru and Nausori Airports. The proposal is based on genuine efforts from the government of Nauru to better serve the needs of the Nauruan people, most of whom reside or work in and around Suva. We remain fully committed to the Suva declaration and regional collaboration and connectivity, and we are currently giving favourable consideration for this request.

Historically, air traffic demand to Nausori International Airport was relatively low and is expected to still be the case today. Airport Fiji is currently working on the concept plan for a terminal building which includes infrastructure upgrades that will enable to provide a seamless customer experience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nonetheless, and to conclude, with significant development initiatives underway, including planned terminal expansions and capacity improvement, Nausori Airport remains well positioned to support the future resumption and growth of international flight operations, aligning with broader national connectivity and tourism objectives.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the comprehensive answer he gave. My question to the honourable Minister would be, because Fiji Airways does not want to fly from Nausori either to Auckland or to Sydney, are there plans to allow Qantas or Air New Zealand to service these particular routes in future?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Any airline is driven by demand. The situation with Nausori was that it was mostly a corporate market, corporate being businessmen, diplomats and you cannot really run a service based on corporate market and 90 percent of the traffic to Fiji is holidays. So, you need elements of holidaymakers to make Nausori viable. That would be the long and short of this thing, honourable Member. Until the day that we can create Central Division in Suva as a viable holiday destination, the airline will fly in there, but if Air New Zealand or Qantas wants to come into Nausori on a 737, there is nothing stopping them from doing that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, in line with the fact that Fiji Airways is not to fly to Nausori because of what you just explained. Does that mean that they will bump up the local service, the connectivity that will have to occur or can occur to facilitate that corporate sector from Suva to Nadi in terms of Boeing 702, et cetera, to come into Nausori to ensure that?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you may know that Fiji Airways has acquired more ATRs and that gives them the capacity to do Nadi and Suva. There is something that I need to highlight here, Sir, is there is no restriction to competition between Nadi and Nausori. Any other domestic operator can fly between the two points, so in terms of capacity between the two points, the equipment is there to service the routes according to demand.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the investment, we had \$60 million Government spending with \$50,000 annual rental and dividend paid about \$45 million plus IAFFP made a payment of \$65 million and guaranteed the \$61.9 million loan. Now, the investment done by local people in Nausori. And the only flight which took place was in September 2022. Was any other feasibility study done on this flight from Auckland, Suva, Sydney?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, as I highlighted, the airlines will fly, the demand is there. Right now, the demand for Sydney-Nausori, Auckland-Nausori is not sufficient to justify the deployment of a 737 or any of those aircraft. As I have said, any airline like Air Nauru is going to be flying there we will approve that between Nausori and Nauru. Open sky, Mr. Speaker, it is not between the regions. There is an allocation between Australia-Fiji and New Zealand-Fiji and that allocation is more than sufficient to meet any new servers into Nausori.

Key Sustainability Challenges in Tourism (Question No. 33/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the key sustainability challenges identified in tourism operations and how will it guide necessary adjustments to ensure better alignment with Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Tomasi Tunabuna for this important question on the challenges facing the Fiji's tourism sector and how we can better align these realities with our strategies.

Fiji's tourism industry, while a key driver of economic growth faces several challenges that directly impact our ability to grow and sustain the industry. These range from matters such as geopolitics and climate impacts to community empowerment and legal problems. This is the nature of tourism. If you are un-growing enough at home, it impacts tourism. If infrastructure lacks, it impacts tourism. If there is crime or health threats, it impacts tourism. So, there are many challenges that inhabit our sustainability journey, I would like to share a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have shared this several times, that only four out of Fiji's 14 provinces currently receive the full benefits of tourism. These four provinces drive the 40 per cent contribution to GDP. Imagine if other provinces too had the opportunity to contribute. To me we are so good at tourism. We do it very well. We are the leader in the Pacific and relative to other destinations, Fiji does extremely well in tourism. I always liken it to our seven a side. We are a small country. We play against some of the big boys in the world, but we won two gold medals because we do sevens. It is something that we are passionate about sevens, and we do it well, similarly tourism.

The idea is not to move tourism from traditional areas to other regions, but to grow the tourism pie to empower them to generate social economic benefits from tourism too. We need to seriously look at this because dispersing tourism especially in rural areas, has the potential to firstly, mitigate the rural to urban drift and secondly, to ease infrastructural and utility pressure we are already seeing. I continue to highlight this, Mr. Speaker, if there is an industry that can hold back our people from migrating to the cities, tourism would be number one in that area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ageing and inadequate infrastructure is one of the key limitations which is sustainable to tourism developments. From airports and roads to sewerage and water, these are limitations not only to tourism, but for our economic development. A few days ago, the honourable Minister for Finance had shared that they need about \$8 billion to fix sewerage and water throughout the country. Tourism operations plays high demands on water, energy and other natural resources, sometimes leading to conflicts with the local needs. The challenge is also not just to build infrastructure, but to ensure its climate resilience so that we do not fork out money for repairs after every natural disaster that we know and expect. This comes at an even greater cost.

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention one of our greatest threats as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), the impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels, growing intensity of extreme weather events, coral reef degradation, pose a direct threat to the natural attractions that form the foundation of Fiji's Tourism Bill. Without proactive measures, these environmental changes could undermine the long-term viability of our tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another common challenge we face is unlocking the full potential of the private sector in serving an enabling the environment. Right now, much of the tourism operations are covered under the Hotel and Guest Houses Act 1973, which only looks at accommodation. Legislation from the 70s is not adequate. Across the board, government is raising a strong emphasis on empowering resource owners and advocating for more indigenous-led and -owned businesses.

One of the key challenges we have seen is the lack of financial literacy or discipline at grassroot levels. For example, some of the greatest expenses are the Christmas payout to the villages. We can relate to this, Mr. Speaker, when there is a village business. Come Christmas, they all sell their proceeds. Starting from 1st January, there is nothing in the kitty, so, this is something that we notice with the MSMEs that we are supporting. While there are social cultural structures that determine this, we need to inculcate a culture of savings and financial prudence so that businesses are not just surviving but growing. It is very hard convincing our people that all these big businesses started from scratch. They were small and they grew gradually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many other challenges, as I mentioned, such as training and upskilling and diversifying our product offering and tourism markets in order to be resilient and sustainable. To address these challenges, the Government, in partnership with industry stakeholders, is implementing targeted strategies under the National Sustainable Tourism Framework (NSTF) 2023-2034 as well as the National Development Plan 2025-2029.

The NSTF is a high-level framework that aims to provide a roadmap to revitalise and enhance the Fijian tourism industry is competitive positioning and to anticipate the future needs. The four areas are:

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NSTF is accompanied by a three-year action plan which is in line with the NDP. We have specifically designed the action plan to be a living document that upon its review can be adjusted to meet present and future challenges. The good news is most, if not all, these challenges did not happen overnight. They have existed and the focus now should be on addressing them. The NDP provides a review mechanism to allow us to refocus our priorities and budget such as in the event of another pandemic. By continuing to align our policies and industry practices with the NSTF, we ensure that tourism remains a sustainable and inclusive force for Fiji's future.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- The honourable Deputy Prime Minister's response is noted. The Fiji Airways plays the biggest role in getting our tourists to our shores, but I ask the Government, why the delay in ratification of very important treaties like the Beijing Convention 2010, Montreal Protocol 2014, 2010 Protocol Supplementary to the Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft Convention as it hinders Fiji's compliance with international security standard, legal authority and in addressing transnational crimes. Why the delay in the ratification of these treaties?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, do you wish to answer?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It is a totally new question, more on aviation and I would be ready to present a statement on it another time.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think that is a fair comment, honourable Sharma, because the connection has to do with the aircraft.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, my mind is relative to the sustainable framework but let me say, in light of the challenges that were raised in the sustainable framework, one of the ones that stands out is the over-reliance of Australia and New Zealand and I am sure you will understand this because that is actually recognised in the framework. What measures are being put in place through tourism with respect to three markets that are recognised already? I think they're in the top 10, I am talking about China, India and Japan. Now, does that mean that it will necessitate more funding from the Ministry of Finance again with respect to Tourism Fiji? Does it mean that Tourism Fiji is now going to go out and get more from these particular partners? Which I understand we should.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I indicated yesterday, our tourism relies on Australia and New Zealand for 70 percent of our numbers and the American services are also paying huge dividends. The service to Dallas is working very well. You touched on the new markets that need to be developed, Japan is already there. With Japan, the numbers are so - but we are committed to continuing the service in Japan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, China is serviced through Hong Kong, but the Chinese want us to service directly to the mainland. There is dialogue happening now between the two Governments, Civil Aviation of China and Civil Aviation of Fiji on a direct service to China and we have identified Shanghai "as where you want to fly to" and the Chinese have agreed to that. Initially, they wanted us to go to Beijing, but Fiji Airways have stated that Shanghai is a better port and they agreed to that. Dialogue is happening, everything being equal we could see three flights a week from mainland China and they could really make a huge impact on the numbers from China. You remember prior to COVID-19, China had almost 50,000 visitors, so I mean, the potential is here. That was through Hong Kong. If it was straight to the mainland, the numbers could be on that scale.

India, as I highlighted yesterday from a question by honourable Koroilavesau, it is a growing market. One of my colleagues met honeymooners from India at the Hilton last week, and they loved Fiji and the younger Indian generation are very discerning, they do their own thing. They come as

far as the Pacific for their honeymoon. It could be greater, but accessibility is the problem. We hope that one day we could fly directly to New Delhi, but the current equipment we have, does not allow that. You would recall that the President of India flew from New Delhi to Nadi non-stop, which was for 14 hours.

That was on a 777 Boeing (extended range). We do not have that kind of equipment yet. As I had indicated yesterday, India will be the top five outbound market in the coming years. Currently, Australia has India as one of the top inbound sources, and we are also benefiting from that. The connection from Singapore is there. There is talk that perhaps we could look at another transit point in the Asian area. All these things are part of the dialogue going forward. Definitely, we want to diversify, and we know those markets are huge, if we can get the connectivity there.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the Government for the Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework (FNSTF), and hope that it will succeed as well. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister is talking about challenges, you mentioned ageing and inadequate infrastructure, the levels of investment, public and private sector investment, and perhaps the local operators as well. Has FNSTF already identified the levels of investment in as far as public sector investment and private sector investment, and those in the local areas as well?

The major concern is, the public sector investment is the one that will create the environment to bring in the private sector investment, and \$300 million in China aid does not have the money to do this public sector investment. What percentage of this is public sector, private sector, and the local reinvestment by the operators?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometimes, you ask the question, which comes first, the investment or the infrastructure? There are areas where you identify for developments, and when the demand is there to build an operation, a business, infrastructure commitment will follow. We are open to any kind of partnership as an enabler to grow, to build the kind of infrastructure where needed.

Right now, we have the honourable Minister for Trade who can elaborate on this further on a partnership. We have agreed on a 50-50. If you want to start something new in an area, we will take up 50 percent of the cost, and the developer takes up 50 percent. That is out there now. Going back to what I said earlier, we need to grow tourism across the islands, and that kind of approach is what we have in mind. We will be building resorts in areas where there is nothing. We are committed. When the case comes up, we will make 50 percent of the cost of the infrastructure.

