

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**WEDNESDAY, 30TH APRIL, 2025**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

# CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes ... ..	756
Communications from the Speaker ... ..	756-757
(1) Welcome	
(2) PL100 Students – USP	
(3) Extension of Tabling Bills – Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights	
(4) Information on Second Reading of Bills	
Amendment to the 2025 Parliament Sitting Calendar ... ..	757-759
Presentation of Reports of Committees ... ..	759-760
(1) Review Report – Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji 2023 Annual Report	
Ministerial Statements ... ..	760-785
(1) Role and Impact of Fiji’s Trade Commissions – Hon. M.S.N. Kamikamica	
(2) Update Derelict Vessels in Suva Harbour – Hon. M.D. Bulitavu	
(3) Update on the Ministry of Justice - Hon. S.D. Turaga	
(4) Sustainable Growth Through New Town Development – Hon. M.K. Nalumisa	
(5) Update on Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Service – Hon. A.M. Radrodro	
(6) Fiji’s Maritime Leadership-Advancing a Just and Inclusive Transition – Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau	
Questions ... ..	786-801/803-806
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Update on ASA Between Fiji and China	(Q/No. 38/2025)
(2) Subsidised Routes -Domestic Airfares	(Q/No. 39/2025)
(3) Plans for Improvement of Cane Access Roads	(Q/No. 40/2025)
(4) Rent Arrears – iTaukei Land Trust Board	(Q/No. 41/2025)
(5) Measures to Address Illegal Migrants in Fiji	(Q/No. 42/2025)
(6) Recent Developments in the Outsourcing Industry	(Q/No. 45/2025)
(7) Expected Downturn-US Trade with Fiji	(Q/No. 46/2025)
(8) Exploration of New Regional Air Routes	(Q/No. 47/2025)
<u>Written Question</u>	
(9) Detailed Breakdown-Official Overseas Travel	(Q/No. 48/2025)
Suspension of Standing Orders ... ..	802
LTA (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025 ... ..	806-809
Consolidated Review Report – Levuka Town Council 2016-2017 Annual Reports...	809-816
Consolidated Review Report – Nasinu Town Council 2011-2017 Annual Reports...	816-823
Review Report – BAF 2011-2013 Annual Reports ... ..	823-831



**WEDNESDAY, 30TH APRIL, 2025**

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

DEPUTY SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports and honourable Vijay Nath.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

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

PL100 students - University of the South Pacific

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

Extension of Tabling of Bills – Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

For the information of honourable Members, the honourable Speaker received correspondence from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, which was subsequently tabled with the Business Committee.

The correspondence requested for the extension of the tabling of the following Bills to a later date:

- (1) Code of Conduct Bill 2025, which was referred to the Standing Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> March this year;
- (2) Access to Information Bill 2025, which was referred to the Standing Committee on 12<sup>th</sup> March this year; and
- (3) Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill 2025, which was referred to the Standing Committee on 13<sup>th</sup> March this year.

By way of background, honourable Members, the Parliament had resolved for the Bills to be tabled during this April sitting of Parliament. The Standing Committee has requested additional time to ensure that a thorough review of the technical aspects of the aforementioned Bills is undertaken.

Honourable Members, please be advised that the Business Committee has deemed that the extension of the tabling to a later date is necessary to allow the Standing Committee to fully undertake its legislative and representative mandate. In that respect, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights has approval to report back to the House on the Bills at a later sitting date.

### Information on Second Reading of Bills

Additional information, honourable Members, the second reading of the Work Care Bill 2025 and the Accident Compensation (Amendment) Bill 2025 will proceed tomorrow, Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> May. The honourable Attorney-General will also be moving the approval motion for the BBNJ Treaty on Thursday, 1<sup>st</sup> May. I trust that all honourable Members will prepare accordingly.

### **AMENDMENT TO THE 2025 PARLIAMENT SITTING CALENDAR**

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I move that:

Parliament adopts the amended 2025 Sitting Calendar as previously circulated.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Madam Deputy Speaker, as all honourable Members are aware, Standing Order 122(1) mandates that the Business Committee must recommend to Parliament a schedule of sitting times. Clause 3 further provides that it is the ongoing duty of the Committee to consider and review the practices and procedures of Parliament and to make recommendations for the improvement or change or further development of new practices and procedures.

As all honourable Members are aware, Parliament approved the sitting calendar for 2025 on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2024. As is customary, the Business Committee agreed that if there was a pressing need to adjust any of the sittings, this would be subsequently tabled in Parliament for endorsement. The motion before Parliament this morning seeks approval for an amendment to the Sitting Calendar, proposing that the sitting originally scheduled for 7<sup>th</sup> July, 2025 to 11<sup>th</sup> July 2025 be deferred to 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2025 to 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2025.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this request is made in light of the Official State Visit to Fiji by His Majesty King Tupou VI and Her Majesty Queen Nanasipau'u Tuku'aho of the Kingdom of Tonga, scheduled to take place from 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2025 to 12<sup>th</sup> July, 2025. In recognition of the deep historical and cultural ties between the Kingdom of Tonga and the son of Lau Province, the head of the *Mataqali Vuanirewa* in Tubou Village, Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara, he has extended an invitation to their Majesties to attend the installation ceremony for the *Sau ni Vanua ko Lau* and *Tui Lau*.

I am pleased to report that their Majesties have graciously accepted this invitation, and the installation ceremony will take place on Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> July, 2025 in Tubou Village, Lakeba, Lau. The installation of the *Tui Lau* holds deep cultural, historical and political significance for Fiji, particularly for the Lau Province. It symbolises the continuation of traditional leadership and the preservation of ancestral customs and have shaped the identity of the Lauan people.

As a nation, it is also a momentous occasion as the last *Tui Lau* and *Tui Nayau*, the Paramount Chief of Lau was our Prime Minister at independence and was considered as the father of the nation and a statesman not only for Fiji but also for the Pacific region.

The installation is a momentous occasion for the people of Lau reaffirming their traditions values and connection to their ancestors and which necessitates support not only from Government but from the people of Fiji. The upcoming installation scheduled to take place in Tubou Village, Lakeba, Lau is expected to be a historical event marking a new chapter in Lau's leadership after a lapse of 21 years since the passing of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in light of this brief but salient points, I seek the indulgence of all honourable Members to support this motion. I commend this motion to Parliament urging the approval of the proposed amendments to this sitting calendar, as outlined in the amended calendar provided to all honourable Members today.

I extend my gratitude to the members of the Business Committee for their unanimous support, and I hope that Parliament will endorse this motion accordingly.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and each speaker may speak for up to 20 minutes. I look around the room and I see that there does not seem to be anyone who would like to speak to the motion.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we were notified about this change during our caucus meeting. I do understand where the Government is coming from. I do understand the urgency, et cetera, but one has to also realise that once we see the calendar, we also make our travel decisions, particularly attending death anniversaries or weddings in the family.

When you do your booking in advance and when these changes are made, then it affects your plan, particularly the change that is being introduced now is to do with the budget. If it was any other session, one can say, it is alright. But this is at a very critical stage, which is a critical event for the country, which is the budget. Unfortunately, that is all I wanted to say, and I am kind of disappointed, but I do understand where the Government is coming from. I hope that in future, you can change your programme but, please, leave the budget session as it is, particularly the debate.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Is there any other honourable Member who would like to contribute to the debate before us this morning?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not want to speak, but it is actually quite demeaning coming from honourable Premila Kumar. The honourable Minister and Leader of the Government in Parliament had explained it very carefully. We have changed that and we, from the Ministry of Finance, agreed to the request from the honourable Prime Minister.

It is a very important occasion, a historical occasion for Fiji, on the installation of the new Tui Nayau after so many years. Some of us as Government Members, including Opposition Members, would be attending that. Of course, we always have our plans. If I tell her what the previous Government did in this Parliament, changing calendar dates and time because people had to travel, we accepted that. This is a very solemn request and the reason behind the change, so I do not understand the fuss about it coming from honourable Kumar. It is just unbelievable.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister likes the sound of his own voice. Honourable Premila Kumar made the statement that she respected what has happened here because of the reason, but she made the point.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Can you please just zip? She made the point, because we have agreed to that, in this group, but there is no need for that. She has had to spend money to make a plan to go on that particular week, either she cannot get that....

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Listen, please learn to listen!

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Please, address the Chair, honourable Members.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Either she should not be able to use that ticket or she has to forego it, so have some common sense about making statements. These things impact everyone; we understand why Government is doing that. She made a statement there, all you have to do is accept it.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- None of all these, full of balloons that you go on about.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I fully understand why the comments have been made. If there was anyone to apologise, it is I as the Prime Minister who should be apologising. The request for their Majesties - the King and the Queen of Tonga to come to Fiji, arrived late from the organisers of the installation of the *Turaga na Tui Nayau*.

When I accepted the request for a royal visit and cleared with His Excellency the President, I realised that it was going to be affecting the budget debate week, and I asked the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance if it would attract negative comments, which it has. But it has given us, honourable Members of the House, another week to prepare for the budget debate. There is no change in the budget presentation, but we will have two weeks. Instead of one week of preparation, it will be two weeks of preparation, then one week of debate. So, we will be better prepared, probably take shorter, present our views on that. We will increase the preparation time and reduce the debate time.

HON. LEADER OF GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- I thank the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of the Opposition, especially the Business Committee for the endorsement, allowing us to present this today.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

## **PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES**

### Review Report on Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji 2023 Annual Report

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence hereby submits to Parliament the Review Report of the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji 2023 Annual Report. The Committee was referred the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji 2023 Annual Report on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2025.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF) is a national aviation authority responsible for regulating and overseeing civil aviation in Fiji. Established under the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji Act 1979, CAAF ensures compliance with the Chicago Convention and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards. Its functions encompass certifying and licensing aviation entities, conducting surveillance, and fostering a safety and security culture within the industry. Sir, CAAF's mission is to partner with stakeholders to uphold the highest standards of safety, security and efficiency in civil aviation, contributing to sustainable development and connectivity for Fiji and its people.

As part of its review, the Committee had called for an oral public submission from CAAF on 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2025 and conducted site visits at the ICAO's Pacific Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) Liaison Office, Nadi Air Traffic Management Centre which is Operational and Communication Navigation Surveillance (CNS) Technical, and the Nadi Control Tower. The Committee Report is bipartisan and had 14 recommendations for consideration. The Committee commends CAAF for being up to date with its Annual Report.

At the outset, the Committee urges the Government and CAAF to modernise Fiji's aviation laws, ratify key international conventions and establish an independent accident investigation body to enhance aviation safety and security. It also recommends strengthening regulatory enforcement, upgrading screening technologies, addressing talent retention, improving inter-agency data sharing and supporting initiatives such as drone regulation, sustainable aviation fuel and health safeguards for aviation personnel. These measures aim to ensure alignment with international standard, address emerging threats and build a resilient and efficient aviation sector.

The Committee thanks CAAF for compiling and submitting its 2023 Annual Report. I thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, including the 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 submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

## **MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

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

- (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 Justice;

- (4) Minister for Housing and Local Government;
- (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.

### Role and Impact of Fiji's Trade Commissions in Advancing Fiji's Trade and Investment Interests

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable 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 and the members of the public in the gallery here today; I rise to deliver my Ministerial Statement on the role and impact of Fiji's Trade Commissions in advancing our trade, investment and broader economic objectives.

Fiji's economic future hinges on our ability to engage meaningfully with international markets and our Trade Commission offices are an extension of Government's vision in this regard. We currently operate Trade Commissions in Australia, New Zealand, China and the United States of America. Allow me to elaborate on the work and impact of our trade commissions, which continue to deliver measurable results.

The Trade Commission in Australia stands as Fiji's anchor in terms of exports and so far, just this year, facilitated \$33 million in exports – an increase of \$3 million from the previous year – growing Fiji's exports to 13 percent in total. In terms of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), the Trade Commission has helped to facilitate the registration of over 16 investment projects from Australia valued at \$8 million. These investments span tourism, agro-processing and ICT services.

For the year 2023-2024, Madam, Deputy Speaker, the office has facilitated 34 FDI projects valued at \$29 million, and \$76 million in exports. As a Consulate, the office also provides essential support to our diaspora, processing more than 2,500 consular applications in the last financial year. For every one dollar spent in funding that office, the Fijian economy receives the return on investment of almost \$50 back in registered investment projects and facilitated exports from consular services. We view this as a very good return.

Recently, we have been making some remarkable progresses in terms of success stories in the Australian market. For instance, new market access and distributor deals have been secured for Fiji products, such as Fiji Fire Bongo Chilli Sauce – Fiji's answer to the sauces around the world – Juice Fiji, and fresh *dalo* from Road King Farms in Taveuni. Additionally, Fiji has proudly become the leading exporter of *kava* to Australia, with over 185 tonnes exported by nearly 200 Fijian *kava* exporters since the launch of the Commercial Pilot Programme. Today, Fijian *kava* can be found in more than 800 Coles stores across Australia.

The Trade Commission is also exploring opportunities in high-value niche markets. One such example, which was mentioned by the honourable Minister for Agriculture yesterday, is coffee, Australia's largest agricultural import product. A pilot project is underway with boutique Australian labels that has identified the unique flavour and quality of Fijian-grown coffee.

The Commission facilitates targeted trade missions and events, which are targeted to create more opportunities for our people. Next month, over a dozen Fijian exporters will participate in the Naturally Good Expo in Sydney – Australia's largest trade show for organic and natural products. To complement these events, the Commission has launched an online product catalogue and directory,

making it easier for Australian and New Zealand businesses to discover and connect directly with Fijian producers.

Furthermore, in collaboration with Outsource Fiji, we proudly featured at the Customer Contact Week Australia and New Zealand on the Gold Coast. We have supported the Textile Clothing and Footwear Council at the Global Sourcing Expo in Melbourne, highlighting the strength of our manufacturing sector in an exciting milestone for the creative industries, Madam Deputy Speaker, we partnered with Fiji Fashion Week to deliver the first-ever Fiji Fashion Symposium in Sydney. The groundbreaking event is now set to become an annual feature in Australia's fashion calendar, which is particularly significant, given that Australia remains Fiji's largest textile export market.

In a unique example of sectoral innovation, Madam Deputy Speaker, our Australia office facilitated a strategic business visit from the St. Kilda Football Club – a leading team in the Australian Football League (AFL) – to explore collaboration with Fiji in sports development, infrastructure, and youth talent pathways. This initiative has the potential to make Fiji a leading sports tourism hub, and to inspire the next generation of Fijian athletes, like Nick Naitanui and Esava Ratugolea in the AFL.

I now turn to New Zealand. In the first half of this financial year, the office facilitated \$30 million in exports, an increase of \$10 million compared to the same period last year. Similarly, the office has facilitated 11 registered investment projects from New Zealand valued at \$4.8 million. These span sectors such as agriculture, real estate and manufacturing. The Return On Investment (ROI) is about \$60 to \$1.

For the 2023-2024 financial year, the office facilitated 17 foreign direct investment projects at around \$8.9 million and facilitated around \$62 million in exports. In terms of tourism, the Trade Commission has facilitated several investment projects in value added tourism products, including yacht charter services and super yacht gatherings. Additionally, a number of other high value niche projects are in the pipeline, with a focus on eco-tourism and agroforestry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji remains the only Pacific Island country among New Zealand's top 20 trading partners. Our market engagements show sustained and growing demand for our exports. Diaspora-led businesses in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington continue to serve as key distributors, helping Fijians MSMEs gain access to supermarkets and convenience stores around the country.

Allow me, to outline some of the key initiatives led and facilitated by the Fiji Trade Commission in New Zealand. The Commission participated in the Auckland Baby Show together with Loloma Fiji, achieving a major milestone by securing a partnership with Baby City, marking the first time a Fijian baby product has been stocked in a national retail chain. Our creative industries were in the spotlight at the Pacific Fusion Fashion Show, where a number of talented Fijian designers took centre stage, showcasing Fiji's creative potential and the vibrant storytelling of our fashion sector.

At the Auckland Wellington Food Shows, products like Fiji Fire, which I have mentioned, Juice Fiji and Aztec Farms were showcased and marketed, including the use of targeted influencer campaigns. The response from consumers were overwhelming, so much so, that Juice Fiji and Fiji Fire were sold out after the event. As a result of these efforts, 40 stores across New Zealand now stock Juice Fiji, and more than 90 stores stock Fiji Fire hot sauce.

The office has also led targeted marketing roadshows across key cities in New Zealand, including Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua and towns across New Zealand. These roadshows are featured in in-store product demonstrations, digital marketing and strong engagement with our diaspora.

Turning to Asia, Madam Deputy Speaker, our Trade Commission in Asia serves as Fiji's gateway to one of the most dynamic and complex markets in the world. The Trade Commission has

facilitated \$20 million worth of exports of Fijian products to China. This includes \$10 million in terms of mineral water and *noni* products, \$10.2 million in timber and continued growth in *kava* exports.

On the investment front, I am pleased to inform you of several major developments signalling growth in investor confidence in Fiji. The first, which was launched by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, is an investment in Wailoaloa, which potentially is a large-scale development which stands to significantly boost tourism infrastructure, create jobs and stimulate local supply chains.

There have been other several promising developments, among them a Chinese company specialising in daily household products, registered now in Fiji, with an investment contribution over \$3 million. We also have a prefabricated housing project which has commenced. This will be of interest to the honourable Minister for Housing, which may well transform how affordable housing is done in the future in Fiji.

For the 2023-2024 financial year, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Trade Commission has helped facilitate three investment projects from China valued at \$129 million across various sectors in the economy. Concurrently, the office has helped facilitate exports exceeding \$33.3 million. Our Trade Commission in China is also developing investment pipelines in mountain tourism worth tens of millions potentially. Discussions are also underway for an investment project in agriculture and fisheries with a focus on crab and prawn farming.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these projects not only bring capital, but also jobs and skills and confidence, to Fiji's long-term economic potential. Looking ahead, the Trade Commission has plans to participate in a number of trade shows this year. These include the:

- Macao International Travel Show,
- SIAL Exhibition - which is a good platform for food and beverage;
- China International Small and Medium Enterprise Fair Show; and
- China International Import Expo in November.

A delegation from the Fiji-Macao Chamber of Commerce is expected to visit Fiji in June. This will be facilitated by the Chinese Trade Commission.

Finally, North America, Madam Deputy Speaker. Our Trade Commission in North America plays a critical role in representing Fiji's interests in both, the United States and Canada. Its work centres on three pillars - reconnecting the Fijian diaspora, attracting investment and strengthening trade links between Fiji and North America.

In 2024, Fiji's exports to the US totalled \$487 million. The Trade Commission has directly facilitated over \$4 million in new exports and secured more than \$200 million in active investments. To support exporters, the Commission provides market intelligence on products such as *kava*, turmeric, seafood, and cosmetics, and undertakes market scoping and engagement. With rising demand for health and wellness goods, there is a growing interest in value-added products such as ginger shots, moringa supplements, and fruit-infused drinks. The Commission is also working with the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji to support potential pineapple exports into the U.S.

As part of the trade promotion efforts, Fijian products were showcased at the Cosmoprof North America Beauty Trade Show in Las Vegas, with returning participants including some of our known beauty and cosmetic products, Nama Fiji, MeSovu, and Loloma Fiji. In February, the Trade Commission led the first *kava* mission into the U.S., joined by the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. He delivered a Ministerial Statement on that visit. This visit, Madam Deputy Speaker,

will position us well in our ambitions to develop the kava industry into a billion-dollar industry. This year, the Trade Commission also plans to attend the Canadian Food Association Expo in Vancouver to assess the potential of Fiji products.

On the investment front, Google Project is progressing well, and the Trade Commission was a key player in developing this opportunity. Fiji Water is advancing its commercial agriculture programme in Fiji.

In May 2024, I led the first-ever largest business mission to North America, engaging investors, government agencies, business communities and the Fiji diaspora across the US and Canada. This has helped reconnect the diaspora and has led to a few investor-scoping visits in tourism, education, outsourcing and agribusiness. Following the mission, several investor groups visited to explore opportunities, including tourism, real estate, education, outsourcing, and agribusiness. We will continue to facilitate such scoping visits.

In California, business leaders have established the US-Fiji Chamber of Commerce. We are working closely with them to strengthen ties between Fiji and the US business community and diaspora. In Canada, we are doing the same.

Our North American Office continues to do a wide range of investment inquiries from US companies and the diaspora. Diaspora engagement remains strong. In 2024, the Commission reached over 1,000 Fijians through the US-Fiji Investment and Savings Drive, securing more than \$1 million in investments. A larger drive is planned for 2025.

A partnership with HFC Bank now allows diaspora members in the US to open accounts remotely, a key step in easing investment. This new process demonstrates our commitment to delivering on promises and supporting the diaspora meaningfully. To deepen service delivery, the Trade Commission is exploring passport enrolment services at its San Francisco Office.

Madam Deputy Speaker, looking ahead, the Trade Commission will also be representing Fiji at the Los Angeles Rugby Sevens in May, providing on-the-spot assistance with banking, investment, trading and business queries for our diaspora. Preliminary work has also commenced for the second business mission to the US for next year (2026). This will build on the success of past missions and further solidify Fiji's visibility in key North American markets.

This Statement highlights the value of our Trade Commission Offices. Their work supports our exporters, attracts new investment and builds our international reputation, and advances connections within our diaspora. In no time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I expect offices to be open in Canada, India and Papua New Guinea.

As we work to future-proof our economy, the contribution of our Trade Commissions will be vital to our successes. I commend the work of the Trade Commission teams, in particular Commissioners Alika Cooper from the US, Daniel Stow from Australia and Yolinda Chan from China and assure this Parliament that we remain fully committed to strengthening their capacity and reach, to ensure that Fiji is not only seen, but heard, felt, and remembered in every major international market.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, right at the outset, I want to thank the honourable Minister for his ministerial speech on our Trade Commissions and at the same time commend the work that has been undertaken by the three very young Trade Commissioners that we have based in Australia, China and in North America, mainly Commissioners Daniel Stow, Commissioner Alika Cooper and Commissioner Yolinda Chan based in China.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I totally agree with the sentiments expressed this morning by the honourable Minister about how important these trade commissions are especially in light of the fact that we are a developing nation. We need to make sure that we are on the ball with respect to doing as much as we can and getting as much as we can in terms of investment, in terms of our exports, et cetera that keep us healthy enough on the trade front.

Seeing the success rate that we have with Australia and New Zealand, and also with China and the one in the US growing, I think it is a good lesson to us that we need to use these Trade Commissions to expand our horizons on a completely different scale, especially now that the trade landscape around the world is actually changing. We need to ensure that we are on top of the ball game when it comes to all of this.

There are markets that we still have not explored fully and thoroughly in light of the agreements that are in place. I specifically mention that because there are other areas that the honourable Minister mentioned, like PNG and India that should also be looked at that could be of tremendous benefit to Fiji and I am talking about the UAE, I am talking about Europe and fortifying the ones that we have currently to turn them into great institutions.

Along with all activities that these Trade Commissions do, Madam Deputy Speaker, they provide consular services to our diaspora all around the world and they are very important pieces of the machinery in terms of our foreign affairs and looking after our diaspora overseas. They do a wonderful job of making sure that they are well looked after for passports, et cetera, and all of those things that need to be done. Hats off to all the three young Trade Commissioners that we have, and I really urge the Minister to also broaden the horizon to look at some of the other areas.

Just a case in point, when we did have the expo in Dubai, we saw that the UAE itself is actually a hub as they provide to all the other Middle Eastern countries. They had invested about a billion dollars in agriculture in Africa and they started inquiring and asking, et cetera. So, there is some room for us to do well out of those areas. And remember they are very friendly to Fiji. That is one area that we can tap into in terms of what we have, in terms of what we are talking about, what we spoke about earlier on yesterday with respect to our organic products.

Madam Deputy Speaker, quite a few of the Ministers have travelled. I remember we used to do a test in every single hotel room that you entered, you pick up the fruit and you taste it. Of course we are biased, but our pawpaw and bananas are still the best and the sweetest in the world, but yet we have not ever fully realised the potential of these. So, these things need to be put at the forefront. There was a reason why I had asked the honourable Minister for Agriculture yesterday regarding the organic status because that will give, right at the bottom - the farmer - a whole lot of more money in his pocket with respect to organic. This is why the Fijian organic labelling had started. So, all these things put into a basket for Fiji in terms of diversification means a lot for Fiji. It can put us in a different space. It can take us out of reliance. It can take us out of dependence. It can take us out of a whole lot of stuff, if we look at this in a proper way and see how many other countries that we can establish these Trade Commissions in.

Once again, I urge the honourable Prime Minister, please, have a word with the honourable Minister for Finance to see if we can extend and make it even bigger in terms of our Trade Commissioners around the world because they are an important tool, especially in light of the fact that we are trying to get away from our reliance on tourism alone.