Absence of Lecturers - USP
(Question No. 34/2025)

HON. H. CHAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament if some PhD and Masters students at the University of South Pacific have been without lecturers since July last year?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the honourable Member to be specific in the question that he is raising. The way it is set out, it is very general, given that the University of the South Pacific is a University, and to understand the many programmes that are given, Masters level and PhD level. We just had a recent graduation ceremony. A lot of graduates were Masters graduands and also PhD graduands. I honourably request the USP VC if they can give some answers to the general question that was given today. The answer that was provided by the USPVC is to

confirm that lecturers are assigned only for courses. Sir, USP has no Masters level courses, they do not have an allocated lecturer. For Masters by Research and PhD students, they have supervisors.

The Masters Research students who are registered with their approved research proposals, at least one supervisor is allocated. At the PhD level, every USP Doctorate candidate has a Principal Supervisor who is supported by a supervisory panel. Our supervisory teams are supplemented by area specialists from our partner universities. That is the answers provided by the VC. If you have any supplementary questions, I can take it back to him.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to tell the honourable Minister for Education, I know the difference between a lecturer and supervisor. According to a group of 12 Higher Degree Research students, in the discipline of Biology, a supervisor was terminated just a week before the beginning of Semester II. She was a special Principal Supervisor of 12 Higher Degree Research students. This had huge impact on 12 Research students and affected their studies since July last year. These students, they have written to USP Council, and honourable Minister, you are also on the Council and you are fully aware. So, what is USP Council doing to address this issue?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, are you in a position to answer that? I would have disallowed it for one reason. But you go ahead and see what you can make of it.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good that the honourable Member understands the difference between the supervisors and examiners. However, as a former Human Resource (HR) Director for the Ministry of Education, he should also understand that the case is in the court.

MR. SPEAKER.- Well, that is the issue I was going to bring up. If it is in fact being referred to the courts, you cannot ask questions here in respect of that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the issue is not whether the matter is in the court. The issue is, the honourable Minister for Education for Fiji happy that the students that Fiji puts into that university to do their Higher Degree Research programmes do not have a specialist looking after them? Are we listening to a Minister saying that this is okay for the students of this country to hear? Is that what the honourable Minister for Education is saying? He is not really worried about that? Can you confirm that because that is what he seems to suggest.

MR. SPEAKER.- One moment, honourable Usamate. My understanding from the Minister is that each one of those students come under supervision. So, everyone has a supervisor in terms of their thesis and in fact there is no teacher as such to each of those classes that you are asking about. Am I on the right track?

HON. J. USAMATE. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is about the capability of the person that is supervising that research. If the person does not have subject matter expertise, and somebody is put there to supervise who does not have the knowledge about the subject area, is the student losing out? This is the point and he is making flipping statements about this?

MR. SPEAKER.- You are now touching on the capability. It is totally different from the issue that was raised by them. The presence or otherwise of the supervisor was one and now you are talking about the presence and the capability of that person which is totally different from what we have started off with. I will give you one last chance to clear that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- In my mind when we use the word lecturer, it also encompasses the idea of a person that supervises the person doing the research because you can do a degree by

coursework where you have lecturers. They do that, supervise, but others also they do research. In a sense, a lecturer can also be the person that supervises the research and that person has to have the capacity, subject matter expertise in that particular area. That is the point I was raised.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you wish to answer that or will I ask honourable Professor Biman Prasad just to clarify one of the issues.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members on the other side are totally confused. They are misleading.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, I am asking the honourable Minister to clarify certain issues that has been raised.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also attend USP Council meetings and the honourable Minister for Education very clearly explained the difference between a lecturer in a course and Masters and PhD by research which requires supervisors and never, in a supervisory role, there is only one person. There is a principal supervisor, there is an associate supervisor, there are external supervisors, there are a combination of supervisors that deal with research thesis and some of us who have supervised PhD, Masters students over the years understand that.

The honourable Minister has answered very clearly, the Vice Chancellor has provided the answers that at no point a student is deprived of supervision and subject experts are assigned to supervise those students and it happens in all universities. Sometimes students enrolled as remote, so they enrolled at the University of the South Pacific, enrolled at FNU, enrolled at UniFiji, they have a local supervisor, they have an external supervisor. They may have three or four supervisors. If one supervisor leaves, there is always other people to look after them.

MR. SPEAKER.- I can only add for honourable Hem Chand to take the invitation from the honourable Minister if you need further clarification, please direct your clarification request to him.

Trade Enhancement Programme
(Question No. 35/2025)

HON. S. TUBUNA 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 Trade Enhancement Programme and its efforts to support the MSMEs in the service sector?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Tubuna for the question on what are the programmes that exist within the ministry called the Trade Enhancement Programme or TEP as it is properly known for short. The TEP programme was actually, as, I have been advised the honourable Speaker, came out of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was really targeted at assisting micro entrepreneurs. These are Fijians that have turnovers of \$50,000 or less.

Over that COVID period, it was a welcome form of assistance and since then it has continued to be propagated. It was continued by the previous government and we have certainly continued to move forward with it because we can see how impactful and beneficial it is. Since it was accepted, we have increased the allocation from \$500 to \$1,000. As I have said, Mr. Speaker, the programme prioritises businesses that have a bit of trade skills, professional expertise, but not limited to electricians, mechanics, tailors, artisans - those kind of skillsets. Since inception, it has been a very

popular programme over the years.

In terms of the key statistics, some of the things that have made this program very popular is 72 per cent of all TTFB recipients are actually women making sort of a significant contribution towards the SDG-5 on gender equality and there are lot of documented cases of where assistance has been quite helpful. Application is online, Mr. Speaker, requiring only five documents. To date, on record there has been about 6,500 applications. There are now and again issues around digital access, and we are trying to work around that. Overall, there is a large interest in this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 34 percent of all businesses fall within food and beverage. So, all our market vendors, juice stands, catering services also get assisted through this programme. And one of the great things I have to say with the Ministry is there is a lot of monitoring that goes on after and according to the stats from the Ministry, success rate has been around 80 per cent in terms of the programme. And so of course it is contributing to creation of jobs and obviously meaning income for those who apply.

We have also continued to see a surge in applications. This year, the number of applications has gone up to 2,600 so far. Valued at around about \$2.5 million. At the moment, we have approved about \$750,000 so far and there is a bit more to be approved. We have even worked with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in one of the provinces who actually had applications and those have been processed. So, we are seeing uptake outside some of the traditional urban centres that has happened in the past.

We were in Rotuma as well recently as I had mentioned. One of the things that we have quickly realised because of the smart classroom set-up, and because it is going to be accessible to the public as well, there will be opportunities for Rotuma to actually start getting more applications from Rotuma in terms of the TTFB programme. One of the things that I discovered while I was there was that Rotuma had not been visited by any of our officials for about 20 years. So, the positive is that we are now engaging. We look forward to seeing applications from there. It is not a sweeping statement, it is a fact. This came from the people of Rotuma.

Mr. Speaker, some of the examples of those who have benefited, I will just mention a lady from Vakano. This is one of the powerful things that is starting to occur, particularly with access to things like Starlink. On the island of Vakano, she actually produces art, handicrafts, well-known mats, *magimagi* belts, handbags, and they are reaching the homes as far as Australia, New Zealand and the United States. She was supported through the Trade Enhancement Programme (TEP) and according to the records from our underground monitors, sales are between \$4,000 to \$6,000 monthly. This is the type of good news that is occurring in some of these places. There is a lady in Kadavu. She, of course, is similarly involved in craft trade, generating up to \$1,600 a month and supported by her husband, makes custom dresses as well, uniforms for civil servants and families.

At the moment, the allocations for TEP has been around half a million. If you heard my discussions around the surge in interest, we will be certainly asking for a bit more this year because there is a very strong interest in this programme. We are so happy with the programme because it creates a lot of very positive stories around the country, and we are very committed to continuing with this. It is making a material impact on the Fijians that are doing their best to create sustainable sources of income for themselves, particularly in the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise Sector.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, I am glad to see that you recognise the success rate of this programme. But just to evaluate that success rate, are we making a concerted effort, and I, especially say this with respect to tourism and what we spoke about earlier, for example, because they are hardworking, a lot of women work in this organic status programme, is there a concerted

effort to do this hand-holding exercise for the supply to go to the tourism operators or for the recipient of the grant, to be able to tap into the knowledge that we have at the Ministry of Agriculture, that they can grow and become bigger conglomerates because we know that there is a market for many different young entrepreneurs.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I think honourable Koya raised a very good question. One of the things that we are currently working on, and it will become apparent once we launch the MSME strategy, and hopefully that is the last strategy out of the Ministry of Trade. What it plans to do is actually create a database, so that we can have a database of all the MSMEs in the country. Once we have that, it becomes a valuable tool to do exactly what you are proposing, honourable Koya which is around monitoring and trying to identify further opportunities for further growth. It would be a wonderful thing if we can, because of the database, we can start tracking our MSMEs through the micro stage and then see them earn above \$50,000 and start moving beyond.

I have to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for us men in the room, the women of Fiji are really mobilising hard and it is starting to manifest itself in a lot of programmes that we are seeing, which is a positive thing. Certainly, in a roundabout way, I expect the ability to make connections to the other Ministries and agriculture will come out of this database that we are trying to develop.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that the service sector is rapidly evolving with technology, how is the trade enhancement programme aligning with the digital transformation needs, particularly for small businesses that lack ICT capacity?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things we are trying to do is, firstly, create the database that will actually record all the MSMEs and looking forward, hopefully turn that into some sort of app and then start coordinating businesses that way. One of the things that distinguishes Fiji from all the Pacific economies is, and I mentioned it in the National Digital Strategy, our ICT capacity is quite well evolved. For example, in the areas of digital wallet all over Fiji, the penetration is very high. You have Viti Cart coming on board.

I am aware through the honourable Minister for Tourism, that Tourism Fiji is also looking at an app that will look at MSME displaying all the products on it. One of the things that is coming largely from our tourism is that they need experienced tourism, so, events, kayaking, and all of those things. Honourable Ketan, it is a work in progress area. We are blessed in Fiji because of the very mature ICT environment that we have. All that means is, we need to find the tools to leverage up the opportunity.

There is a lady who is moving around the Pacific. You have probably seen her on *Facebook*. She has another platform that actually sells products, you know, around the Pacific and internationally, focussing on the diaspora. There is a lot of these platforms around that can be used by our MSMEs. You have Rise Beyond the Reef that uses Amazon. That is a group out of the Western side of Fiji that uses Amazon to market their wares. They now even have a shop. If you go to Denarau now, they have a shop in Denarau. The leveraging of technology is a very active space in terms of the MSME sector. With some of the things that we are looking at doing, it will only create more opportunity in that area, and of course, put more money into the hands of all our people.

Review of the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944
(Question No. 36/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

update Parliament on the review of the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Maharaj for the question on the update on the review of the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944. I am pleased to report that the comprehensive review of the iTaukei Administration was conducted from April to July 2024 by a team of seven highly qualified consultants. The team held nationwide face-to-face consultations, throughout the 14 provinces and conducted focus group discussions.

Mr. Speaker, the Report was submitted to the Strategic Advisory Group, whose role is to align the submissions of the Review Committee with the government vision and assist in fine-tuning the submission. The Review was also submitted to the Great Council of Chiefs and the iTaukei Affairs Board, in the meeting held last February, following the GCC meeting conducted in November 2024.

After the endorsement of the Board, the paper was submitted to Cabinet. Currently, we are actively engaged with the Solicitor-General's Office in the drafting of the revised legislation, and we anticipate this process will be completed, by the end of June this year. A dedicated committee is overseeing this process to ensure timely and efficient development. This review is not just about legislative changes. It aligns with broader strategic goals for both iTaukei communities and the nation.