It is going to be volatile. You have seen the Reports themselves coming out of the banks that you know they are looking at projected figures that may affect us. We will do our best, I know, to ensure that that does not happen, but we are subject to disasters, et cetera, all those things and diversification is important. And this, Madam Deputy Speaker, is a massive tool for us to look at in

terms of trying to put us in the space that we want to, internationally. I could stand here for the next half an hour and speak on it. My time is up, but congratulations to the honourable Minister in making sure that we are on the ball with respect to this, but I urge him to please look at some other places that we may need to establish ourselves in terms of Trade Commissioners. They are a fantastic tool. And the three people who are looking after the current ones are absolutely phenomenal Fijians who have done fantastic for Fiji.

#### Update on Derelict Vessels in Suva Harbour

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, my address today focuses on the growing concern in our maritime domain, the issue of derelict vessels in and around the Suva Harbour. This issue cuts across environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions. It persists in close proximity to the Government, as many of us in this august House continue to express concerns on the increasing number of abandoned vessels year after year.

The derelict vessels are more than an issue of ethnicity. They represent a clear and present danger to our environment, maritime safety, community health, economic resilience, and the livelihood of those that depend on the Suva Harbour. It is an imposition of cultural and traditional connections to the people of Suvavou Koro, the *vanua* of Navakavu and other coastal communities contained within this ecosystem.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the late 1800s, the colonial administrators moved the capital to Suva, noting the presence of an accessible, sheltered and deep harbour. The Suva Harbour is now the South Pacific's busiest and most important maritime area. Suva Harbour remains to be more than just a port; it is a place where the cultures of the Pacific trade and commerce and activities that establish Fiji as a regional hub collide. It is a place that accommodates both cruise ships and coastal communities alike. But today, that prominence is threatened.

The accumulation of abandoned and decaying vessels in the Suva Harbour, many of which are grounded, sinking, visibly corroding and lying perpetually in the clusters. These vessels have become a serious environment and navigational hazard. These vessels leak toxic substances such as oil and petroleum, heavy metals, and other pollutants into our waters. The decaying vessels have become a chronic source of hazardous chemicals, and the situation is disproportionately impacting the traditional custodians of this important coastal area. Derelict vessels are damaging Suva's ecosystems and causing physical damage to endemic and totemic flora and fauna and continue to impact the vital coral reefs and fish stocks.

Those submerged or partly submerged are partly sinister, as they are difficult to navigate, shift and change against existing navigational information. They can exacerbate the risk of collision, particularly during low tide, and in the condition of poor visibility in major weather events. Recent research has established that the harbour and its surroundings play an important role in harbouring the threatened species such as manta rays, whales, avifauna, and other migratory species.

Derelict vessels are increasingly creating legal and regulatory liabilities. When vessel owners default on their obligation to remove vessels in a safe and timely manner, the onus is placed on the State to mitigate the risks and may end up liable for any harm that results. The cost of managing the safe and environmentally sound removal of the vessels is extremely high. The state of these vessels means that the cost of the removal is exceptionally high and technically challenging.

The abandonment of vessels has been attributed to a range of factors, including the higher maintenance costs, complex procedures related to vessel disposal and the financial constraint faced by the owners. The cost associated with refueling, towing, dismantling, and removal are substantive, but the cost of action is even greater. Many of the derelict vessels are former Asian fishing vessels which

faced declining catches and cash flow problems and have reverted to a strategy that has exploited our system. While some companies have come forward with the funds to facilitate removal, more often the Government is left with the enormous task of tracking owners and issuing removal orders.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we will no longer stand idle and watch the Suva Harbour turn into a shipping graveyard, allowing our nation to incur environmental, economic, and social costs. The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change is a member of the Joint Maritime Environment Committee established in August 2024 under the Ministry of Public Works, Transport, and Meteorological Services. This multi-stakeholder body is chaired by the Chief Executive of the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji and supported by key agencies, including the Fiji Ports Corporation Pte Limited, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, Ministry of Fisheries, Fiji Police Force and the Republic of Fiji Navy. The Committee has, to date, overseen successful removal of 12 derelict vessels. Six of those were scuttled, five were scrapped, and one vessel was restored to operational condition.

The Committee has in its sight the removal of 17 high-risk derelict vessels and has proactively reached out for support to address this long-running issue. The Committee recently met with the philanthropist and founder of Waitt Foundation, Mr. Ted Waitt, who has generously offered support for the removal of 17 high-risk derelict vessels. Blue Prosperity Fiji is a Government programme supported by the Waitt Institute helping to implement ocean governance and conservation strategies that align with national laws and Fiji's broader vision for a sustainable blue economy.

Blue Prosperity Fiji is proud to collaborate with Fiji's Ministry of Environment to establish a fund that will provide up to US\$1 million in funding over the next 12 months. This fund will support the removal of derelict vessels that are causing extensive and possibly irreversible damage to the country's marine environment. It will support legal, policy, and institutional reform to ensure responsible parties are liable. An initial US\$500,000 will be available immediately to support vessel removal and associated legal work. An additional US\$500,000 will be allocated as matching funds with the goal of raising contribution locally from those closely connected to Fiji and to support the fund.

Further to that, with the assistance of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) valued at US\$90,000, a local consultant will be soon appointed to assess the current inventory of partially and fully submerged vessels. The consultant is to provide recommendations for the immediate, safe and cost-effective removal. We aim to complete this work within five months or six months following the consultant's appointment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this issue transcends national pride, environmental protection and civic responsibility. It reflects how we value the natural resources we have been blessed with, respect the environment that sustains our communities and honour our cultural heritage. We have a profound obligation to our people of Fiji today and the generations that will follow. We ensure that our harbours and coastlines are clean, safe, resilient and thriving. A healthy and a resilient blue economy depends entirely on the health of our maritime ecosystem. We must act urgently to remove what no longer serves or restore what has been damaged and renew our system to prevent future harm. We must secure Suva Harbour's rightful place in a vibrant, prosperous and unspoiled maritime hub – a legacy of care and responsibility that future generations will inherit with pride.

Madam Deputy Speaker, that is the Ministerial Statement this morning and another update will be given by the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services, because Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji comes under him and the Act for MSAF, will be responsible in the operation and the removal of the derelict vessels.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, first, let me acknowledge the honourable Minister for the Ministerial Statement this morning. This is an issue that has been discussed so many

times in this august House. We are all equally concerned and be assured that the Opposition will provide all the necessary support and advice so that we can pursue and move this issue forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, listening to the Ministerial Statement, I totally agree and thank the Ministry's concern. This requires a whole-of-government or probably a whole-of-community approach, because it is not only about the regulations, but about sustainable development, environment and most importantly, how it impacts the community. I wish to acknowledge the formation of the Joint Maritime Environmental Committee that the honourable Minister has alluded to, and I hope they will be given all the necessary support in order to continue with this very important work.

I also acknowledge the assistance from other agencies, the philanthropic organisations that are involved and of course, other development agencies. These are critical to us, particularly in areas where we lack capacity and perhaps capability as well. This is probably an area we are all aware of the capacities and capability within the agencies of Government, in fisheries, in the Ministry of Works, in MSAF, and of course in environment as well. Because we can come up with the best legislations, but if it's not properly resourced, and if it's not also supported by critical competencies that we've talked about during the week, particularly capacities. It is an area that we probably will need to look into, particularly when it comes to environmental impacts.

In the remaining few minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker, perhaps I can just focus on why it is so important to us, Fiji being a small island developing state. Our ocean is our life. It's so important to us. We were the first co-chairs of the World Oceans Conference way back in 2017. Fiji is a key player in the ocean space, and we are thankful that the BBNJ ratification is coming tomorrow, because we need to lead by example. It is not only about talking, but it is also about showing the world that we take responsibility in protecting the environment because particularly for Pacific Island countries, Madam Deputy Speaker, the human security aspect is so important for us.

Human security deals with economic security. It deals with environmental security. It deals with political security and so forth, Madam Deputy Speaker. For us, this is where we need to work together because, our ocean is our life and we need to protect our oceans. We have talked about the blue economy and this, Madam Deputy Speaker, is basically about the fundamental sustainable utilisation of our ocean resources. It converges on a fundamental principle, the imperative to safeguard our oceans while ensuring sustainable future for our communities and the planet.

What is sustainability? It's about meeting the needs and aspirations of today without compromising the future. We should, particularly, when we talk about extractive industries, when we talk about environmental issues, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have aspirations for today, but we have a responsibility to our children, to the future. And let's not compromise on that, Madam Deputy Speaker. And this is why such issues are so important.

The Ministry for Environment and Climate Change needs all the support and of course, we know the complications in here because we have Ports Corporation who have the mandate over the Suva Harbour. And then we have MCEF who is the regulatory body. And then we have the owners of the vessels. We all need to be communicating. We all need to be coordinating because, at the end of this, we need sustainability, we need to protect our children for the future and that is why, this is so important.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

### Update on the Ministry of Justice

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I warmly greet you this morning. I would also like to welcome those joining us through livestream from across the globe. Before I proceed with my Ministerial Statement, I join the honourable Prime Minister and other Members of Parliament to express how sad we are, how frightening it is to see the escalation of domestic violence in our nation. I offer our prayers to the families. It is a wake-up call for the people of Fiji.

*Au sa kerekere tiko vei kemuni na turaga, cauravou, kerekere tiko kina na lotu kei na vanua, kerekere kina vuvale; meda vakavulici ira na luveda tagane ena sala dodonu me ra rokovi ira na watidra.* This must stop. I know that the honourable Minister for Women will join later to give her Ministerial Statement, but I feel that I am obligated to stand before this House and share our thoughts to the people of Fiji. *Sa rauta mada!*

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to provide Parliament with an update on the Ministry of Justice's public awareness outreach, the election reform and the progress of the new Law and Justice Sector Reform Initiative. From September to November 2024, the Ministry of Justice successfully conducted a series of awareness campaigns in various locations across Fiji such as Koro, Levuka, Tailevu, Labasa, Rotuma, Naitasiri, Nadroga, Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Serua and Suva.

During these campaigns, our Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry service was accessed by a total of 651 people, covering a range of services including new and late birth registrations, printing of birth, marriage and death certificates and court marriages. For the same period and locations, the Registrar of Companies recorded 1,285 individuals accessing its services, which included new business registration, business renewals, printing services and general inquiries.

Madam Deputy Speaker, from January to March 2025, the Ministry continued its outreach efforts delivering services in Gau, Cakaudrove, Rotuma, Levuka, Tailevu, Rewa and Ra. Within this time, the BDM Registry recorded 591 individuals accessing its services, while the Registrar of Companies recorded 772 individuals utilising its services. These figures demonstrate the continued commitment of the Ministry of Justice to bring accessible services closer to the people, particularly those in rural and maritime areas, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all Fijians and leaving no Fijian behind.

Previously, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Justice did not conduct awareness campaigns at the scale and frequency that we are now undertaking. Within the Ministry of Justice, now operating as a stand-alone Ministry, it has allowed for me the Minister for Justice, together with the Assistant Minister, honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu, to be fully committed to ensuring that the Ministry's services reach the farthest and most remote regions in Fiji. The data provided today represents just the beginning of what we envisioned. In the coming months the Ministry of Justice plans to expand its efforts, conducting more awareness campaigns and proactively connecting the unconnected. This is the ultimate goal of the Ministry of Justice to ensure that no Fijian is left behind and that access to justice and essential legal services becomes a reality for all.

If I may just highlight, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry also assists in terms of the approval and facilitation of grants in the Ministry of Trade that resulted in 201 grants for people in Bua, 56 in Levuka, six in Nadonumai, three in Lautoka, 25 in Suva and 17 applications still pending. That represents about 340 people being assisted with small grants from the Ministry of Trade.

I am also pleased to provide further update to this august House on the electoral legislation review and reform and the public consultation under the chairmanship of the part-time Commissioners for the electoral reform, retired Chief Justice Daniel Fatiaki. The elected team has made significant progress in its nationwide public consultations, recording strong engagement across various avenues.

In the Central Division, the consultations were held for over five days with high attendance recorded at the Suva Civic Centre, Vunidawa in Naitasiri, Nasinu and the Navua areas. Although low attendance was noted at Korovou, Bure, and Nausori Market Hall important and valuable submissions were still received.

In the Eastern Division, full attendance was recorded at Ovalau, including an evening meeting in Lovoni Village. Consultations were also scheduled across seven districts in Rotuma with preparation including translation of materials into the Rotuman language to ensure inclusiveness. Across most venues, strong participation from women, men and children were evident, particularly in the informal settlement and rural communities.

Participation levels have steadily increased throughout the consultation period, boosted by enhanced media coverage and active participation with organisations such as the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), the Ministry of Women and of course the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. The inclusive approach taken by the electoral review team has ensured active involvement from women, youth and marginalised groups reflecting our shared commitment to ensuring that every voice counts in shaping Fiji's democratic processes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the review team has planned this week and next week to continue consultations in Northern and Western Division, as well as in the maritime island regions of Lau and Kadavu where turnout is expected to remain strong or even increase further. Having said that I call on Members of this august House – please reach out to your communities, your youth groups and your women's group and invite them to be part of the consultations. The schedule is available at the Fiji Law Reform Commission website, in most major mainstream media outlets and through official email of Govnet users. All MPs on both sides of the house who use govnet email, please share the public consultation schedule widely.

Madam Deputy Speaker, additionally this august House is also advised that the proper and safe destruction of sensitive material from the 2022 General Elections began on 3<sup>rd</sup> March and has been completed on 4<sup>th</sup> April. The procedures and processes are well established and observed by major political parties from the 2022 General Elections. The materials being destroyed include ballot papers and other sensitive items that were used during the previous election in line with established procedures. A total of 2,066 ballot boxes were opened and sensitive materials were destroyed. Of the 2,066, there were 1,435 election day ballots boxes, 618 pre-poll ballot boxes and one overseas ballot box.

I now wish to provide a progress update, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the work being undertaken to review the Fiji law and justice sector. Many of us here, indeed many of our very senior legal professionals will recall that the Ministry of Justice has always been an extension of another ministry or government agency.

In reviewing archived records and annual reports, the first archived recorded annual report of the Department of Justice was in 1997, when it was with the Department of Corrections. In our recent history, the Ministry of Justice has been an extension of the Attorney-General's Chambers. We were in the shadows until June 2024, through the wisdom of honourable Prime Minister, to appoint a Minister, permanent secretary and most recently an Assistant Minister for Justice.

The separation to ensure access to justice and the administration of justice is timely. It is necessary and has indeed demonstrated the vast needs of our people who have been neglected over the

past administrators. In our attempt to ensure we go about the provisions of services in a systematic manner, ensuring alignment with Fiji's Vision 2050 and the National Development Plan, we have embarked on a strategic journey to look at who we are, where we have come from, where are the gaps, and what we need to do to align to the Coalition Government's vision.

Under the umbrella of the Vuvale Partnership, we have begun a systematic review of our plans, our processes and policies. The review, led by a distinguished son of Fiji, a former Ambassador, Mr. Luke Daunivalu, aims to enhance transparency, accountability and performance across the law and justice sector and ensure that the Ministry of Justice aligns to Fiji's national development priorities and the Australian International Development Policy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to facilitate close cooperation with national stakeholders, Mr. Daunivalu is attached to the Ministry of Justice for a period of three months. This attachment ensures direct engagement, strengthening the depth, relevance and ownership of the review outcomes. I am confident that Mr. Daunivalu's leadership and expertise and the strong collaboration across our sector stakeholders, this important function review will result in a practical, actionable recommendations that will chart the course of a stronger, more resilient, law and justice sector for the benefit of all Fijians. This review presents a strategic opportunity to align our law and justice sector with best practices while remaining sensitive to Fiji's unique context. It reflects a commitment to good governance, transparency, accountability and the rule of law.

The review has been implemented through the Fijian-Australia Institutional Partnership Programme (IPP) which enables rapid target support for Fiji's ongoing instability, prosperity and resilience. We thank the Australian Government for their partnership and anticipate that with this review, the outcome documents and the future plans, the Ministry of Justice will be stronger and will be a standalone Ministry for many more years and administrations. I thank the honourable Prime Minister, for his wisdom and assure this august House and the people of Fiji, that we will ensure access to justice for all our people.

Before I take my seat, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to highlight again the fundamental principle of access to justice and our role as administrators of justice. Access to justice is a basic principle for the rule of law. In the absence of access to justice people are unable to have their voice heard, exercise their rights, challenge discrimination or hold decision makers accountable. A commitment to access to means taking all necessary steps to provide a fair, transparent, effective, non-discriminatory and accountable service that promotes access to justice for all.

Delivery of justice should be impartial and non-discriminatory. Our registries must be strengthened. There must be vigorous monitoring and evaluation. We must empower the poor and marginalised to seek response and remedies for injustice. We must improve legal protection, legal awareness, legal aid, civil society and parliamentary oversight, addressing challenges in the justice sector such as the police brutality, inhumane prison conditions, lengthy pre-trial detentions, and impunity for perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence and other serious conflict-related crimes, and strengthening the linkages between formal and informal structures. There has been much overlap, and there will continue to be overlap. Our Ministry of Justice will ensure that we continue to provide access to justice for all of us.

Madam Deputy Speaker, access to justice is a basic principle of the rule of law. In the absence of access to justice, people are unable to have their voice heard, access to their rights, challenge discrimination or hold decision makers accountable. I again reaffirm my commitment that the Ministry of Justice will ensure access to justice for all our people, and it will do so with integrity, collaboration, fairness, justice and the rule of law.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise today in response to the honourable Minister for Justice's Ministerial Statement. While I acknowledge the importance of improving service delivery across justice institutions, I cannot let pass without strong objection to the way in which the electoral legislation review has been handled over the past several months. The electoral reform is not a routine administrative exercise. It is a fundamental democratic process that must be treated with the utmost neutrality, care and transparency. However, the Government's conduct around this process raises significant red flags, not just for the Opposition, but for the public as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me begin with the leadership of the review team, the Chairman, who should be an impartial figure guiding the process with professionalism and neutrality, instead made political and inappropriate remarks that have drawn widespread condemnation. These were not isolated concerns voiced by the Opposition. Even Members of the Coalition Government have expressed unease and publicly distance themselves from the tone and direction of the Chairman's sentiments.

This alone should have prompted immediate corrective action by the Ministry. But what is even more concerning is the composition of the review team itself. One of its members is a former political candidate and, more importantly, a former general secretary of a political party. Let us not pretend that such affiliations can easily separate from one's approach to such a sensitive task.

Madam Deputy Speaker, how can the people of Fiji be expected to trust the recommendation of a committee that includes individuals with such overt political histories? This is not just about perception; it is about principle. Electoral reform must be above politics. Those entrusted with reviewing our election laws must come with clean hands and without political baggage.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. K.K. LAL.- This review team should have been composed of individuals with no prior political affiliations, drawn from civil society, the legal and academic communities, women groups, youth representatives and other independent stakeholders. That is how we build trust. That is how we assure the public that the process is not politically motivated or stewed towards predetermined outcomes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, now let us address the public response. According to various media reports for Suva Consultation and Tailevu, the turnout at the review's public consultations has been remarkably low, and the reasons for these are not difficult to understand. The public, Madam Speaker, sees what we see, a process that lacks impartiality, lacks credibility and feels more like a political exercise than a genuine effort to listen to the people. The same concerns that we, as the Opposition MPs have been raising are the same concerns being echoed by ordinary Fijians around Fiji.

The question is, what is the honourable Minister for Justice doing about these concerns? We have raised them repeatedly in statements and through the media yet, we are yet to see a single concrete step from the honourable Minister addressing the fundamental issues plaguing this review. Instead, Madam Speaker, we received periodic updates via ministerial statements, carefully scripted and detached from the relived reality of the public and the voices calling for real change. Ministerial Statements should not be the only platform where the Minister acknowledges our concerns. He must respond in real time, in real forum and through real reforms. Leadership is not about waiting for the right time to speak. It is about having the courage to act when it matters the most.

I urge the honourable Minister and the Government, dissolve this compromised review team, and reconstitute it with individuals of unquestionable independence, professionalism and credibility. If the Government truly wants reform for the electoral system for better, if it truly wants to empower our people and enhance democracy, then it must begin with a process that the people can believe in.

Madam Deputy Speaker, access to justice is not just about registering births and streamlining business licences. It begins with fair representation. It begins with free, credible and trusted elections. It begins when our electoral laws are written by those with partisan interests. Justice is already compromised before a single vote is cast.

Before I take my seat, we in the Opposition will not sit quietly while the foundations of our democracy are quietly eroded. We will continue to speak out, not because it is politically convenient, but because it is our duty to protect the democratic rights of every Fijian.

(Laughter)

Let this Parliament be reminded that electoral reforms must never be about protecting the incumbents. It must be about protecting the people's right to choose.

### Sustainable Growth Through New Town Development

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise today in this august House to reaffirm the coalition Government's steadfast commitment to fostering sustainable growth, promoting regional equity and building climate resilience through the strategic development of new towns across Fiji

Madam Deputy Speaker, urban resilience sits at the heart of Fiji's sustainable development agenda. Over 70 percent of our population lives within five kilometres of the coastline and many towns have developed around rivers estuaries. In addition, approximately 58 percent of our population live in urban centres. This proximity to nature also brings exposure to cyclones, rising seas, environmental degradation, and the significant strength of urban infrastructure and resources.

The vision, resilience, and environmentally sustainable urban centres is anchored in Urban Policy Action Plan 2007. This landmark policy, which recognised the urgent need to decentralise economic opportunities, manage rural to urban migration, and address urban sprawl by designing rural growth centres as future satellite towns. Through the new town development programme, the Ministry of Local Government has embarked on a transformative journey, building inclusive, multifunctional communities that empower rural Fijians and safeguard our environment for generations to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the New Town Development Programme is one of the key thematic pillars of the Urban Policy Action Plan, with a clear mandate to unlock the potential of rural Fiji by establishing satellite towns equipped with modern infrastructure, diverse economic opportunities, and resilient public services. In doing so, we aim to alleviate pressure on overcrowded urban hubs while revitalising regions through job creation, enhanced service delivery, and climate smart planning.

By doing so, Madam Deputy Speaker, the programme directly supports the objectives of Fiji's National Development Plan, which includes the goals of promoting balanced regional development, reducing urban congestion, improving access to services for rural population, and building climate-resilient infrastructure to safeguard communities from natural disasters.

Our approach aligns fully with the National Development Plan's overarching theme, which is empowering the people of Fiji through unity. Furthermore, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government is committed to better urban planning that will allow for sustainable growth. Madam Deputy Speaker, to localise our national commitments and our national ocean policy, the Coalition Government is developing a National Blue Town Framework, an integrated blueprint for sustainable township development.

Developed with support of the United Nations Development Programme's Investing in Coral Reefs and Blue Economy project and guided by the multi-ministerial taskforce, the framework aims to set high environmental and ocean protection standards for towns, incorporate current principles and renewable energy systems, promote climate-resilient infrastructure and land-use planning, engage communities, businesses and business partners, as well as facilitate marine special planning in sync with sub-national growth.

The framework is not just inspirational, it is actionable. It has been the missing link, and will drive up town planning, anchor our local blue economy, and guide investment in ecotourism, aquaculture, and waste systems across Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the proposed framework will become the guide for all new town developments, including Nabouwalu in Bua, Keiyasi in Navosa, Seaqaqa, and future growth centres such as Korovou in Tailevu, Waimicia in Ra, Vunidawa, Dreketi, Navua and Taveuni. This ensures that we do not merely build infrastructure but cultivate sustainable climate resilient towns that uphold both economic prosperity and environmental stewardship. I am pleased to provide this House with detailed updates on this Nabouwalu, Keiyasi, Seaqaqa projects alongside our plans for future growth centres, including the ones that I had mentioned earlier.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Nabouwalu town development in Bua stands as a flagship project of the New Town Development Programme, which was initiated in 2016, but serious commitment was only made in the early 2024 by this Coalition Government. This project has three phases. We developed 23 commercial and five industrial lots, a future market and a bus stand, allocated spaces for Government agencies and short-term accommodation to provide opportunities for travellers to stay in Nabouwalu and contribute to its economy.

All documentation design phases are completed and civil works are progressing to phase one. The Ministry, Madam Deputy Speaker, has also taken flooding issues into consideration, and has included reclamation as part of phase one to mitigate issues and create more land area for the development of Nabouwalu. The Ministry of Local Government is also working closely with the Department of Lands and the iTaukei Land Trust Board to acquire this area to be included in the development list.

The Nabouwalu Township development is expected to be completed in 2027-2028 financial year. The Nabouwalu Township is supported by critical infrastructure and is expected to be completed in two months, that is, the Nabouwalu passenger terminal. This was a project awaited by the people of Nabouwalu and the travellers who frequent this port. We are working closely with the Ministry of Public Works and Meteorological Services to get a passenger move-in system in place in Nabouwalu. This will allow for better records of what is moving in and out of Vanua Levu through this port.