HON. A. A. MAHARAJ.- I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his comprehensive answer to my question. Are there plans to review the Provincial Councils and the operations of Provincial Councils as well, while you are reviewing the iTaukei Act 1944?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a recommendation there in regards to the running of the Provincial Councils, which has been approved by Cabinet and we are working on the change management which covers the Provincial Council.

Outcome of the Fiji-PNG Business Mission
(Question No. 37/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise and Communications update Parliament on the outcome of the Fiji-PNG Business Mission, and how it is expected to contribute to strengthen bilateral ties and unlocking new opportunities for Fijian businesses?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Ravu for the question. In terms of Fiji's relationship with Papua New Guinea, it is a longstanding and very deep relationship. This year, we will be celebrating 50 years of bilateral relations, and as I understand, the honourable Prime Minister will be headed to Papua New Guinea for the celebrations. Once the High Commission Office was re-established following its temporary closure during COVID, it was basically a green light to the Ministry for Trade to try and re-engage with Papua New Guinea and attempt to restart our bilateral relations, certainly from a trade, investment and services perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In an overall sense, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the visit, it is very clear, that Papua New Guinea is on a major trajectory for significant economic growth. I would go further as to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given their expectations, particularly in terms of what they expect to see in terms of the resource sector, that they are fast becoming somewhat a Dubai of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they expect a few major mines to be opened very soon, in fact, bigger than the current mine that is up in the middle of in Papua New Guinea. So, from that perspective, the visitation, was quite timely and opportune. The Fiji delegation consisted of about 28 delegates with very senior private sector and Institutional Executives going along. We have conducted a business forum was over 100 registered participants. It was really made very clear from the meetings that there are significant opportunities to be held between respective countries. Our two-way trade is only around about \$40 million, far less than our trade to Tonga and Samoa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the size of the Papua New Guinean economy, we have an opportunity to conduct some good relationships or build some very good relationships in terms of opportunity. One of the things that I was quite proud of, when we talk about regional cooperation and engagement, I think the two respective countries have – sort of between them, actually, they started developing regional engagement for quite some time now - Vodafone PNG. Operations has been quite successful in Papua New Guinea, owned by Vodafone Fiji, and by defaulter FNPF, BSP being the largest bank now in Fiji and there are other regional companies that are somewhat trying to point towards the development of more cooperation in terms of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of some key priorities, one was trying to see how it could generate some trade and investment opportunities, and we certainly were able to look at some of the major opportunities. From the Investment Fiji estimates, we already have \$100 million in terms of both trade and investment opportunities that can be generated. This is from a couple of days visit with a significant opportunities to grow more.

Some of the things are sort of being explored now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we were up there, of course, the re-establishment of PNG-Fiji Business Council from Fiji and vice versa from Papua New Guinea. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a model that works quite well for Fiji business. We do have very strong private sector relations in our two core markets of New Zealand and Australia, and we feel that if we are able to re-establish the PNG-Fiji Business Council relationship, that will be quite significant.

We started discussing MSG Trade Agreement again, and we hope to progress on that. I know the previous government was trying to make some changes and move forward. Not all four members have yet to sign off on the MSG Agreement, but we took the opportunity whilst we were there to surface that discussion and we will be engaging further over the next few months. We have a Pacific Islands Forum Meeting here in July and certainly, we will be using that to progress discussions around MSG.

What I honestly feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is between the two countries, we can really start generating more in terms of regional economy or Pacific economy, almost even a Pacific union economy, if you like. One of the things that was discussed while we were there looking at dual listing on stock exchanges between Fiji and Papua New Guinea, it is quite advanced, it is more advanced than what I realised, so there will be some discussions over the next few months to try and see whether we can get that going which will, obviously, unlock the money that is sitting in all our super funds across the Pacific in terms of avenues for investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the meetings that were held there, we had bilateral meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, honourable John Rosso, and also had meetings with the honourable Minister for Information and Communication, my equivalent. I also had quite extensive meetings with some of the private sector in Papua New Guinea. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that from that meeting, we are seeing a renewed interest for a lot of our big players in Fiji both, in manufacturing and other sectors, to re-establish in Papua New Guinea. We know that there has been issues around foreign exchange, that is now slowly being sorted out. So, I think we

can be confident that over the next few months, there will be a resurgence of our trade into Papua New Guinea and, hopefully, vice versa, and try and develop much closer ties between the two countries.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of our promising companies, Paradise Technologies, based in Nadi, is a bit of a trailblazer when it comes to energy saving. They produce tube lights that can save up to 30 or 40 percent electricity and are now exporting to New Zealand. They are now establishing an office in Papua New Guinea, and that is another example of how these trade missions can create opportunities for more export and the like.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all, the visitation was very successful. We were able to engage very closely with His Excellency Jackson Evans from our High Commission in Papua New Guinea, and we look forward to further engagement. There is a business delegation coming to Fiji from Papua New Guinea in August in an attempt to really start capturing some of the opportunities I have mentioned, Mr. Speaker, and really start reigniting the opportunities that exist between Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, just a quick question. Earlier on some years ago, a little bit of background, one of the issues that existed was biosecurity. So, my question really is when you went along this time, did you take Biosecurity with you so that we would not get into that kind of situation again because it is an important entity, knowing that it is such a good (audio disturbance/stuttering)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, yes, we did take an official from Biosecurity and they did have some meetings in Papua New Guinea. It is probably fair to say that it is work in progress. So, we will continue to liaise with Biosecurity and try to work out pathways, particularly for some of the products that we think can enter Papua New Guinea and vice versa.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Question time is now over and I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today. However, we still have agenda items left on our Order Paper.

We will suspend proceedings for dinner. I am told that dinner is hot and ready, served in the Big Committee Room. So, we will suspend the proceedings for dinner and Parliament will resume proceedings in an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.35 p.m.

REVIEW REPORT - LAUTOKA CITY COUNCIL 2015-2017 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Lautoka City Council 2015-2017 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 11th March, 2025.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the motion of the Consolidated Review Report on Lautoka City Council 2015-2017 Annual Reports. The Committee, in its deliberations of the Reports, was informed of the strategic focus of the Lautoka City Council, that is, the:

- (1) continuation of the Best Solid Waste Management Practice - 3R;
- (2) establishment of the recognised standard supporting infrastructure;
- (3) enhancing integrated approach with relevant stakeholders;
- (4) extension of municipal service with its right resources on capacity approach; and
- (5) implementation of the climate change disaster risk management components into its development plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, significantly, the key findings and recommendations were highlighted during the deliberation of the Reports and the site visit that was conducted on:

- (1) its financial management report;
- (2) the rate arrears;
- (3) the city security plan; and
- (4) the infrastructure development of the Municipality.

The Committee anticipates that the recommendation by the Committee will assist the Council in its service delivery mandated by the ratepayers.

On that note, I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list with me, there are seven speakers for batting and the time allocation is five minutes. On this measure, the Whips had voted on the speaking time and honourable Bainivalu and honourable Naupoto had voted in favour - one against, and there have been two votes in favour of five minutes. I have decided that five minutes will be given to each of the speakers.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before the House. At the outset, I wish to thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for a very well researched Report that has been provided to this august House. The Annual Reports are quite outdated, and it is not really a good reflection on the former Minister for Local Government and the previous administration of the Lautoka City Council during that period of review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Lautoka City Council is a vibrant and forward focussed agile municipal organisation. Declared a city in 1977, approximately 44,000 residents make Lautoka their home and about 4,000 people come from outside to work in the city. The city has 8,163 ratepayers and it has housed Government Departments and statutory bodies in the Western Division and is also known to

us, the people of the West, as the administrative capital of the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, well known as the Sugar City, the sweetest city in Fiji, Lautoka is a vibrant city with strong community value, quality lifestyle and dynamic opportunities and is a desirable place to live, work and visit. As the song from my Naita in Rewa, the Drekena Serenaders, usually sing, and I quote: “*Lautoka na i karua ni koro levu e Viti, Nadi levu sa kemu i cibi.*”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Lautoka has the largest sugar mill, central bulk storage loading facility and is the second port of entry. Apart from that, there are a number of other industries such as timber, pine chips, garment, distillery, brewery, blending, steel, fishing, hatchery, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that for the period under review from 2015 to 2017, the Auditor-General issued a disclaimer opinion for these years. The Committee noted that Lautoka City Council failed to comply with the relevant financial regulations. Some of the findings of the Committee is that the Lautoka City Council has a very high rate of arrears, which currently sits at \$10 million. It was also noted that there is a rise of criminal activities within the municipality and there needs to be a plan for a more secure, safer, peaceful and welcoming environment within the municipality areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rate collection is the major revenue earner for the Lautoka City Council and other Municipal Councils around Fiji. Lautoka City Council is heavily dependent on the rates to fully and effectively deliver its services to the ratepayers. The delay in rate payment is hampering the ability of Municipal Councils to deliver services and carry out major projects. Therefore, the Lautoka City Council has to continue with its efforts to reduce outstanding rate arrears.

I wish to thank the Ministry of Local Government for currently aligning to the Government’s commitment in recovering every dollar owed, ensuring that Municipal Councils can reinvest in the communities that need it most. Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the implementation strategies for the Council is to encourage rate payment and collection, so that the development and maintenance of infrastructure in our city is continued.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also asking the Lautoka City Council to encourage community engagement by carrying out effective crime prevention activities in the city. The Council should make sure that villages like Namoli, Vitogo, Naviyago, Lauwaki in Vuda and the nearby communities are actively involved in the fight against crime in the city of Lautoka, and the locals have to take ownership of the city.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I resume my seat, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Taukei Vidilo, *ena Vanua o Namoli; Were Levu i Sukanacagi ena Vanua o Vitogo*; and the *Vanua o Vuda*, for their unwavering support and warm hospitality in welcoming all the people from the other 13 Provinces in Fiji, who have called Lautoka their home.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Review Report of the Lautoka City Council. I will just go straight to the key findings.

3.1 Review of Legislations

The Committee noted that the Local Government Act needs to be reviewed to better control the activities of all municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we were at the Council, we were told that a review is being done by the Ministry of Local Government. However, I found that there is no such review at this point in time. When will the honourable Minister respond to confirm whether the Ministry is under review? If there is a review, what is the timeframe?

3.3 Collection of Rate Arrears

The Committee noted the increase in the rate arrears, which currently sits at around \$10 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when Special Administrators are appointed, they are given certain responsibilities and one such responsibility is to reduce the rate arrears. It says here in the Report that there is an increase in the rate areas, what action has the honourable Minister taken on the Special Administrators of Lautoka, who are failing in their duty?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on flood mitigation, this was not happening before. Now, whenever we have a heavy downpour, certain locations in Lautoka are flooded. When we were at the Council, we were told that it is the responsibility of the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA). It maybe, but this blame game is not going to solve the problem. At the end of the day, the ratepayers know their respective councils and they rely and depend on their respective municipal councils. I urge the honourable Minister to sort out this issue between the FRA and municipal councils so that we can stop this blame game.