To further protect the community and the environment, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is also in the process of acquiring a foreshore lease. The Director of Lands to construct a coastal protection structure with a broad work, fully aligned with the broader climate adaptation strategies and national vision.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Keiyasi Township is a Coalition Government's collective effort to improve Government services and economic growth in the province of Navosa through the development of 27 commercial lots, a future market, bus stand, and civic lots for Government offices including the National Fire Authority Station. Last year, we completed partial works on the road, stormwater drainage, sewer reticulation and fire hydrants. With the continued efforts of the Ministry and stakeholders, the Township is projected to be completed by the end of this year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government has also prioritised critical infrastructure development of a market and bus stand in Seaqaqa. Following a competitive tender process, a design-build contractor has been appointed and building plans approval shall be finalised this week. A groundbreaking ceremony for this transformative project will be held next Thursday, 8th May, 2025.

Once completed in 2025-2026 financial year, this facility will serve as a hub to strengthen local commerce, alleviate travel challenges for residents and accelerate the growth of resilient, modern township. Upon completion of the market and bus stand, the second phase will focus on developing seven commercial lots and two civic lots, further enhancing economic opportunities and community infrastructure in Seaqaqa.

Madam Deputy Speaker, building on the momentum of the New Town Development Programme, the Ministry is now expanding focus to new and future growth centres. For Korovou in Tailevu, the acquisition of 40 acres of town expansion and 10 acres of civic development is near completion. Flood mitigation studies and climate resilient designs will guide infrastructure rollout, the engagement of a lead consultant to conduct the planning documentation phase in the 2025-2026 financial year.

At Waimicia in Ra, identification with the iTaukei Lands Trust Board will conclude by July 2025. For the township, the most urgent need for a market and a bus stand as expressed by the local residents and farming communities. The Ministry will also conclude the preparation of the Waimicia Local Area Advisory Plan by the end of this financial year.

In Taveuni, Madam Deputy Speaker, leases are being secured for a new Naqara Market and bus stand, with environmental and geotechnical studies to tentatively commence in 2025-2026 financial year, which shall ensure climate smart construction. The Local Area Advisory Plans, Madam Deputy Speaker, will be completed for Vunidawa, Dreketi and Navua by the end of the current financial year, to ensure that all the developments aligned with sustainable growth frameworks with the Ministry, commences planning and documentation works for these identified growth centres beyond the 2025-2026 financial year.

The Navua Local Area Advisory Plan shall be upgraded into a Draft Town Planning Scheme, which shall be informed by the existing land use and up-to-date approved of survey plans, as the Ministry is currently working with other infrastructure agencies to concurrently effect an upgrade to critical infrastructure, such as roads, water, and sewer, within the proclaimed boundary of Navua, advancing works on the proposed township. The works on the declaration of the Navua Township, Madam Deputy Speaker, start way back in 2017, but less it did not eventuate with reasons not only to the former Minister and we are committed to complete this process.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government is committed to building not just infrastructure, but resilient inclusive communities. Guided by the proposed National Blue Town Framework, we are ensuring that each town supports a Blue Economy, reduces environmental impact, enhances the livelihood of all Fijians. Community engagements remains central to our approach. From *talanoa* sessions in Ra to planning flood risk consultations in Korovou, local voices continue to shape every development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government is not merely constructing townships, we are building lasting legacies of sustainability resilience and equity. As we advance works in Nabouwalu. Keiyasi, and prepare to break ground in Seaqaqa, the plan for new townships in Korovou, Waimicia, Vunidawa, Taveuni, Dreketi and Navua will reaffirm our unwavering pledge - no Fijian will be left behind.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I now give the floor over to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I just want to go back to the *Daily Hansard* of 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2024 where the honourable Minister said and I quote, “currently 50 percent of the terminal construction is completed and we are on track to deliver the facility by March 2025.” We have gone past March 2025.

The other point that I want to make, Madam Deputy Speaker, when we have Ministerial Statements, the respective Ministers should also provide the breakdowns of the allocated budget so that we as Members will know where these funds have been utilised. For example, in 2023- 2024 Budget for the New Town Development, \$1.5 million was allocated and in 2024-2025, \$2 million was allocated. We have got no idea where all these monies have been spent. Yesterday and again today, we have been hearing from my good friend, I can say good friend, but he has been saying, “The former Minister did this and that”, but there is no evidence to any of the allegations that he is making.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government’s latest plan that was announced just now on the new town development is yet another grand gesture devoid of substance, failing to address the urgent housing crisis gripping our nation. At a time when Fijians are battling poverty, drug issues and cost of living crisis, severe labour and land shortage, the Government’s preference for flashy slogans, mentioned by the honourable Minister a few minutes ago over tangible results, is unacceptable.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to ask, where are the numbers? The Coalition Government must provide specifics and not just slogans - units commissioned verses delivered. How many homes has this Government actually built or financed under its programme? There are so many housing programmes. I want to know from the honourable Minister, the next time when he comes, please, provide all these figures, the current backlog and the shortfall.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- How many?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Go and check the annual reports. We were the only government that gave housing to the poor people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what is the shortfall in housing based on planning approvals versus actual construction? Land tenure. How many of the promised 99-year leases for informal settlements which have been completed have been processed? This is not the first time I am asking the honourable Minister, and I can tell you Madam Deputy Speaker, that this will happen a week or two weeks before the election. Mark my word!

Madam Deputy Speaker, housing stress under the Coalition Government; the housing crisis has deepened under this administration. The cost of living pressures, rising VAT and import duties on construction materials have made home ownership unattainable for low income families.

The Coalition Government’s grand announcement on the new town centres is nothing more than smokescreen, a desperate attempt to distract Fijians from its failure to deliver real housing solutions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.K. BALA.- We have witnessed this from the last two and a half years, not only you, but from the other Ministers as well. While families struggle with overcrowded homes and unaffordable rents, this Government prioritises fleshy urban projects that do nothing for those in urgent need.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government must stop the destruction and start building homes and not headlines. The people demand answers and action and, as I had said earlier on and I reiterate what what happened in Korovou. We went to Nausori last month and we were told by the Nausori Town Council that everything is ready, but the delay is from the Ministry. However, what we have heard from the honourable Minister is that for future development, Korovou is in there. That has been going for the last two years, Madam Deputy Speaker, the people of Korovou deserve a township, a town centre.

#### Update on Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Service (TSLS)

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to provide a brief on the update of works undertaken by the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS) in 2025 under the Coalition Government. One of the strategic priority areas for TSLS is ICT transformation for business process improvements, data intelligence and sophisticated service delivery. I am proud to say as one of the line Ministers that TSLS has done remarkably well in that area. TSLS is now proven to be amongst the most technologically advanced public sector institution in Fiji based on the imperatives of the generations of core customers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 9th January, 2025, TSLS launched the Learning Enrichment Management System (LEMS). This is a dynamic digital hub, enabling students (I notice the students of the University of the South Pacific are here) to access learning materials, track their academic journey and interact with industry speakers. This system is a game changer that brings education into the digital era and better connects our young minds to career opportunities. The intended outcome is to reduce failure rates, poor pass rates and non-completion of student studies as reported in the past.

Further embracing technological advancements, TSLS launched the AI integrated 24-hour service ChatBot, offering 24/7 assistance to students on scholarships, allowances and bond details. This signifies capitalisation of modern technology tools, such as artificial intelligence, in providing accurate instant support, ensuring no student's query is left unanswered, including the non-official business hours.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as per the amendments of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service Act 2024 Act in the 2024-2025 National Budget, the function travel clearance, guarantors toll clearance, bond enforcement and clearance, and recovery of unserved bond is now with TSLS effective from January this year. Thus, making the organisation a one-stop agency in providing convenient public service.

In taking over the responsibilities, TSLS has developed and launched travel and bond clearance portal moving towards highly efficient and paperless system. The portal was launched on 9th January, 2025. This has been loaded by sponsored students, graduates, guarantors and key stakeholders, such as border controls at the Nadi International Airport.

Madam Deputy Speaker, two cleared graduates from Bond Services, TSLS, has signed an MOU with the Fiji National Provident Fund on 23rd January, 2025, to verify employment records before issuing bond clearance letter and delisting the graduates from Fiji Immigration Watchlist. The Coalition Government is not just creating opportunities for learning, but also for entrepreneurship.

On 31st January, 2025, TSLS co-launched the Graduate Business Startup Grant Scheme in partnership with the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, offering training, resources and funding for new graduates with bold business ideas. The selected students have finished their training and will be given the grant in two weeks' time. This is the first ever such initiative to allow graduates to become job creators instead of job seekers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the sponsored students or graduates returning from abroad who are issued with temporary travel release are required to delist their guarantors. Many sponsored students and graduates forget this process; hence, guarantors get into issues with their overseas travel.

To bring efficiency and automate the guarantor delisting process, on 10th April, 2025, TSLS launched the TSLS Guarantor QR Code kiosk system. The new system facilitates a secure and efficient process wherein users engage with the interactive kiosk that guides them through a few steps to complete the guarantor delisting process. This eradicates the need for current manual and time-consuming through e-mails. The two kiosks will be installed at Nadi International Airport by the end of June.

On 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2025, TSLS also launched the TSLS Scholarship Data Intelligence Platform to enhance the reporting facets of the organisation through advanced reporting and data analytics with the incorporation of artificial intelligence. TSLS has a wide range of scholarships and student data, and the new platform transforms the current data into a collective, understandable and easily interpretable format within a single platform.

Madam Deputy Speaker, TSLS Alumni and Employer Connect Portal was also launched on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2025. That platform strengthens the connection between scholarship recipients, alumni and employers in Fiji. That provides a centralised hub for job opportunities and professional networking as the portal ensures that the TSLS-funded graduates do seamlessly transition into the workforce. It not only helps job seekers find employment that matches their skills and qualifications but also enables employers to access a pool of talented and highly educated candidates.

To bring efficiency in the collection of reports and information from the Tertiary Education Institutes, TSLS also launched the TSLS Partner Tertiary Education Institution Portal. This new portal allows the Tertiary Education Institutes to upload enrolment reports and student grades and TSLS can directly access information from the portal. TSLS uses this information for allowance processing, reviewing scholarship continuation and learning enrichment session.

Madam Deputy Speaker, TSLS also launched the MyTSLS Mobile App on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2025. This App provides a comprehensive one-stop solution for all sponsored students requirements, consolidating academic details, sponsorship details, support services and application procedures into a single integrated platform. The platform will house all TSLS services, including scholarship application details, sponsorship details, travel and bond clearance application and updates, TSLS employer connect facilities and the TSLS complaint management system.

These initiatives are not just technological upgrades, they are a reflection of a vision for a more responsive, efficient and empowering education system. This year's 2025 highest new scholarship recipients are from the skills qualification TVET scheme, as 4,118 awards have been given.

Madam Deputy Speaker, significantly, more new scholarships were given this year compared to the last three years. The new awards in 2023 were 4,731 and in 2024, 7,662 when compared to 8,700 in 2025. This year's figure is a clear testament that the Coalition Government scholarship policies are more successful, as more access and equity is provided to Fijians to pursue tertiary education dreams.

Upon analysing the 8,700 new scholarships by ethnicity, the iTaukei students received the largest portion with 6,181 for these scholarships, which is 71 percent; followed by Fijians of Indian descent students with 2,278 scholarships or 26 percent. The remaining ethnic groups - Rotumans, 74 scholarships or 0.85 percent; Chinese, two scholarships or 0.2 percent; and Others, 165 scholarships or 1.9 percent.

The gender distribution of new scholarships in 2025 is 55 percent female and 45 percent male. This indicates a positive shift towards gender empowerment in scholarship distribution.

In addition to the new awards, there are over 10,244 continuing students on the Fiji Government Scholarship. Therefore, if new and existing sponsored students are added together, a total of 18,944 scholarships were given out.

The Coalition Government has assisted unemployed youths and adults with micro qualification grants in automotive, construction, hotel and tourism, white goods repair and existing small business operations. After round one, 1,802 students were assisted, and round two applications are currently being processed. Therefore, to give a full picture of the total students assisted so far, which include scholarships, study loan and grants, is 20,746. That is the highest after year 2024.

The Government is proud to announce that out of 20,746 under total scholarship and grants, 53 percent are females. Moreover, this year the highest number of new scholarships taken in, is in TVET, which shows Government policies are aligned to employment and workforce demands.

Quarter 2 application for the skills qualification scheme is currently open, and application for Semester 2 will begin in mid-May 2025. The Government is encouraging individuals who missed out earlier in the year, to apply.

Madam Deputy Speaker, today, the Coalition Government is not only preparing our students for jobs, but also preparing them to be leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs. At this point in time, I thank the TSLS for being an outstanding institution of excellence in business processes, re-engineering and service delivery, as well as effectively implementing the Coalition Government's policies.

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Education for updating Parliament on the works undertaken by TSLS in 2025. I wish to commend the CEO TSLS and his team for the good work that they are doing. An organisation thrives when Government policies are effectively implemented when you have a highly qualified and competent CEO.