3.6 Extended Rural Boundary Services

The Committee noted that the Council provides services to the extended rural boundary for garbage collection. The Committee further notes that there is insufficient funding to cater for the extended rural boundary services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not only Lautoka, but there were other Councils that told us that they do not have the type of fund to carry out this exercise. We are talking about the environment. Before, we used to have beautification competition and now, it is not there, so that is the cause of dengue outbreak in the Western Division. There needs to be a massive clean-up campaign. I urge the honourable Minister to seek some funding from the honourable Minister for Finance because we have heard he has a lot of money so, please, give it to the Councils.

3.7 Ministry of Waterways Government Grant

The Lautoka City Council used to receive government grant from the Ministry of Waterways for improvements to undertake drainages, which has now ceased.

The City Council told the Committee that funding has been stopped, and they are unable to carry out all those services. I urge the honourable Minister if he can reinstate this funding so that the Council can carry out their work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendations states that Lautoka City Council should work closely with FRA, Ministry of Waterways and other stakeholders to address the issue of poor road conditions, blocked drains and malfunctioned streetlights. We were at a few Councils and were told that they had made a submission to FRA to get back all the services that had been provided by FRA. They have a huge problem and now they want to get the maintenance of streetlights and upgrading of roads which FRA is doing. The Council wants to get that back. I strongly suggest to the honourable Minister that that be stopped.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, which is very important...

MR. SPEAKER.- You have half a minute to do that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

...I seek clarification. The last time when the Local Government (Amendment) Act was brought into Parliament, section 9(a) was removed, which spells out the appointment of Special Administrators. do not think the honourable Minister has any power left, if there is a vacancy.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You will have time to respond.

There are vacancies in some Municipal Councils.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you conclude your statement now?

HON. P.K. BALA.- However, positions are not being filled. When removing section 9(a), that should have been considered.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to contribute to the Report before the House. One of the key findings I found on Page 14 was the crime rate. Obviously, no city is free from crime. However, what was suggested was that cameras to be put in hotspots of the city, especially the market area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from then to now, we still have a lot of drunkards. Drunkards is the word on Sunday mornings at Marine Drive where people go for a walk or with their families, and that is something that I am putting forward to the honourable Minister for Policing and the whole of the Police Department.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, a business owner shared with me that there is a particular street in Lautoka City, opposite the market, where he said, “people are sitting outside my shop, and it is causing customers not to enter my shop.” Unfortunately, just across the road is the Market Police and still, people are there in front of stores who should not be there.

I have an eight-minute response but I am trying to shorten it to five minutes. Looking at Page 12 of the Report on the stray dog issue, that continues. Once dogs are trapped, they are handed to the Ministry of Agriculture and other future interventions, like neutering as per their assessment can be done. It is an ongoing issue, and I think the Greater Good Foundation, the Pacific Animal Shelter and Hospital and NGOs and other organisations who run pilot projects are helping the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pets should be licensed, and it is the responsibility of the owner. What happens in some cases, newborns are usually thrown away in rubbish dumps, but people need to take responsibility if you own pets. I have spoken to the honourable Attorney-General and putting attention to Government for the enforcement of the Protection of Animals Act 1954. To the public, if you see animal abuse, please, approach the Fiji Police Force and lodge a complaint.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also highlight the termite issue which began in the Western Division and the issue is growing. In their first year, the Government allocated a \$3 million grant and in the second year, a \$2 million grant. It is a growing issue and has grown to Nadi, Ba, Tavua, and has even come to Suva. The Government needs to allocate more funding for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also putting to Government to look into the suppliers who supply untreated timber at the price of treated timber. They are the ones that you immediately need to go down to and investigate.

The bus stand conditions has not changed much, and I believe that the repair works will start very soon. Students are loitering around. Traffic congestion remains an issue. Parking also remains an issue, especially between Ba, Lautoka and Nadi. Traffic congestions are terrible, but then this Government is also struggling to fill potholes and cut overgrown grass throughout Fiji. So, it is quite an achievement of absolute incompetence on their part.

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- On the potential of sports facilities, there is a lot of potential and income generation for the Council but there seems to be not much investment in sporting facilities.

Speaking of youth empowerment, the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports said that I do not come to youth conferences. Well, I was invited to the AG's Conference. At least, some Ministers are kind enough to send an invite, so do not talk about leaving no youth behind.

Lastly, Lautoka is a sport's city and has huge potential for boosting Fiji's multiple sports. The Government is on the road to complete the Lautoka Swimming Pool. The Coalition Government is struggling to swim and navigate through their empty promises, and we hope to see the completion of the pool very soon. I support the motion before the House.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution on the motion moved by the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Consolidated Review Report on the Lautoka City Council 2015-2017 Annual Reports. Before I go any further, I take this opportunity to thank the Chairperson and the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the work that they do by scrutinising the Annual Reports of the years in review and compiling the Consolidated Review Report which highlights the Committee's key findings and recommendations.

Being the country's second largest city with an estimated population of 44,000 residents and occupying a land area of 1,600 hectares, it is important that Lautoka City Council considers the Committee's recommendations and implements them accordingly. That will improve the economic development of Lautoka City and also create more opportunities and a better way of life for its population and increase the collection of funds that will improve municipal service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted that the Consolidated Committee Report highlights 11 key findings and nine recommendations. In one of its findings, the Committee highlighted the increase in rate arrears which currently sits at \$10,081,820. City rates provide a major revenue stream for municipal councils. Tax is levied by local councils to fund various services and infrastructure within their jurisdiction and enables them to invest in and enhance services for residents, ultimately, improving the quality of life and the overall economic health of the city. That is an ongoing issue for Lautoka City Council and most of the municipal councils around the country.

There are several reasons that contribute to ratepayers defaulting on payments. That includes:

- Financial difficulties
The COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturns have significantly impacted many Fijians, leading to financial hardship and making it difficult for some to keep up with rate payments.

- Perceived lack of services
Some ratepayers may be reluctant to pay if they feel the services provided by the council are not adequate, or if they perceive a lack of value for their rates.
- Owner absence and other circumstances
Ratepayers who are away, facing short-term financial difficulties, or embroiled in legal disputes may struggle to pay their rates.
- Lack of capacity for financial management
Municipal councils may face challenges in effectively managing their finances and collecting rates due to lack of resources and expertise.

Current accounting practices may not be adequate to track fraudulent activities or ensure rate collection. Accumulated rate arrears can put a strain on municipal council budgets, forcing them to borrow or reduce service levels.

Mr. Speaker, with the issue of the increase in outstanding rate arrears, the Committee has recommended that the Lautoka City Council continue its efforts in reducing the outstanding rate arrears and improve the collection of default ratepayers. In doing so, the Lautoka City Council should:

- focus on proactive communication and engagement;
- early intervention and do not wait until a payment is severely overdue;
- reach out to customers proactively offering support in exploring payment options before they fail, fall behind; and
- maintain regular communication with customers, keeping them informed about their account status and upcoming due dates.

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

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the Report. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for the Report and coming up with some good findings and recommendations.

The key functions of Lautoka City Council are to promote and facilitate:

- clean and healthy environment;
- deliver services to meet local needs; and
- improve the quality of life and community wellbeing.

One of the recommendations of the Committee is maintenance of the city parks. Parks are important for all age group because parks provide numerous benefits including improved health, environmental protection and provides recreational opportunities. There are 105 open spaces in Lautoka City and many of these spaces needs maintenance. The Council should attend to the parks that need maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other recommendation of the Committee is flood mitigation. There are many areas in Lautoka City that experience flash flooding during heavy rain and blocked drains, and I wish to name a few places, that is Kashmir and the front of TappooCity. We cannot put people, especially children at risk. The Council should work closely with the Fiji Roads Authority and Ministry of Waterways to address the issue of blocked drains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I found in the Report that Lautoka City Council used to receive Government grant from the Ministry of Waterways for improvement to drainage which has now ceased. What is the reason - I do not know. I request the honourable Minister for Local Government to request funding for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other recommendation of the Committee is on extended rural boundary services. Lautoka City Council provides services to extended rural boundary for garbage collection. That is a very good service to rural areas which started about five years ago. A clean environment is vital for human health and wellbeing. It minimises exposure to harmful toxins and pollutants, reduces risk of illness and infections.

I have noted from the Report that there is insufficient funding to cater for extended rural boundary services. I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government to ensure that this important service continues. I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government and Minister for Finance to provide funding for garbage collection so that the area is not disadvantaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another recommendation of the Committee is on collaboration and networking, which is very important. The Committee found that the Ministry of Local Government and the Council need to improve their coordination and collaboration in order to improve service delivery. Lack of coordination between the Ministry and Council should not affect the ratepayers and visitors. There are more than 8,000 ratepayers in Lautoka and the population of Lautoka is over 70,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, service delivery to ratepayers and the people of Lautoka should not be compromised. I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government to ensure that there is good collaboration and networking between the Council and the Ministry, to ensure that best services are provided to the ratepayers, the people of Lautoka and visitors to Lautoka City.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue highlighted by the Committee is the poor road conditions and malfunction of the streetlights. I totally agree with the Committee because I have noticed that myself because I am from Lautoka. The way Lautoka City Council seems to be operating currently is in the manner of firefighting and solving matters when it becomes a problem, rather than a more planned and systematic approach. The malfunctioning streetlights and the leakage of Lautoka Market a few months ago show lack of planning and systematic approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, had the Council done its due diligence in terms of regular inspection, issues would have been picked up as part of the inspection and planned for repairs prior to it becoming a major problem for vendors and the people of Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Special Administrators have special roles, and they should show some leadership and ensure that there is better planning and systematic approach so that best services are provided to market vendors, ratepayers, the citizens of Lautoka and all visitors to Lautoka City, including tourists. I support the motion.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion and thank the Committee and honourable Members for doing a marvelous job in coming up with some very good recommendations. From the outset, Sir, I also wish to comment on a few issues that were raised by the former Minister for Local Government, who is also part of the Committee, in the evaluation of the Lautoka City Council.

The first recommendation of the Committee is on the review of the Local Government Act. This is the third time that I am standing in this august House and saying that we have done the first

review of the Local Government Act 1972 in 2023 and was passed in Parliament in October 2023. In that review, section 9(a) was repealed where we wanted to bring in the local government election. We have also amended the interest methodology in the Council's use in charging rates in arrears, which is from compound to simple interest, as well as reducing the interest rate from 11 percent to 5 percent. We have also amended the retirement age for our workers from 55 years to 60 years, in line with the national age retirement policy. I hope we are clear on that. We are going to further review our Local Government Act which I mentioned yesterday, with the help of the Local Government of New Zealand to modernise our towns and cities to make sure that we come up with very sustainable important policies, moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next recommendation is the laxity of the previous Administration in monitoring most of the Municipal Councils. Based on the difficulties faced by Municipalities, we have established an Audit and Monitoring Unit in 2024, to ensure that they monitor all the activities, as well as the policies in place in all those Municipalities. It is a very important aspect that we have changed. The team went out, did an action plan on some of the recurring audit issues, and they went to the Councils to rectify those with all Municipalities across the country.

The other recommendation is on the arrears. I have also mentioned, Mr. Speaker, what we have, at least, mitigated the effect of using compound interest in most of the Municipalities - reducing the interest methodology from compound interest to simple interest. We have also stressed to all the Administrators and CEOs of Municipalities the importance of looking after and managing their rates because that is one of the income drivers for most of the Municipalities. Most of them have done their interest rate profiling. When you do profiling, you can come up with strategies of improving the collection rate of your municipalities. For example, if you look at March 2025 collection, it was \$3.4 million compared to \$2.7 million last year. That is an increase of 25.9 percent. That, in itself, is a testament of the good work that these Councils and Administrators have been doing in most of the Municipalities.

Another issue that was raised by honourable Bala is on the flooding around Lautoka City Council. It was the previous Administration that had taken away the responsibility from the Councils to Fiji Road Authority and could not even mitigate or manage flooding in some of the Municipalities. We are mitigating that by including it in our next year's financial budget so that our Municipalities are fully equipped with resources, to ensure that they have adequate funding to assist them in mitigating and assisting some of the areas that gets flooded in most of the Municipalities around the country.

On the grants that is given by Government to assist in the collection of rubbish collection from some of the extended areas in most of the Municipalities, it is something that I have been liaising with the Ministry of Finance to give us additional funding to assist Municipalities in servicing and collecting waste from those extended areas. We are closely monitoring the activities of Municipalities and hope that they are going to accomplish the projects that were left behind by honourable Bala at Lautoka City.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion before us. It reflects the Consolidated Review Report on the Lautoka City Council's 2015-2017 Annual Reports. While there is much to comment in this Report, it also raises concern that demand action from the Council and Government stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Lautoka City Council's alignment with Sustainable Development Goals is a step towards ensuring long-term resilience and sustainability for Lautoka. The Council's focus on waste management initiatives, such as composting, market waste and green waste keeping, reflects an admirable commitment to SDG13 - Climate Action. Similarly, efforts to maintain clean and safe

public spaces align with SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities. These initiatives set the foundation for Lautoka to involve in a greener and cleaner City.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commendable progress alone cannot erase the fundamental issues that have been highlighted in the Report, and one of the most pressing concerns is the growing rate arrears, now sitting at an alarming \$10 million, as said by other honourable Members. The Council must adopt enforcement mechanisms and explore innovative solutions, like incentivising rate payments through discounts or digital systems, and more community engagement is also needed. The Council must reach out to ratepayers and educate them on how their contributions are directly tied to improving their everyday lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the parks and open spaces of Lautoka City. This Report reveals that there are 105 open spaces, many of which remain underutilised or neglected. These spaces are vital assets that could serve as hubs for recreation, culture and community building, yet their potential remains unrealized. While the councillors initiate collaborations with businesses and organisations for maintenance, these efforts lack urgency and structure. Open spaces should not be idle plots, they should be vibrant and welcoming areas that reflect the pride and spirit of Lautoka.

I strongly urge the Council and the government to prioritise this issue. Modern parks and recreational facilities can enrich the lives of the residents, foster physical wellbeing and boost local tourism. Sponsorship programmes, partnerships with corporations and grants could help fund the development of inclusive spaces that cater for all demographics, from children to the elderly and even those with disabilities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are investments that will pay dividends for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report also highlights plans for retention dams and drainage system improvements, which I commend. However, these plans must move beyond discussions and be implemented swiftly. Hygiene infrastructure and unethical waste disposal into the drains exacerbate the problem. The Council must address these underlying issues. I urge the Council to work closely with stakeholders, including the Fiji Roads Authority and the Ministry of Waterways, to ensure these projects are completed efficiently and with long-term resilience in mind.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- I thank all the honourable Members for their constructive contributions to the debate on this Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all valid critical issues from honourable Members are noted and will be thoroughly discussed with the Council for their continuous improvement and benchmark for best practices in its future development. The Committee will ensure that the execution of the recommendations and its key findings will assist the Council on its service delivery.

On that note, I commend this motion before this august House.

MR. SPEAKER Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – FIJI INDEPENDENT COMMISSION AGAINST CORRUPTION 2018-2020 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption 2018-2020 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 12th March, 2025.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to present the findings and recommendations of the Standing Committee's Consolidated Review Report on the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Annual Reports of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC). The review has highlighted both, commendable progress and areas where strategic investment and policy reforms are urgently needed.

To begin, Mr. Speaker, the Committee acknowledges FICAC's dedication to promoting integrity through its awareness and outreach programmes. Despite the considerable efforts made across various localities, the Commission has not yet met its national outreach targets due to limited manpower, especially in reaching rural and outer island communities. Of particular concern is the delayed or underdeveloped implementation of vital programmes, such as the Youth Ambassador Initiative and the National Anti-Corruption Curriculum.

The Committee recommends that FICAC be allocated sufficient resources to fully realise those initiatives. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, FICAC should prioritise integrating anti-corruption education into school curriculum and teacher training programmes as soon as practicable.

Cultural norms also pose another challenge, Mr. Speaker. The Committee was informed of the public's tendency to conflate bribery with traditional forms of gratitude, such as gift giving. That perception, though culturally rooted, undermines efforts to instil a clear ethical understanding of public service integrity. Therefore, the Committee recommends enhanced training, public education and policy strengthening in alignment with PSC Circular No. 09/2008, which supports comprehensive corruption risk assessments and ethical behaviour reinforcement across Government institutions.

In leveraging modern platforms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC has effectively expanded its digital presence, utilising social media to disseminate anti-corruption messages through engaging, multilingual and animated videos. While these efforts are commendable, the Committee believes that greater impact could be achieved by tailoring these messages for young audiences in primary and secondary schools. We also urge FICAC to evaluate its social media strategies regularly to maximise public reach and awareness.

On the technical front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commends FICAC's investment in a digital forensic lab, which has enhanced the quality of digital evidence and supported successful prosecutions. However, staffing continues to remain a problem - staffing shortages, that is, and limited expertise threatens the sustainability of these advancements. The Committee strongly recommends the development of a succession planning strategy, where senior experts mentor junior officers to safeguard institutional knowledge and continuity.

Staff retention continues to be a pressing concern. Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC does operate within a constrained budget and is unable to compete with international or private sector salaries. To address that, the Committee proposes a range of strategies to improve retention, especially for specialised roles in areas, like digital forensics. These recommendations include skills-based allowances for high-demand roles, performance-based incentives tied to KPIs and regular salary reviews to ensure competitiveness within the Public Service.

In conclusion, the Committee acknowledges FICAC's pivotal role in upholding the integrity of public administration in Fiji. The Committee believes that with strengthened resourcing, greater educational outreach, investment in human capital and institutional reforms, such as the re-establishment of a specialised court, FICAC will be better positioned to meet its mandate and help build a culture of integrity and good governance across the nation.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now open the floor for debate on the motion. I have a list of seven speakers with me. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover. Each speaker is allocated five minutes for their intervention.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Qereqeretabua for the motion, and rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report that was produced by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. The Consolidated Annual Reports provide a comprehensive overview of FICAC's performance, legislative activities and key initiatives undertaken during the reporting period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Members of this august House are aware, FICAC was established in 2007 under the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Act. By law, it is required to investigate and prosecute complaints of bribery, as well as corrupt practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC's budget has seen a substantial increase since its inception. In 2007, the agency operated with a budget of \$1.5 million. By 2024-2025 fiscal year, this figure had risen to just under \$10.5 million, marking an exponential growth in funding over a 17-year period. The total budgetary allocation for FICAC for the period 2007-2025 amounts to a staggering \$139,175,583.

On any measure, this is a huge amount of money. Mr. Speaker, taxpayers of this country are entitled to ask, how has this money been spent? What results have been produced? How many people have been sent to jail for abuse of office, corruption or related offences?

Despite this significant financial investment, concerns persist regarding FICAC's effectiveness and independence. As of the latest available data, FICAC employs 144 staff members, including 14 lawyers. The increase in budget and staffing has not necessarily translated into a higher rate of complaint resolution, more convictions or enhanced public trust in the agency's operations.

More than \$40 million was spent, as Members know, on the incomplete Fiji National University Labasa Campus and the project was 47 percent completed when work stopped. The cost of the yet to be finished Lautoka Swimming Pool has escalated from the initial budgeted amount of \$2 million to \$12.6 million. There are indications that these and other large capital projects may have been affected by corrupt dealings. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is little evidence of any accountability whatsoever for these and other excesses. The public have a right to know what is happening and whether any of these cases are being investigated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC has been accused in the past of being a political tool, particularly during the last administration. Critics argue that instead of serving as an impartial anti-corruption body, FICAC was employed to target political opponents and dissenters.

In December 2022, the leader of the Unity Party said, and I quote, "I believe it is just that it was established as a political weapon and is used as a political weapon." There are internal challenges and the public perception of the body is that it needs to be more accountable and transparent.

In the interest of time, I am not able to complete the rest of my statement but with your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to make a brief statement on the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. I join my fellow Catholics and others around the world in mourning the passing of Pope Francis. During his pontificate, Pope Francis has consistently addressed the issue of corruption, accentuating its destructive impact on individuals and society.

His Holiness the Pope said corruption is a “grave sin” that not only harms personal integrity but also threatens the very foundations of social life. If it becomes pervasive, it could lead to a culture where people justify their unethical behaviour and dishonesty becomes normalised and accepted. Pope Francis emphasised that corruption distorts justice, undermines trust in institutions, leads to cynicism among citizens and harms the most vulnerable, especially the poor.

One of the legacies of Pope Francis was his impassioned call to protect our planet. In his call for a more sustainable and compassionate world, Pope Francis reminded us that the actions we take today will shape the world for tomorrow.

Through his encyclical *Laudato Si*, he reminded us that the earth, our shared home, is a reflection of our deepest values. He called on us to confront the environmental and social crises of our time with courage, compassion and a renewed sense of duty. “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth”, Pope Francis wrote, challenging us all to rethink our relationship with nature and our responsibility to future generations.

Pope Francis emphasised that caring for the environment was not just a political issue, it was a moral imperative, a call to preserve creation for the wellbeing of all people, especially the most vulnerable. He calls the world to dialogue and cooperate between all sectors of society, be it religions, politics or science. He reminded us to look beyond our differences and work together for the common good, the sake of our planet and for all who call it home.

As we reflect on Pope Francis' life and teachings, let us not simply mourn his passing, but reflect on the lessons he shared with us. The life of Pope Francis was one of profound love and courage - teaching us to live with humility, to show mercy, to care for the earth and to fight for justice.

For those of us in leadership, let us remember that our greatest responsibility is not to ourselves, but the people we serve, particularly the most vulnerable. He said that we must not ignore the cries of the earth or the suffering of those who are most affected by degradation.

Mr. Speaker, we have the power and the responsibility to act, whether by supporting policies that protect the environment, engaging in climate action or fostering more inclusive economies. Amidst all the noise and cynicism in this complicated yet beautiful game of life, Pope Francis reminds us that goodness is still possible. The world is poorer for his passing. May the soul of Pope Francis rest in peace.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for thoroughly scrutinizing the Report. I speak today out of deep concern for the integrity of our anti-corruption institute which is Fiji Independent Commission Against Corrupt (FICAC). Back in 2007, as one of the directors of Transparency International, we presented the case for Fiji to sign the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and to establish an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency. That advocacy led to the creation of FICAC, and it was a promising start.

During that time, Mr. Speaker, corruption was at its peak. If you look at municipal councils, there were a number of cases within the councils that needed an institution of that calibre to

investigate. We also had the National Bank of Fiji case on hand where investigation did not lead to any conviction, and we lost millions of dollars. All that led to the establishment of FICAC. In the past 18 years, FICAC has grown in staffing as we have heard, it has a larger budget, but with that growth has come greater controversy, diminishing public trust and a rising allegation of political interference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the statistics, FICAC received 447 complaints and charges were laid only on 43 cases. More than a half, that is, 283 complaints, remain unresolved during that period. These are not just numbers; these are people waiting for justice.