The TSLS was introduced in 2014 with the focus on achieving the best educational outcomes for Fiji and ensuring that funding spent on scholarships and loans, will result in contribution to Fiji's economic growth, workforce development and livelihood.

The vision was to offer opportunities to Fijians through scholarships and study loans to empower them through knowledge, skills and talent for a prosperous Fiji. No other investment yields as great returns as the investment in education.

Before the introduction of the educational loan scheme, many high performing students in secondary could not further their studies at tertiary institutions because of financial difficulties. Thanks to the previous government for the great vision.

TTSLS has spent around \$1.5 billion from the budget to assist about 70,000 students in the last 11 years of operation. The total amount of taxpayers' money spent has indicated a huge contribution to Fiji that is prioritised through tertiary education and training programmes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the previous government established a sustainable model for tertiary education, creating a revolving fund for future students intending to study at tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, this Government has created an unsustainable financial model where every year, taxpayers fork out millions of dollar for tertiary education.

The Government has imposed up to 50 percent penalties for forfeiting bonds if students wish to seek opportunities offshore. How does this help our graduates or the economy? Remittances sent by unemployed students working abroad, can contribute positively to our foreign exchange.

The Government's decision to write-off student debts in the 2023 Budget has forced over \$600 million directly pointing to that current budget deficit. Converting the student loan scheme into a scholarship is not sustainable for a country like Fiji. Even larger economies like Australia continue to maintain a loan scheme for tertiary education.

Previously, all students meeting the educational tertiary requirements at any tertiary institution were given loans, but that is not the case today. There are many students who have received admission into programmes at universities but are studying privately because they did not qualify for scholarship.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government introduced hardship assistance after realising that many students did not qualify for scholarship and were studying privately. That is very a good move, despite Government promising scholarship for all tertiary students. Around 19,000 students are studying privately.

According to the data provided last year, there are more students studying privately in tertiary institutions than on scholarship. In addition to scholarship, my suggestion to the Government is to reconsider bringing back loan scheme which will assist families to send their children to tertiary institutions. I know that will happen when we are closer to election.

#### Fiji's Maritime Leadership – Advancing a Just and Inclusive Transition

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Members and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute today in terms of a Ministerial Statement on Fiji's Maritime Leadership – Advancing a Just and Inclusive Transition at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Maritime Environment Protection Committee, of that organisation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the ocean does not separate our islands, it connects us. It is our highway, our heritage and the very foundation of our identity as Pacific peoples. As custodians of the Blue Pacific Continent, Fiji bears a solemn responsibility to lead with integrity, vision and resolve in shaping the global maritime agenda and championing the voices of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

In that regard, I wish to also acknowledge the outstanding leadership of the Republic of the Marshall Island (RMI), throughout the MEPC 83 negotiations and the Pacific International Working Group Meetings, whose unwavering commitment to climate ambition greatly strengthened the Pacific's collective voice at the IMO within the UN.

These duties enshrined in our commitment to safeguard the ocean for future generations, ensuring our development is both sustainable and inclusive. It is these sacred duties in mind that I rise to update this honourable House of Fiji's participation at the 83<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Marine, Environment Protection Committee of the International Maritime Organization held from 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> April.

I wish to also provide an update on the progress made towards the establishment of the IMO Regional Presence Office in Suva, an initiative that firmly cements Fiji's leadership role within the Pacific and Global Maritime Community.

The Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) is one of the five principal committees established under the IMO, the specialised United Nations agency responsible for regulating shipping.

The MEPC holds a critical mandate of addressing environmental issues affecting international shipping, including pollution prevention and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Central to its recent agenda is the implementation of the revised IMO Strategy on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from ships adopted in 2023, which seeks to achieve net zero emissions from international shipping by around 2050, in alignment with the objectives of the Paris Agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the core instruments to facilitate the realisation of this Strategy is the proposed establishment of the IMO Net-Zero Transition Fund. This Fund is intended to serve as a key mechanism for supporting developing countries, particularly the SIDS and least developed countries in their transition towards low carbon and resilient maritime transport systems. It will provide critical financial resources for capacity building, technology transfer, infrastructure development and support for just and equitable transition measures.

Against this important backdrop, Fiji's participation at this Committee was not entirely timely, but vital in ensuring that the voices of the Pacific and other vulnerable States were meaningfully represented, and that our unique needs and realities were incorporated into the evolving international maritime framework.

Fiji's delegation to MEPC 2023 was strong and committed, comprising officers from the Ministry, the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF), the Ministry of Defence, including an Officer from the Fiji Navy and representatives from our High Commission in London. The Fiji Hydrographic Office was also represented. I should add that a visit to the UK Hydrographic Office confirmed capacity building and technical cooperation with Fiji, with one of their officers attached to the Fiji Hydrographic Office and a Fijian at the UK Hydrographic Office.

The collective presence ensured that Fiji's national interests were not only articulated but strategically advanced in all technical and political discussions. The delegation demonstrated professionalism, deep technical expertise and a shared vision for a decarbonised, equitable and resilient maritime future, guided by our commitments under the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership and our Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

At MEPC83, the IMO adopted its first globally binding mid-term measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from international shipping - a historic, yet not really perfect, in our shared fight against climate change. The measures introduced a two-tier compliance system under a Greenhouse Gas Fuel Intensity Framework consisting of a base target and a direct compliance target. Whilst this sets a framework for progress, it regrettably does not deliver the level of ambition or fairness required by SIDS, including our own.

Fiji, together with our regional partners, including Vanuatu, Republic of Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati and Nauru, abstained from the final vote, not in opposition, but in principle protest of a process and outcome that failed to align with the 1.5 degree temperature goal, and that lacked sufficient revenue generation for a just and equitable transition financing, and also ignored the realities of disproportionate negative impacts on vulnerable nations. We stood firm in affirming that ambition must be matched with equity, and that climate justice demands practical action, not just promises. That vote exposed deep flaws in the IMO's decision-making process, and illustrated how voices from the Global South continue to be sidelined.

Madam Speaker, despite these setbacks, Fiji played a pivotal role in shaping outcomes through persistent diplomacy and strategic coalition building. We contributed to the formation of the ACP, plus coalition with ISWG, GHG-19, significantly amplifying the collective voice of developing and vulnerable countries.

Fiji actively participated in negotiations with major economies, notably in raising the ambition levels amongst BRICS countries, which included encouraging China, one of the world's largest maritime nations to shift its position towards supporting a revenue-generating mechanism projected to yield between US\$5 billion and US\$10 billion annually. This was a major breakthrough as China had previously maintained a stance of limited or no revenue generation.

The significance of this shift cannot be overstated. It moved the negotiations closer to establishing a global fund that could finance climate resilience, low carbon transition and support for vulnerable States, like Fiji.

Fiji played an instrumental role in negotiating compromised tax on the critical issue of revenue disbursement. Through careful negotiations, consensus was achieved to include specific language to mandate the disbursement of sufficient revenues towards five core purposes, as outlined in the Revenue Disbursement Regulation, namely;

- (1) the incentivisation of transition;
- (2) support for just and equitable transition; and
- (3) addressing disproportionate negative impacts on vulnerable states, such as SIDs.

This provides greater security that the revenue generated will not be disproportionately channelled only towards commercial incentives but will also meaningfully support the needs of developing countries, such as transition and infrastructure and those impacted mostly by climate change.

I am also happy to report that Fiji contributed to the enhancing of the environmental ambition of the proposed amendments to MARPOL Annex VI, the principal international treaty regulating air pollution from ships. These efforts resulted in translating regulatory measures that will impose stricter requirements on the shipping industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, thereby advancing environmental integrity, supporting the 1.5 degree temperature goal and aligning international shipping practices with the Paris Agreement Targets and IMO Strategy 2023.

These achievements reflect not only Fiji's unwavering commitment to climate leadership, but also our ability to influence meaningful change within complex international negotiations. They demonstrate the power of principal leadership, effective coalition building and unwavering advocacy in shaping a more just, inclusive and sustainable maritime future for our Blue Pacific continent and beyond.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is important to note that this was also a moment of unprecedented regional solidarity. For the first time in IMO's history, five Pacific Ministers stood united at the negotiation table. I was joined at the negotiating table by four other Pacific Ministers, the honourable Manasseh Sogavare of Solomon Islands, honourable Simon Coffey of Tuvalu, honourable Ralph Regenvanu of Vanuatu and honourable Hilton Kendal of the Republic of Marshall Islands. Together, we stood united in carrying the voice of the Pacific and firmly advocating for a maritime transition that is just, inclusive and ambitious.

Pacific solidarity not only demonstrates our collective strength but also set a powerful precedent for future global climate and maritime discussions where the Pacific and SIDS must be seen as one voice for ocean stewardship and climate resilience.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this unity reflects Fiji's commitment to the Pacific vision of oceans of peace, as initiated by the honourable Prime Minister the regional and international stage. We envisage our Blue Pacific continent as a region where the ocean is not only a source of life and livelihoods, but

also a platform for diplomacy, cooperation and sustainability, given the current international tensions. Our oceans must be safeguarded from both, international degradation and geopolitical tension.

Through our work at the IMO and other global fora, we are reinforcing this mission, advocating for maritime decarbonisation, fair financing, resilient connectivity and a spirit of solidarity and peace. Our efforts also ensure that Pacific peoples continue to benefit from the oceans bounty while preserving it for future generations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to provide an update on Fiji's hosting of the IMO Regional Presence Office for the Pacific. The Ministry is currently progressing work on establishing this office - IMO RPO, as an independent body with housing and arrangements nearing finalisation. The selection of office premises that meet international standards is at this final stage with due diligence conducted to ensure accessibility, security and operational efficiency. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Fiji and the IMO for the housing of the RPO has already been signed, marking a key milestone in this initiative.

In preparation for the launch, the Ministry will soon establish a dedicated taskforce in collaboration with the MSAF to coordinate the necessary arrangements. The official launch of the IMO RPO is scheduled for August this year and will be officiated by the Secretary-General of the IMO, who will also be making an official visit to the Pacific in conjunction with that.

Once operational, the Office will serve as a vital hub for technical cooperation, regulatory compliance, support and capacity building. It will also facilitate timely interventions on emerging maritime issues, foster innovation and promote regional collaboration towards sustainable maritime transport. It positions Fiji, not only as a regional leader, but also as a central convener of practical, inclusive and sustainable maritime solutions.

Fiji will continue to engage actively and constructively in upcoming negotiations, including the 20th and 21st Sessions of the Inter-Sessional Working Group on Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Extraordinary Session of the Marine Environment Protection Policy, to advocate for a more ambitious, equitable and transparent International Maritime Framework.

These negotiations represent critical opportunities to strengthen the governance of the IMO Net-Zero Fund, boost for equitable representation for SIDS in least developed countries and embed high ambition across the regulatory framework. It is very, very critical that Fiji is part of that, so that we maximise the benefits as soon as these frameworks are established.

Fiji's delegation will continue to advance the principle of transition that low carbon shipping must be ambitious and just, ensuring that no country is left behind, especially the Pacific. We will work collaboratively with our Pacific and global partners to ensure that our future meet the measures and design with just and equitable transition principles at their core, delivering tangible benefits for vulnerable economies.

Our advocacy will continue to be anchored in the broader climate commitments under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement, as well as our national priorities outlined in Fiji's forthcoming Transport Decarbonization Strategy. We will continue to promote the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership as a pioneering model for regional cooperation, demonstrating how Pacific Island nations can lead global action on maritime decarbonization.

We will continue to support calls for the operationalisation of the IMO Net-Zero Transition Fund in a manner that prioritizes capacity building, access to climate finance and technology transfer for Fiji and our Pacific islands.

In conclusion, MEPC did not fully deliver the level of ambition our islands urgently needed, but it has laid the critical foundation for renewed advocacy and transformation in terms of energy transition. Fiji stands undeterred with continued leadership of our nation in terms of our regional cooperation and priorities. We will press forward in shaping an international maritime order that uplifts the vulnerable, protects our oceans, and paves the way for sustainable and resilient future.

Madam Speaker, with the establishment of the IMO RPO, the development of Fiji's transport carbonisation strategy and our whole leadership of the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership, Fiji is not only advocating for change, but we are also demonstrating it through tangible strategic actions. We remain resolute, despite the international challenges in moving forward not only for the SIDS but for developing countries in general, in ensuring that there is a just and equitable transition as we move forward in terms of climate change.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, please, allow me to thank the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport on his Ministerial Statement. The honourable Minister's Statement informs Parliament on Fiji's role at the Maritime Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), in terms of the maritime sector transition to renewable energy.