We all know about the high-profile Housing Authority land scandal case where prime land that was supposed to go to low-income families ended up in the hands of staff, relatives and friends. Even today, the investigation is still dragging on. We also know about the Savusavu land sale cases, and nothing happened even in that case.

Mr. Speaker, I support the Committee's recommendation for the reintroduction of the corruption court. One of the challenges facing FICAC is getting its case prioritised in court. When corruption cases get lost in a court system that is already stretched thin, witnesses die, accused persons flee and evidence fades, the people's trust in the justice system slowly erodes.

Unfortunately, in September 2023, the anti-corruption division in both, High Court and Magistrates Court, was dismantled, which is a clear step backward. What message are we sending to the public that corruption is not a priority? I recall, the honourable Minister for Justice now, at that time he was the Attorney-General, came and said that we did not have data to prove that we really need an anti-corruption court. Today, the Committee is telling you, "Yes we do." Even the staff at FICAC are saying, "Yes we need an anti-corruption court." We should be listening to the people and not making decisions just out of nothing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are truly serious about protecting public funds, restoring public confidence must happen and FICAC must be continuously improved. We have to look at FICAC in a more serious way. What is missing in FICAC is an independent oversight body. We briefly discussed that during the Audit Bill - no external scrutiny, no accountability and, therefore, no public trust. We experienced that during the appointment of the FICAC Commissioner and the whole of Fiji witnessed what happened during that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to learn from Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption, one of the world's most respected anti-corruption bodies. They have a citizen's oversight committee - independent, transparent and trusted. Fiji needs to establish a similar multi-stakeholder oversight committee for FICAC - one that includes civil society, the legal profession, academia and independent experts, and not politicians.

To do this right, we must amend the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corrupt Act to create this independent oversight body. Let us not forget that the Accountability and Transparency Commission will offer another layer of public protection. This is not about who sits on which side of the House, but about protecting the public interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are eagerly awaiting the Commission of Inquiry Report. The honourable Prime Minister himself said that transparency must be the guiding principle. People were promised transparency, not secrecy. If this Government buries the Commission of Inquiry Report, it will confirm what many Fijians already fear, that is, the Government says one thing and does the exact opposite.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hogwash!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Keeping the report hidden will not protect the Government from scrutiny. It will only expose its double standards even further. I support the motion before the House.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) for the 2018-2020 Annual Reports. Sir, FICAC's mandate is comprehensive, yet its effectiveness hinges on several critical factors.

Firstly, the scope of its powers - investigatory, advisory and prosecutorial, provides a formidable framework for tackling corruption. However, the challenges often arise in the implementation and execution of these powers. The Review Report highlights areas where FICAC has made significant strides but also points to gaps that need addressing.

Mr. Speaker, I take note of the recommendations in the Review Report and mainly support the need for FICAC, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, to implement a national anti-corruption curriculum in schools as soon as practical. This initiative is not merely about imparting knowledge, it is about shaping the ethical framework of future generations. By embedding anti-corruption principles early, we cultivate a culture of integrity that can permeate all levels of society. Collaborating with teacher training institutions to include an anti-corruption module and their programmes ensure educators can convey these crucial lessons.

Mr. Speaker, equally important is the recommendation for more training within the Civil Service and establishing strong systems of corruption risk assessment and policy strengthening by Ministries and Departments. This approach is two-fold - it enhances the capabilities of civil servants to identify and combat corruption, and it fortifies the institutional framework that supports these efforts. Effective training programmes and robust policies are essential for creating an environment where corruption is less likely to thrive.

Mr. Speaker, awareness and visibility of corruption are vital in these efforts. The more spotlights on the issues of corruption, the more conversations revolve around it, the more people recognise and report it. While I appreciate the digital outreach efforts FICAC is already making through its social media platforms, I believe more can be done to engage Fijians in conversations and debate about corruption. Stimulating these conversations on social media where most Fijians gather these days, both young and old, improves the recognisability of corruption and intolerance of its presence.

Digital engagement is a powerful tool in the modern era and leveraging it can effectively and considerably enhance FICAC's outreach and impact. By combining education, engagement and interactivity, FICAC can make digital spaces vibrant hubs for anti-corruption discourse, where reporting corruption is seen as a civic duty rather than a fear-laden risk.

Digital engagement is not just about broadcasting information, it is about turning passive awareness into action. For example, we would like to see FICAC use digital platforms to:

- (1) Host Live Webinars and Interactive Q&A Sessions.
- (2) Social Media challenges and Storytelling Campaigns - Leveraging platforms like *Facebook*, *TikTok* and *Instagram* to initiate interactive challenges, such as the Anti-Corruption Pledge or Spot Corruption campaigns where users share personal experiences or scenarios highlighting corrupt practices.

- (3) Engaging Polls and Discussion Threads – Posting thought-provoking polls or discussion, prompts on corruption related issues encourages users to express opinions, debates and learn from different perspectives.
- (4) Youth-focussed Digital Content – Since young people are highly active online, FICAC could create engaging short form content videos, memes and podcasts that resonates with youth, making anti-corruption advocacy more accessible and relatable.

To be effective in fulfilling its core purpose of eradicating the prevalence of corruption and abuse of public funds, FICAC needs to be properly equipped with human resources and technology. I support the recommendation to properly remunerate skilled personnel like digital forensic experts. Unless they receive proper pay and training to enhance their digital forensic skills in a time of highly specialised digital technology and means of perpetuating and covering corruption, FICAC will struggle to be effective in its duty to prevent corruption. Investing in technology and human capital is not just a necessity, it is strategic imperative for FICAC to stay ahead of increasingly sophisticated corruption tactics.

In conclusion, while FICAC has made commendable progress, there is a clear need for continued and enhanced efforts across education, civil service training, digital engagement and resource allocation. These measures are essential for FICAC to fulfil its mandate effectively and for us to build a society rooted in integrity and transparency.

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to contribute towards the motion before the House. Sir, FICAC was established to eradicate the prevalence of corruption, systematic abuse and the misuse of public funds in office throughout the public sector. The Act gives FICAC the authority - advisory and prosecutorial powers, covering *inter alia* corruption, election bribery and fraud-related offences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that there were 283 cases pending from 2018-2019 and 303 cases pending from 2019-2020. Majority contributed to the cases that backlogged in the High Courts and there were a lot of delays with the outcomes of investigations that needed prior attention or results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the prosecution powers of the Commission are outlined under section 12(a) and (b) of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 2007. The recommendation was that the anti-corruption court that was established in 2021 and then removed in 2023, to be brought back. The Committee also urges FICAC to evaluate and enhance its social media efforts to raise awareness about corruption, stressing the importance of awareness of their work in educating the public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *TikTok*, if used wisely, has a lot of reach, and people see more videos than they read content. When we had put the question to the Committee, the response was, “We are not TikTokers.” The whole point is, there is a lot of good information on the internet, it is just a matter of how you use it. That is one of the mediums or platforms that you can create awareness about corruption and stressing the importance of their work.

Another concern that was raised, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is how they select the schools and conduct the awareness programmes. A few people have sent a few cases of corruption to my official email, but they are too afraid to come forward. As a new Parliamentarian, I have been advised to tread carefully because the kind of complaints they are, it is like I will be creating new enemies for myself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many honourable Members who are in Government who were in Opposition before may relate to this, that when you stand with the truth, when you raise people's voices and concerns, you make their perpetrators or enemies yours and we live with it day in day out. Last week, I was in the West, in fact, I was a bit hesitant to speak on this Report, but someone approached me and said, "There is a politician (who is not in this House) we will put him through FICAC and send him to jail".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that night, I drove from Nadi to Lautoka, and I reflected a lot on this independent organisation.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I am talking about the Report, if you understand, good for you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Parliamentarians...

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- It actually explains all the fake accounts, extorting of money and defamation on social media for some targeted MPs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, Members of Parliament names have come up with FICAC, on both sides of the House, even in the past, but what message are we sending to the younger generations and the level of effort we put in to try and encourage them to become a parliamentarian?

As of now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this institution's name is in the media every week - talk of the nation. I would like to reiterate that FICAC should not be used as a tool for political witch hunting, and Government needs to resolve this as soon as possible to maintain the integrity of FICAC. It is unfortunate that they are not even taking this in good faith, which shows their level of understanding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support honourable Kumar's statement for an independent committee to oversight FICAC's work, and I support the motion before the House.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the work of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, its Chairperson and their recommendations, as articulated by the honourable Attorney-General and previous speakers.

First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you want to know what is your image of FICAC, what is your experience like FICAC, you can easily ask the honourable Prime Minister, or honourable Lynda Tabuya, or the honourable Minister for Finance, or the honourable Minister for Tourism, and many others, on the experience that they went through, because the manner in which powers were exercised, far beyond what is expected and reasonable in a justifiable and democratic society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we changed that, this Government changed that. It is pretty clear that things have changed. Whilst we are looking at the 2018-2019 Annual Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also have an opportunity to look at three other Annual Reports of FICAC under the leadership of the current Commissioner. I also thank the appointment of the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Fotofili, who served in the DPP, served the Judiciary, and of course, in combination with the Commissioner, and we look forward that there is a bright future for FICAC in terms of its responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC's mandate is outlined under Section 115 of the 2013 Constitution. It empowers the Commission to investigate and prosecute criminal offences related to corruption. The Commission plays a critical role in upholding the rule of law, ensuring transparency, promoting integrity across both, the public and private sectors. Their work is underpinned by two main functions, the reactive and proactive arms.

The fact is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter what we view about FICAC, we cannot change FICAC because it is protected under the 2013 Constitution. What we can do and what this Government has done, is give it to those who are charged with, and that includes the Judicial Services Commission and the other agencies, to see what the way forward for FICAC.

We are grateful for the recommendations that have been given. Yes, special courts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe if you really assess the number of cases objectively, it does not justify a special court. We have only one or two Supreme Court cases, very few High Court cases, but majority are in the Magistrates Court. That is the reason why the Coalition Government decided to take that away so that everyone go through the same process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact is that, once you are charged and before when FICAC officers run to your house at 11 o'clock, or 12 o'clock, 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning, your name is tagged forever. Looking through the FICAC 2021 Annual Report, I mean, I have just noted one thing, Mr. Solo Mara is a former diplomat, who had like two years left in his career. But through FICAC, at that time, he's gone through it. Finally, after assessment by the current FICAC, there is no reasonable reason to charge him and he is free, but his career is gone. Look at Mr. Rahul!

I have to admit one thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that things have changed. We have seen briefs coming in on a monthly basis as to the cases that have been disposed, those that *nolle prosequi* has been entered, because there is now more scrutiny on the work that they do than ever before. That is what this country needs. Trust the system! Unfortunately, those on the other side have a, sort of, generalisation.

Honourable Koya, earlier on this evening, said that the Ministry of Lands go and spend time at the Registrar of Titles Office and being given a dedicated space. Since September 2023, when that matter was raised and when officials from the Ministry of Lands come to the Registrar of Titles Office, there is a dedicated desk where they can work, but in this House, honourable Koya and honourable Premila Kumar say something else. If you really want to talk about FICAC, ask the Members on this side of the House.

We agree, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there should be a lot of public engagement. People need to know the work that they do so that they do not get into trouble, and we also support the work that FICAC is doing. We hope that with the current leadership, positive changes will be seen at FICAC.

I fully support what has been recommended by the Committee.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on the motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on the report, I would like to take this opportunity and join the global community in condemning the terror attack that took place in Pahalgam, Kashmir, India. It was a very inhumane act, carried out by a group of cowards and should be highly condemned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we stand united with the people of India, especially with the families of 26 victims. Above all religion is humanity and we should respect and love each other. We sincerely

hope that justice shall prevail, and the perpetrators are taken to task.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming back to the Report, I would like to thank the Committee, the Chairperson and Committee Members for the comprehensive review of the FICAC Annual Report. This used to be one of the highly criticised independent institutions by a few commentators in the past, and that it was used as a political tool to victimise people which was one of the allegations that was placed every now and then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the same FICAC institution that was used as a political propaganda during the election campaign that once this government comes into power, FICAC would be the first independent institute that would be closed down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to see now that Government has realised the importance of having an agency like FICAC, to curb corruption. Sir, no matter how much we try, there would be some level of corruption in the public office, and we need to have deterrent factors, and FICAC is one of those factors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an independent institution, we should not have political interference but, unfortunately, what we see happening at FICAC, we are not too sure about this case at this moment. One Commissioner comes in and says, “We will charge a particular politician”, and then the second Commissioner comes in and says, “We will not be laying any charges against the same politician”. We seriously do not know what is actually happening at this point in time, and for any organisation to run efficiently, we need to have the head of the institution to run the affairs of the organisation. However, at the moment, we are not too sure whether the Commissioner is on voluntary leave or is back in the office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is very serious. If we are giving a responsibility to someone to run, we should give it in a way that it is independent, there is no political interference, and that person is allowed to give outcomes of what is expected from this independent institution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government needs to make a decision. If the Commissioner is to remain, she needs to be given the greenlight to stay back, or if it needs to be changed, then it should be changed, but a definite decision needs to be taken in order for FICAC to remain effective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the leadership role is in such a dilemma, how can we expect organisations to produce results expected from it? With what is happening in FICAC, people are laughing. It has become a laughing matter in Fiji, and I urge the Government to resolve this issue at the earliest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to touch on the first recommendation which is on advocacy. Because we are dealing with corruption, it is better we instil these ideas and ideologies upon our young children. I believe FICAC should start advocating from primary school level going up to high school and tertiary level that there is an institution and if you happen to be in a public sector and if you are involved in corruption and in an unethical manner, then there is an institution that will come for you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that particular recommendation is highly recommended and with all due respect, I support the motion before the House.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this motion. Firstly, I would like to reply in brief to the point made by honourable Maharaj. He understands pretty well the doctrine of the separation of powers. We are Parliament, JSC sits under the Judiciary, and we are the Executive. There is a reason why in law or in public law,

we should not be delving into each other's compounds. That is the whole reason why, in this House, we need to be very careful before we start talking about the proprietary of someone that another branch of government has appointed and has installed their confidence, that we would maintain that decorum in our House, that we would pay them the respect that is due to them.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Premila Kumar spoke about the genesis of FICAC. They provided a report and, to her knowledge, it was that report that then prescribed to the then military government the powers for them to pass the FICAC Decree. I have an alternative version, and I think I am entitled to share that version with the House, as much as honourable Premila Kumar has done.

The Fiji Independent Commission Decree when it was introduced in 2007 was really an excuse for what had happened in 2006. The lead up to the 2006 event, this was the message that we continue to hear their former leader saying on public television - rife corruption all throughout public service by the ministers, by government then they introduced the 2007 FICAC law. Now, what happened? Where did they go to in the evidence in order to prosecute Prime Minister Qarase? They went way right back before even he became the Prime Minister. It was a witch hunt, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think they all understood the genesis of the law that we are now dealing with today.

Again, citizens oversight. This is the proposal by honourable Premila Kumar. We should now have, now it is the time, the time is right for us to have a citizens oversight commission to oversee the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption. My question to them is this, why did they not provide the oversight from 2007? It is 17 years old today. For 15 years, they have run FICAC under their government. They have never thought about introducing an oversight to their organisation which we say, they had weaponised all throughout those 15 years.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- All throughout the 15 years, they say, “No oversight.” The reason is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why they did not prefer to have an oversight is they themselves are the oversight.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- That was what happened, Mr. Speaker Sir. Mr. Speaker, sir, I am running out of time, I just want to make one other reference, Sir, because during this period in 2018-2020, the honourable Prime Minister was prosecuted, honourable Vasu was prosecuted, honourable Professor Biman Prasad was taken in for questioning, honourable Tuisawau was taken in for questioning, honourable Lynda Tabuya was taken in for questioning, and many of those who stood for the views of the Opposition at that time were being taken in for questioning by FICAC.

The reason why I raised that point is because they are running thin on resources, as we have seen in the Report. Yes, of course, they have quite a large amount of funding that the honourable Attorney-General had referred to, but they have 144 staff with 14 lawyers.

The FijiFirst Government had, over the years, vested them with more powers to investigate and prosecute. They have not only restricted them to the anti-rot offences, but they also gave them the powers to prosecute under any offence in the Crimes Decree. What has happened, Mr. Speaker,

Sir? They were investigating and prosecuting sedition offences, which are traditionally the domain of the Police and the DPP's Office.

We have been there before, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think it is time that we need to relook at the FICAC laws and then realign them to what their intent should be, release the rest of the powers to the Police and the DDP.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- I just want to say thank you very much to all the honourable Members. Thank you for your well-rounded and well-thought-out recommendations in reply to the motion before the House, and I thank you all in advance for supporting the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJI NATIONAL SPORTS COMMISSION AUGUST 2022-JULY 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Fiji National Sports Commission Annual Report for the period August 2022 to July 2023, which was tabled on 12th March, 2025.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Honourable Members, I rise to present the findings of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, following our review of the Fiji National Sports Commission's Annual Report for the period August 2022 to July 2023. The Committee recognises that sport in Fiji is much more than just competition, it is a powerful tool for nation-building, youth empowerment, health promotion and social inclusion.

Despite the commendable efforts of the Commission, however, a number of challenges persist that require this House's attention and support, Mr. Speaker. The Committee was informed that the Commission continues to operate with limited financial resources with its \$900,000 annual allocation needed to support 24 sports, including salaries and operational costs. That level of funding significantly restricts the expansion of grassroots programmes. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Commission be adequately funded to enable it to function as an independent driver of sports development, and to better support National Sporting Organisations (NSOs).

Furthermore, the state of sporting infrastructure across the country remains inadequate, particularly affecting children and women. The Committee recommends collaboration between the Commission and the Fiji Sports Council to identify and upgrade facilities and attract donor support for equipment needs.

Reaching remote and maritime areas also remain a challenge. The Committee encourages the use of digital platforms to improve outreach and participation. We also urge greater collaboration among the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Fiji National Sports Commission, FASANOC and the Fiji Sports Council, to manage funding expectations as NSOs requests now exceed \$50 million.

With increased reliance on technology, the physical inactivity of children is a growing concern and we call for a multi-Ministry approach to reintegrate physical activity into schools and

With increased reliance on technology, the physical inactivity of children is a growing concern, and we call for a multi-Ministry approach to reintegrate physical activity into schools and communities.

Rural to urban migration is impacting rural sports continuity, although urban communities are adapting by forming new sporting associations. We commend the Commission's efforts in establishing a Central Urban Division and the call for continued inclusivity, especially of women.

As Fiji loses talent to overseas opportunities, the Committee recommends the creation of professional local sports pathways. Clarity is also needed on the Government's evolving sports vision, and the Ministry must avoid undue interference in the Commission's operations.

The Committee acknowledges efforts in addressing drug-related issues and supports the establishment of a local drug testing laboratory for cost-effective and consistent monitoring. The ongoing shortage of qualified Physical Education (PE) instructors highlights the need to integrate PE into all teacher training programmes. We also recommend strengthening medical screening procedures and greater youth representation in sports governance structures.

We commend the Commission's financial transparency and accountability and urge all NSOs to uphold similar standards. Safeguarding concerns in sports have been raised, especially regarding young female athletes. We support strengthening policies and mechanisms to prevent such incidents from happening and we also recommend investment in upskilling local coaches to meet international standards and the call for the inclusion of life skills, such as financial literacy and leadership, into youth sports development programmes. Looking ahead, the Committee fully supports the Commission's plans to prioritise infrastructure development, community engagement, coaching, governance training and transition programmes for athletes' post-career. Those are vital for building a robust and an inclusive sports sector.

In conclusion, the Committee believes that sports is a national asset that must be nurtured through strategic investment, inclusive policies and unified leadership. I urge this august House to support the recommendations presented and work collectively to elevate the role of sport in Fiji's national development. On that note, I commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have a list of speakers with me, there are four. At the end of the debate, honourable Qereqeretabua will give her right of reply. Each of the speakers will be given five minutes for their intervention.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the overview established under section 3 of the Fiji National Sports Commission Act 2013, the Commission aims to enrich the lives and health of all Fijians through physical activities and sports at all levels.

The Commission operates like a corporate body, governed by the Board of Commissioners, appointed by the honourable Minister for Sports. The Commission works in close collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Fiji Sports Council in the development of sports programme and facilities. Since 2013, the Commission has received an accumulative total operating grant of \$11.4 million.

Additionally, the Government has allocated an accumulative total of \$78.3 million to National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) to support the development of sports programmes and facilities in Fiji. Annual provisions vary over the years, depending on the utilisation rate and supporting requirements during each budget period. The recommendation is for adequate funding for the Commission to drive sports development in the NSOs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is to be noted that Government increased the Commission's operating grant from \$900,000 in 2022-2023 to \$1.1 million in 2023-2024. For the 2024-2025 financial year, the Commission was, again, allocated a budget of \$1.1 million. Reaching remote and maritime areas, the Commission's Sports in Community Camps Programme and Kids in Community Sport Programme were already active in maritime regions such as Kadavu, Lau and the Northern Division in 2023. Community outreach was delivered to over 33 programme locations, including the maritime areas, providing coaching services and talent identification opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on promoting sports participation through multi-sectoral efforts, the Commission is actively collaborating with the Ministry of Education through its Educate the Educator Programme which trained schoolteachers in basic sports coaching. A recent pilot programme was conducted in the Rewa and Nadi Districts, benefiting over 400 students, and similar partnerships with the Ministry of Health to promote physical activity through workplace wellness campaign.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on supporting the retention of talented athletes through the Sports Scholarship Grant, elite athletes are given support professional development while representing Fiji, for example, top athletes in rugby and athletics receive training placement in Australia and New Zealand while maintaining national representation.

On physical education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sports Commission Programme already supported the physical Education programme for over 150 teachers last year under the Train the Trainers Programme, helping to address the current skill gap in schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on local drug testing and anti-doping enforcement, a feasibility assessment is under consideration, while support for the international testing anti-doping education continues. In the interim, testing is outsourced to the World Anti-Doping Agency accredited laboratories. All major sport events hosted in Fiji now include mandatory testing protocols under the Anti-Doping Act 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission supports local coaches accreditation that is ongoing. In 2022 and 2023, several local coaches in rugby, athletics and volleyball were enrolled in certificate programmes recognised by the International Federation. That initiative was supported by short term expert grant, which facilitates international coaches to come to Fiji and train local staff.

The Ministry of Finance commends the Fijian National Sports Commission and the Steering Committee for their respective contribution towards advancing sports and national wellness. I support the motion before the House.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate before the House. My life has been shaped by the transformative power of sports, not only as a coach, but as someone who has witnessed the impact it has in our communities, our youth and our nation's identity.