I understand the MEPC addresses environmental issues under IMO's remit. This includes control and protection of ship-source pollution covered under the MARPOL Treaty, including oil, chemicals carried in bulk sewerage, garbage and emissions from ships, including air pollutants, greenhouse gas emissions and other matters covered, including balanced water management, anti-fouling system, ships recycling pollution preparedness and response.

In the interest of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will restrict my contribution to a local Fiji scene on shipping and what it means to our people. While I salute the achievement of Fiji's role at the Conference, it would be important to position our status regarding maritime transport. It is prudent to approach this transition to suit our level of development, especially for our inter-island shipping that operates now.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji's maritime transport, especially shipping, has a lot of thorough process that needs to be considered. Ships available to Fiji and presently ploughing our waters depend entirely on demand and supply. I say this as I compare the fare and freight that our locals can pay to travel around our islands.

The cost of efficient new ships is huge, so our shipping companies can only afford secondhand ships because our people cannot afford high fare and freight. For example, Madam Deputy Speaker, a tourist travelling from Nadi to Yasawa will spend \$200 to travel for 30 minutes to one and a half hours. A ship travelling from Kadavu to Suva or Suva to Kadavu will take six hours and our locals will only be able to afford \$50. That is why I am emphasising that Fiji has to tread carefully because at the end of the day, our local population has to be able to afford the fare that is being charged to them.

Otherwise, shipping companies will not be able to afford the new ships and the new systems that is endorsed in this system that is being alluded to here. However, the honourable Minister must be congratulated for Fiji's role at the MEPC of IMO in terms of the maritime sector in transiting to renewable energy. I additionally thank the honourable Minister on Fiji's contribution to the Pacific Blue Ocean and its contributions towards the SIDS.

The international framework provides a guideline, and Fiji has to adapt so that it can navigate its way in providing good and affordable ships, keeping in mind that commercial operators have to keep their operation going and their ability to maintain and look after their ships. I thank the honourable Minister, again, for his delivery and I thank him for representing Fiji, SIDS and the Pacific.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have had a good time. At this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch and Parliament will resume again at 2.30 this afternoon.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

## QUESTIONS

### Oral Questions

Update on ASA Between Fiji and China  
(Question No. 38/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the ongoing negotiations for a direct Air Service Agreement between Fiji and China?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Nand for his question. Fiji's tourism sector continues to experience positive growth, with an increasing number of international visitors choosing Fiji as their destination. According to data from our Fiji Bureau of Statistics, tourist arrivals from China comprised 2.8 percent of total international arrivals in 2023; increasing to 3.1 percent in 2024. This upward movement reflects a strengthening trajectory in market recovery and signals growing consumer demand from the Chinese outbound tourism segment.

The Air Services Agreement (ASA) between Fiji and the People's Republic of China (PRC) signed in 1997, lays the regulatory foundation for bilateral air connectivity between the two countries. Under that Agreement, designated airlines from both, Fiji and China, are granted the rights to operate scheduled commercial air services on routes between Nadi and Beijing. While direct air services between these points have not yet commenced, Shanghai has emerged as the preferred point of connection for these services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Shanghai Pudong International Airport serves as a critical transit point for passengers travelling between China and various international destinations. Its extensive network facilitates connections to numerous global locations, making it an advantageous starting point for flights in Fiji.

This connectivity is particularly beneficial for travelers from other parts of China, who can transit through Shanghai to reach Fiji. Shanghai is the preferred route for our national airline for direct and code sharing air services. As we work to establish a stronger presence in this competitive and high – value market, it is essential to ensure that our national airline is positioned securely and competitively.

At present, discussions with our Chinese counterparts at technical level are progressing positively. In particular, China is considering the addition of Shanghai as a new destination in our ASA. In parallel, we are engaged in continuous discussions at technical level with our Chinese counterpart on additional terms. Once these terms are finalised, we will be able to establish a clear path forward, to ensure timely and effective execution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the meantime, capacity on our existing Asian routes continues to be adjusted based on demand and market performance. In 2025, Fiji Airways reduced its Hong Kong service to three times a week due to low demand in 2024. However, early performance in 2025 has shown improvement and Fiji Airways is optimistic about either returning to five-weekly flights or launching a direct service to Shanghai, depending on the outcome of Air Services Agreements (ASA) negotiations.

To conclude, Fiji Airways is currently operating two-weekly flights to Tokyo, Japan. While overall demand has been soft, the Japanese market is showing strong signs of recovery. If this positive momentum continues, Fiji Airways is considering adding a third-weekly flight. Fiji Airways also operates two-weekly services to Singapore, and growth on these routes will depend on the expanded codeshare agreements, especially with Indian carriers and increasing awareness of Fiji in the region. As air services in our Asian market evolves to market performance and demand, we are committed to strategically assessing and optimising our existing ASAs in China to maximise economic opportunities.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you honourable Minister for the update. The question relates to the actual agreement that is being entered into with respect to the Air Services Agreement. Which metal are we looking at? Are we looking at Fiji Airways flying, or are we looking at one of the Chinese airlines bringing in and out of Fiji, or, either or?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I indicated, it is essential to ensure that our national airline is positioned securely and competitively. That is the way we are approaching this negotiation. I am glad we have a national airline that is very important to us, for all the reasons we all know. The Chinese want to come into the Pacific and the ideal connection to the Pacific is Fiji Airways. Fiji Airways is dominant in the way we negotiate with the Chinese. We are very clear on that. The honourable Prime Minister is dealing with his equal in China and I, dealing with my counterpart there. We are very clear on that, that we need to ensure is that Fiji Airways can fly competitively and profitably into China.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to hear that negotiations are going on for expansion in our international routes. Is there any talks with the Ministry of Sugar in terms of the development of infrastructure for biofuel storage and distribution for aviation industry, as it will lower emissions and going forward, as we get more routes and uplift the sugar industry at the same time?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is all part of the aviation equation, the production of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). I just want to brief the House that a pre-feasibility study was carried out by the Asian Bank on producing SAF in Fiji based on sugar. They are basing their study on production of 1.3 million tonnes a year, and they can produce some SAF out of that. We need to expand the capacity to make more sugar into biomass, molasses, et cetera. We thought that we would also include cassava into the equation to be part of the study, but the United Nations, because of this food security concern, have discouraged us from using cassava for SAF.

In answering the question, it is all part of the aviation equation. Most countries now are determined, especially in aviation, to be net zero by 2050. The best way of accomplishing that is through SAF. The production of that will escalate in the years to come.

Subsidised Routes - Domestic Airfares  
(Question No. 39/2025)

HON. A.N. TUICOLO asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament on what interventions, if any, are being considered to subsidise routes or incentivise competition among local airlines, given that domestic airfares to outer islands such as Taveuni and Kadavu, remain disproportionately high despite reduced fuel prices?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Tuicolo for his question. The domestic air transport network is an integral component of the overall Fiji transport network. In the outer islands, it supplements the services provided by regular ferry and shipping services. In the more

remote locations, it is the only form of transport that can provide a timely alternative for access to essential community services.

In Fiji, two domestic airlines, namely Fiji Link and Northern Air Services, are the two principal air operators of scheduled domestic air services, operating scheduled flights across the country, encouraging competition that can drive down fares and improve service quality. Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, airfares are primarily controlled by market forces, meaning the airline themselves set their prices based on supply and demand, competition and other market dynamics.

While both airlines are authorised to serve multiple destinations, they do not operate to all permitted routes due to low passenger demand, which makes some services commercially unfeasible. Even with a decrease in jet fuel prices, airfares can remain high due to several other fixed and rising costs. This include aircraft leasing, maintenance, staff wages, airport charges, insurance, and inflation-related expenses. Additionally, small or irregular travel demand to remote islands further reduces route profitability. Consequently, the airlines tend to focus on high-demand routes such as Suva, Labasa and Nadi, while relying on government subsidies for less-served areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address these challenges and ensure continued service to remote and underserved destinations within Fiji, the Government of Fiji, through the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, allocates a total of \$1.9 million for the Air Subsidy Scheme to support air services to commercially non-viable routes including Lakeba, Vanuabalavu, Cicia, Gau, Koro, Kadavu, and Rotuma. The subsidy is payable on the difference between the cost of operations and the revenue earned by the airline operator. Government funding has been consistently provided in previous years as well.

To give some context on how subsidy is awarded, the process involves a rigorous and transparent process managed by the Government Tender Board with the tender being reviewed and renewed periodically to ensure continued service delivery. The routes and government subsidies are awarded under a contract between the government and the air service operator and a subset to a service-level agreement. Both Fiji Link and Northern Air are permitted to provide the air service on specific routes in line to the tender award.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, looking ahead, the possibility of expanding the subsidy scheme to cover the remaining remote islands within Fiji is now under consideration.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, are you aware of any applications that might be sitting with CAAF or interest that there is from someone to set up, as you had mentioned yesterday, the route between Suva and Nadi? Are there any applications or interest that you know or firmed interest of someone wanting to set up a new airline within the region or within Fiji for domestic purposes because there has been interest?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I indicated yesterday, there is no restriction locally. Anyone can provide a service between Nadi and Nausori in addition to Fiji Link and Northern Air, but as of now, I have to admit that I am not aware of any new applicants for any routes domestically in Fiji. I think they are thin routes; you call them “thin routes” in aviation. I know people are saying that they pay more between Nadi and Savusavu than Nadi and Auckland. It is the size of the aircraft, the cost of running it and the volume it can carry to meet the cost. that is the limiting factor here.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is in regards to the domestic routes to the outer island from Taveuni to Nausori. In fact, the Committee went for a public submission. My question is regarding the security concerns in terms of security scanning and screening machines. As we left Taveuni there was no security scanning done, knowing that Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Pacific is not immune to drugs and drugs follow guns, ammunition and money. The question is to the whole of government but to the honourable Minister is, when will the security scanning and screening systems

be placed at these ports of entries? My question to the Committee was, if someone gets on a plane from Taveuni with a gun, there is no scanning and screening done and hijacks a plane then what would be Fiji's response?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a concern, aviation is safety and security and ease of travel. Our domestic airports, right now if you apply the rules that we apply internationally, you can say that they need to beef up their security, but it is certainly something that we are looking into.

Plans for Improvement of Cane Access Roads  
(Question No. 40/2025)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry update Parliament on the plans to improve the conditions of sugarcane access roads before the commencement of the 2025 harvesting season?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. He is very passionate and very close to the farming industry, sugarcane in particular. I do not know how many tonnes he is producing, but he is a sugarcane farmer. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I give a proper reply, I have got few issues to mention

On aviation fuel, we all talk about aviation fuel, and that is something that we would also like to produce in this country. However, we have to produce sugarcane first before we can produce aviation fuel. That is where I want a joint partisan approach by the Opposition to do farming rather than talking in Parliament.

In saying that, we used to produce 4.2 million tonnes of cane at a good time. It dropped in 2006 to 1.3 million tonnes. Sir, 16 years of the Opposition being in government, we have seen the drop in production. Do you expect a baby to be born in three months? It takes nine months for a baby to be born so, please, listen to us.

On aviation fuel, yes, we are progressing. If we want to make it happen, it will happen. Give us another 16 years in government, we will make it happen.

(Honourable P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You should be in jail.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Yes, honourable Bala, you have Point of Order?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, Sir. This is not the first time he said that.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, you start where you should start. What Standing Order?

HON. P. K. BALA.- Standing Order 60.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You do not have to tell me, I know what I am doing.

MR. SPEAKER.- Relevancy.

HON. P. K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, this is not the first time he has said that to me that I should be in jail. In fact, who will be in jail, very soon people will know. I want him to withdraw that.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think he has got a point, honourable Minister. You are saying that he should go to jail, I do not think that is proper language to use in this House. Please, withdraw that.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, I definitely will take my statement back, but he also said I will go to jail too.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is you now on the spot. It goes to the character of the person, and I would ask you to, please, withdraw.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I withdraw that, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you .

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Can I continue?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We have given media freedom in this country and *Fiji Times* reported about me employing Bangladeshi workers and underpaying them. Two days back, I asked *Fiji Times*, “where did you get this report from?” A former Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary says he has got a complaint. Who is complaining? My employees have not complained. It is a hearsay. He lies.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- This question is about cane access roads.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, start with the Standing Order, always start with a Standing Order.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 45(4) – the reply must be relevant, concise and confined to the subject-matter of the question which is about cane access roads.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you keep to the concise description which honourable Usamate has referred to?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate is not a cane farmer. I am a cane farmer. It is relevant to what I am talking about.