During my time as a representative of the Labasa and Suva Soccer Teams, to coaching the Nadroga Football Team from 2003 to 2014, through the highs and lows of national talent, as well as my gratitude to my cherished members of the many football teams, the victory in 2016 in the Fiji Fact and Pacific Cup Tournament, I have seen firsthand the vitality that sport injects into our lives. Mr. Speaker, Sir, those victories were not just about trophies, they were about fostering resilience, teamwork and hope in countless young hearts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the recommendations of this Report. It is a well-considered blueprint for uplifting sports in Fiji, with a commendable focus on inclusivity,

safeguarding policies and community engagement. Yet, as someone with a keen interest in the game both, figuratively and literally, I must also approach this Report with a constructive lens. My goal is not to oppose, but to strengthen it, to ensure that it truly becomes a catalyst for change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to address key areas that deeply resonate with me. First, the resource limitation faced by the Fiji National Sports Commission (FNSC) is undeniable. The annual allocation of \$900,000 for sports development programmes is a testament to the ambition of the Commission, but it is far from adequate to meet our aspirations as a nation that celebrates sports.

During my time as coach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have often grappled with resource constraints, whether it was lack of basic equipment or challenges of bringing promising talent to the training camps - the struggle was real. Yet, the determination of athletes to succeed, despite these barriers, were always inspiring.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine the heights they could reach if their dreams were adequately funded and nurtured. I urge this Parliament to heed the Committee's recommendation to adequately fund the FNSC. Investment in sports is not just about producing winners in the field, it is about building a healthier and more cohesive communities. It is about creating pathways for youth to find purpose and pride.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report highlights the Sports Outreach Programme, the Trainer the Trainers Initiative and Community Sports Association as pivotal roles in fostering grassroots development. Those initiatives are vital and must continue to be supported. However, as someone who has led teams from rural to maritime areas, I know that our outreach efforts must go even further.

The challenges of reaching remote communities and sustaining programmes amidst migration to urban centres are pressing. It is undeniable and commendable that the Commission has established the Central Urban Division to cater for those shifting demographics, but rural areas should not be left behind. These regions are brimming with untapped potential and they deserve access to sports opportunities that are equitable and sustainable.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Commission to amplify its use of digital platforms to foster engagement. Social media can be a powerful tool to inspire participation, share success stories and provide resources to remote communities. Let us use technology to bridge gaps and not widen them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a coach, I have seen the devastating effects of drug-related issues. The Report emphasises that creating a local drug testing laboratory and consistent enforcement of random testing is timely and essential. We cannot allow the integrity of our athletes - our national pride, to be compromised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a breeding ground for world-class talent. Yet, as the Report rightly notes, we are losing our best athletes to professional opportunities overseas. While that is a testament to the calibre, it also leaves a void in our domestic programmes. We must create platforms that allow athletes to compete professionally within Fiji, while rewarding their dedication.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must prepare our youth for life beyond sports. Programmes such as integrating financial literacy, leadership and management skills are not just desirable, they are essential. Our athletes must be equipped to navigate their earnings, their careers and their contributions to society, long after they hang their boots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as someone who has lived the journey of sports in developing Fiji, I believe in the transformative power of sports, but this transformation is not achieved through recommendation alone. It requires action, commitment and a collective will of this Parliament and our people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support this motion.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address a matter of critical importance to our nation - the promotion of physical activity as a pathway to better health, stronger communities and economic sustainability. The Fiji National Sports Commission's 2022-2023 Annual Report serves as a valuable resource, presenting actionable recommendations to advance this agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as leaders, it is incumbent upon us to act boldly in creating a future where every Fijian has the opportunity to lead an active and healthy life. Physical activity is not merely an individual pursuit, but a cornerstone of national development. It reduces the prevalence of NCDs, fosters mental wellbeing and enhances the productivity of our citizens. Every day, Albert Park becomes a vibrant hub of movement and energy. However, this is only a glimpse of the potential we can unlock for Fiji.

The Report underscores the critical need for inclusive outreach to rural and maritime areas. These initiatives aim to increase participation across all demographics, from the youngest to the elderly, and ensure that no one is left behind in our drive to cultivate a culture of wellness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, promoting physical activity is more than an act of goodwill - it is an investment in our nation's economy. The connection between active lifestyle and reduced healthcare cost is undeniable. The burden of Non-Communicable Diseases costs our healthcare systems millions annually, funds that could be redirected towards other development priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we celebrate the strides made in developing sporting infrastructure, including the completion of new tracks, it is concerning that major problems arose mere months after completion. Although these issues have since been resolved, they highlight the need for greater accountability and oversight in infrastructure projects. Our athletes and communities deserve facilities that are built to last, and I urge the relevant authorities to ensure that future investments meet the highest standards of quality and durability.

I would also like to briefly address an issue raised by my colleagues yesterday, the state of the Ratu Cakobau Park in Nausori. This vital community asset requires urgent attention and a clear plan of its renovation and future maintenance. Ratu Cakobau Park holds immense potential for fostering local and regional competitions, and its current condition is a disservice to the community that depends on it. I urge authorities to prioritise swift action to restore its role as a hub for sports and gatherings in Nausori.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to turn the spotlight on a glaring gap in our nation's sporting infrastructure, the lack of competition-level Aquatic Centres in key regions like Nausori, Nasinu, Labasa and Nadi. While we are an island nation surrounded by water, it is an unfortunate rarity that far too many Fijians do not know how to swim. This is not just a sports issue, but a matter of life and safety.

Accessible, well-equipped Aquatic Centres would not only nurture our next generation of swimmers and water sports athletes but also provide essential skills that save lives. Such centres could host regional competitions, attract international events, and create pathways for athletes to excel at global levels like the Pacific Games and beyond. Investing in these facilities is not just about medals, it is about building a nation where every Fijian feels confident and safe in the water, whether for recreation, sport, or survival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian National Sports Commission's Annual Report provides a clear roadmap to achieve these goals, like infrastructure development, community engagement, education, and awareness, inclusivity in sports, and life skills for athletes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to commend the Shree Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, the largest organisation of *Hindus* in Fiji, for its proactive approach in conducting drug tests for all players participating in various sporting activities during its recent Annual Convention in Lautoka. This initiative sets a strong example of how we can uphold integrity and fairness in sports while promoting a culture of accountability. Such measures are vital as we continue to address related issues and safeguard the reputation of our athletes and sporting institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must prioritise physical activity as a national agenda. Let us commit the expanding programmes, investing in infrastructure and engaging communities to foster a culture of health and wellness. In doing so, we not only improve lives but also save millions in healthcare costs and bolster economic productivity.

I urge this Parliament to take bold steps in prioritising physical activity as a cornerstone of national development. Let us work together to transform the recommendation of the Fiji National Sports Commission into actionable policies and programmes. A healthier Fiji is a stronger Fiji, economically, socially and culturally. I look forward to seeing a healthier Fiji and I hope that everyone in this House will take proactive steps towards being more physically active.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians watching the livestream this afternoon; history will be made this Saturday in Suva when the Wallaroos face the Vodafone Fijiana 15s in a Test match on the Fijian soil for the first time. While we welcome the Wallaroos to Fiji, and we are hopeful that our Fijiana 15s will play well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion before the House regarding the debate of the Review Report on the Fijian National Sports Commission Annual Report for the period August 2022 to July 2023 tabled on 12th March, 2025.

At the outset, I wish to thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for their review of the Fiji National Sports Commission 2022-2023 Annual Report and for the constructive recommendations they have provided. The Commission is mandated under the Fiji National Sports Commission Act 2013, and it continues to play a pivotal role in advancing sports development, community engagement and national sports performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this reporting period reflects the year of both, recovery and strategic realignment. Following the disruptions of the pandemic, the Commission has worked closely with National Sporting Organisations (NSOs), stakeholders and communities to restore and elevate the standard of sports in Fiji. I wish to assure this House that the Ministry of Youth and Sports, together with the Fiji National Sports Commission, has carefully considered the Committee's recommendations and is actively working towards their implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to address the key points raised, as follows:

(1) Adequate funding for sports development

We fully agree with the Committee's recommendation for increased funding to enable the Commission to better serve as the independent driver of sports in Fiji. Currently, the development fund is limited to \$250,000 which constrains the extent of outreach programmes.

The Commission has submitted proposals for an additional \$100,000 to establish new development centres in Sigatoka, Savusavu and the Eastern Division, along with staffing and operational support. Furthermore, we have recommended an increase in the Short-Term Expert Grant from \$250,000 to \$300,000 to better support the salaries of Sports Development Officers across 21 NSOs.

(2) Collaboration on Facilities Upgrade and Maintenance

We reaffirm that the Fiji Sports Council is mandated by law, and is responsible for the maintenance and upgrading of sports facilities. The Commission continues to work with the Council and the Ministry to identify potential venues for development, ensuring that facility maintenance and new establishments are strategically prioritised.

(3) Promoting Sports in Remote Maritime Areas

Connectivity challenges persist in our maritime and remote areas. The Commission leverages social media, particularly *Facebook* community pages, and maintain strong communication links through mainland networks, like the Lakeba and Rotuma Sports Associations. We are strengthening our community-based approach through the establishment and activation of Community Sports Association and have recommended the upskilling of Ministry of Youths Officers to support these efforts at the grassroots level.

(4) Collaboration with Key Sporting Bodies

We continue to work closely with FASANOC, ONOC and various NSOs to advance sports development, despite limited funding. Strategic partnerships and international collaborations remain crucial to achieving sports excellence.

(5) Reintroducing Physical Sports in Society

The Commission already partners with Community Police and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services through our wellness initiatives. In education, collaboration is ongoing with NSOs and the Ministry of Education to reintroduce sports programmes in schools and Educate the Educator. Kids in community sports programmes are already underway.

(6) Domestic Professional Pathways for Athletes

Mr. Speaker, NSOs are encouraged to develop their high-performance pathways while we work towards the establishment of Fiji Institute of Sports to provide the relevant elite athlete pathway for all sports. Sports like rugby, weightlifting, swimming and football are taking active steps towards establishing high-performance centres. The establishment of professional teams such as the Fijian Drua serves as a model for filling the gap between grassroots and elite competition levels.

(7) Oversight versus Interference

The Ministry maintains an oversight role over all its statutory sports organisations including the Fiji National Sports Commission, however, we respect the operational independence of these entities and have not interfered in their day-to-day activities.

(8) PE Training for Teachers

We are working closely with the Commission to identify community training coaches who will train the programmes to fill the gap in PE teaching. Additionally, there are plans to explore using youth training centres in hubs for training future PE teachers. Together we remain committed to advancing a thriving and inclusive sporting sector, one that builds national pride, promotes wellness and inspires future generations.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I realise it has been a long day and most Members are probably looking forward to going home. I just wanted to say, “thank you very much, Honourable Minister, for your reassurance”. Thank you, honourable Nath, for the story of your experience and honourable Virendra Lal, thank you for your suggestion about exercise.

Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, may I give my best wishes as I congratulate the members of the Fiji Bahá'í community who, yesterday, celebrated 101 years of the arrival of the Bahá'í faith in Fiji. My congratulations extend to the Bahá'í community spread across Fiji in Moce, Rabi, Lautoka, Nadi, Nawaicoba, Navua, Suva and Rewa, to name a few.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 9.35 p.m.