Only today *Fiji Sun* has cleared that I am paying \$5.50 an hour, above the minimum wage rate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order again. Standing Order 45(4), the reply must be relevant, concise and confined to the subject matter. The subject matter is cane access roads.

MR. SPEAKER.- I had asked the honourable Minister to confine his statement to the access road issue. Those are the side issues you are referring to, honourable Minister. Are they relevant? You may justify how relevant it is? That is your prerogative then that objection will follow, if that is so.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cane farmers and my workers are working on the cane access road. I am just coming to the story; just be patient.

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, proceed.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Finally, about the investments from China who would like to invest in the cane mills, we are having some talks and shortly we will present a paper to Cabinet for the new sugar mill and we will present a paper to Cabinet for the new sugar mill, which will be built either in Rakiraki or between Ba and Tavua, based on the feasibility. Can I talk about the cane access road now?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Honourable Usamate, please, I think you have been too long in Parliament, you should retire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, who possesses an extensive knowledge of the sugar industry, given his background as a cane farmer, and I express my gratitude for his insightful question and his concern for the cane farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Sugar recognises the critical role of the well-maintained cane access road placed in facilitating and efficient transportation of sugar cane from farms to mills, and in turn, reduce the stand over sugarcane for each cane crushing season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year's cane crushing for all sugar mills is expected to commence from mid-June. This implies that the sugar upgrading of cane access roads must begin before the cane harvesting season. The cane access roads serve a vital component in our nation's sugar industry, enabling timely harvesting and the delivery of sugar cane, while minimising the logistical challenges for our hardworking sugar cane farmers. It is important to note that the maintenance of cane access roads is typically avoided during the rainy season, which spans from November to April. This precaution is taken to prevent the road upgrades being compromised by heavy rains and floods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just for the information of this august House, there were massive damages to many of the cane access roads, in addition to 78 Irish crossings that were damaged or destroyed around the cane belt areas during flood, cyclone, and continuous rain in the past few months. To avoid wastage of resources and ensure best value for money, maintenance activities usually commence in May and extended into the early stages of the crushing season. This strategic decision explains why repairs of cane access roads have not yet commenced.

As we gear up for the 2025 harvesting season, preparations to upgrade over 4,000 kilometres of roads, supply of culverts, and repairing of cane crossing are in their final stages. Since 2012, a total of \$41.4 million has already been expended for this purpose, with an allocation of \$4 million for the 2025 financial year. On average, the Ministry allocates approximately 500 lots per kilometer of upgrade of cane access roads, which is often insufficient for the comprehensive maintenance of the crossings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contractors for the 2025 maintenance season have already been selected, following a rigorous tender process, and agreements are currently being signed with the contractors in all 38 sectors. They are preparing to mobilise the resources. As we speak, maintenance work is scheduled to commence in the first week of May, which is this week as we aim to complete the upgrading of the roads by mid-harvesting season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the contractors undertake the essential repairs on the ground, our field staff, the Sugar Cane Growers Council, the Ministry of Sugar Industry and Fiji Sugar Corporation will actively monitor the progress to ensure that the quality of work is consistently maintained through the duration of this project. This collaborative effort between the contractors, farmers and the field staff underscore the commitment of upholding the high standard and delivering effective results in the maintenance of cane access roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government, we are providing unwavering support and are committing to ensuring the adequate maintenance of the cane access roads, while at the same time exploring alternative transportation methods. Despite the challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we remain committed to ensuring a successful 2025 harvesting season.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I declare my interest because I am a cane farmer, but let me convey to the honourable Minister how disappointed farmers are about the recent third cane payment. Last year they were given \$24, and now you are giving them only \$24. This came from Bocalevu, Qalowaqa and the cane farming communities of Vanua Levu.

The question to the honourable Minister is, you are saying that contractors have been identified, but one of the key challenges that contractors face when it comes to road construction is the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), which is given by the Ministry of Environment. Given the time it takes to process such permits, the big concern is, they will be late in terms of processing after the cane crushing season has started. What is being taken by the Ministry to ensure that this problem is sorted out so that the construction of the roads will not be delayed?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I obviously take concern of the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Having said that, I have been travelling to a lot of countries where a sugarcane industry is, their cane access roads are all tarsealed. In Fiji, in the last 16 years, if we would not have wasted our money – the last government – all the cane access roads would have been tarsealed. Having said that, I will make the payments are made well in advance so that farmers do not face problems.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister is well aware that funding is a big constraint, and most cane access roads are rotten rocks or river gravels and now you are trying to move into tarsealing the cane access roads. What options are you going to take? Not only that, one thing is to get cane through the cane access roads, and then you have the rail and the public access that gets the cane to the mill. What sort of arrangements are you making with the other stakeholders to ensure that cane gets to the mill and are not affected because of the poor road conditions, not only cane access road, but the public access road as well?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Ratu Mara Government, cane access road was purely used for cane access. Today, the cane access road is used by everyone.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- So?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So, we need to get more funding – the logging trucks are coming there, the gravel extraction, et cetera. That was under your government that spoilt it. Now, we have to take the burden and all the costs, we will but give us 16 years.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his answer, especially letting the general public know that he has plans to tarseal the sugarcane access road.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is his answer.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Take a seat.

When you are referring to a statement that is made by another, make sure it is a correct reference to it. It is not quite correct what you are saying, because he was saying quite a different thing from what you are saying now, honourable Maharaj. Can you please rephrase or do whatever that is acceptable under the rules?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He suggested that if they are given 16 years, the road would then be tarsealed. Out of that 16 years, two years has gone. Can he confirm how many kilometres of cane access road will be tarsealed in the next two years? Please give the number of kilometres he expects the cane access road to be sealed. Please let the honourable Minister for Sugar Industry answer my question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B. C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 60 - Relevance. Honourable Maharaj, after you said that, all honourable Singh said was, he was comparing the quality of cane access roads in other countries. He said that in other countries, cane access roads are tarsealed. Now what this honourable Member is trying to do, is to extend that and lie. I know what he is going to do. They are going to go back to the farmers and say, "hey, honourable Charan Singh promised to tarseal the road." This is what they will do, because they are lying.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is exactly what he is trying to do.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I take the Point of Order raised by the honourable Professor Biman Prasad. Honourable Maharaj, can you proceed and steer away from the implication of the speech that the honourable Minister was saying about the tarsealed road that you are, in fact, inferring that he was going to build more, and you are asking how many is going to be built. That is my understanding of what you are asking. I will uphold the objection from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. You can rephrase your question in another way that does not include tarseal road.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I respect your decision. My supplementary question now would be when dealing with cane access roads, it is very important that farmers are provided with culverts as well. Are there plans to provide culverts to the farmers for proper sugarcane access roads? Without culverts, it is very difficult for the trucks with loads of 17 tonnes to 18 tonnes to cross the drains from the cane fields to the sugarcane access roads. Are there plans to provide culverts free of charge to the sugar cane farmers as well?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I answer his proper question, yesterday he praised me about the Nakasi project. You are a good man. Your answer to the culverts, yes, we will provide it for free, and if your farmers give their applications, we will consider.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the road conditions, especially of cane access roads which the honourable Minister has also agreed, it is in a very poor condition and also in most areas, the culverts have been washed away, the Irish crossings are also in a poor state. This is mainly because of the heavy rain and the four or five floodings, especially in the Western Division.

My question to the honourable Minister is whether the allocated fund is enough to complete all the cane access roads in Western and Northern Divisions, or he will need more funding to complete all the work that is required?

HON. C. J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have sufficient funding, honourable Viam Pillay. As I said earlier, wherever the problems are, please forward to my Ministry and we will take care of that.

Rent Arrears – iTaukei Land Trust Board  
(Question No. 41/2025)

HON. S. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, update Parliament on the arrears of rent owed to the iTaukei Land Trust Board, and on rent recovery and compliance?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourabl Nand for the question. The iTaukei Land Trust Board has been working diligently to reduce the amount of rent owed to them. As of 25<sup>th</sup> April this year, the total amount of unpaid rent has decreased by \$6.4 million, from the \$31.7 million in January this year, a 20 percent reduction. the number of tenants in arrears has also fallen from 29,133 to 22,009, demonstrating significant progress over the last four months. The improvement was done through intensive collection efforts, including reminders, home visits, and extensive media campaign with a focus on arrears awareness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are collaborating with employers for direct rent deduction and pursuing legal actions for utility disconnection and eviction. It is important to note that there are 12,614 residential leases currently in arrears, representing approximately \$9.6 million owed to landowners. It is also worthwhile to note that landowners are currently owed \$8.4 million in agricultural lease arrears, affecting 7,357 tenants. These tenants should be aware that their chance of lease renewal will significantly hinder their payment history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the major challenges faced by the iTLTB is that, under its current legislation, it lacks direction power to enforce lease repayment. It is often taken advantage of by the tenant, forcing the iTLTB to seek enforcement through the court, which is an expensive and time-consuming process. The result is a much-reduced payment to the Board but is a major source of tenant complacency. All these is due to tenants not honouring their obligations under the lease agreement for landowners to receive their rightful entitlement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address these critical issues, the Ministry will be prioritising the inclusion of enforcement clauses in the upcoming review of the iTLTB Act, ensuring a fairer and more balancing system. This review will not only empower the Board to more effectively manage arrears and ensure landowners receive the payment they are rightfully owed. We will also consider the needs and circumstances of tenants, aiming for a more equitable and sustainable leasing environment for all. We are committed to improving compliance and delivering landowners' entitlements promptly, while also fostering a responsible and supportive relationship with our tenants.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the clarity. There is something else I would seek clarity for. In Fiji, we have 92 percent of land which is *iTaukei* and I myself would like to encourage as much investment in *iTaukei* land. One of the misconceptions out there, honourable Member is, if someone gets a 99-year lease, they build a house worth \$400,000. The question is coming from the ground. Let us say that after 99 years, the lease is not renewed. What happens to the tenant? Are they compensated or was there a process to follow? This is something that I seek clarity from you to the general public. It will clear a lot of airs out on the process involved after.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the lease agreement, any improvement done on the land should be approved by iTLTB. If the improvement is approved by iTLTB, there is in the agreement

that you will be compensated. If it is not approved, then it will not be compensated.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, you talked about the enforcement powers that will be reviewed on the reinforcement powers when the iTLTB Act will be reviewed. There is a concern now, honourable Minister, that I wish to bring to your attention and perhaps if you can respond to it as well, coming back into the system now is, landowning units are now demanding for goodwill payment for renewal of leases. This is something that I received from the people on the ground, and I would like to bring it to your attention. Perhaps if you can respond to it on what advice should we give the people if such demands are made on them.

HON. I. VASU.- Goodwill payments are not allowed. All negotiations should be done with iTLTB. The iTLTB will only be charging the premium. So, I will advise all those tenants out there to please liaise with iTLTB. Do not liaise directly with landowners.

Measures to Address Illegal Migrants in Fiji  
(Question No. 42/2025)

HON. J. USAMATE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Immigration update Parliament on the measures being implemented to address the issue of illegal migrants in Fiji, including repatriation efforts?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question, an important subject that should be at the forefront of our thinking as a nation. Before I do answer the question, if I can just take maybe one or two minutes to mention Sainimere Tuinasakea, a mother, wife and sister. She is the lady who had passed on in Jittu. She is a member of the Immigration family.

Sai as we call her, a very soft-spoken lady, joined our family just a little over a month ago. She is our cleaner, a job that is just as important as mine. Her sister and daughter came over to break the news to us of her passing and we mourn with the family. The children have lost both father and mother and we send our prayers, love to them and their family at this time.

We hope that the very comforting love of God will carry them through at this difficult time - an incident that can be avoided for families, husbands and wives. I have been at it for 39 years. We can talk things over instead of doing things that we regret. I hope that in her passing, in the sad situation that this family is in, that we learn from it. We are resolute in trying to root out domestic violence in our families. I just want to spend those few minutes to mention Sai in this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The subject matter that is being asked is in two parts. The first is on the measures that are being taken to address illegal migrants and the second is on repatriation. If I may answer the question in two parts and I take the second part first on repatriation or removals as we call it - deportation. I must first acknowledge with appreciation the majority of the migrants who respect our laws. They respect immigration laws, they respect the laws of our country, and they ensure the legality of their status here in Fiji will welcome them as we share with them this wonderful and beautiful country in whatever capacity that they are staying in. To them, I say thank you for being good ambassadors of the countries that they come from and being with us for periods of time. It is the relatively very small number that this part of my answer will focus on - removals and deportation which is part of the immigration process.

There are two types of removals - voluntary removal speaks for itself. They are asked to leave because of some violation, and they can just pay for their own fare and leave. If they do not, then it is a forced removal where usually the 3Ds apply - detained, deported and denied re-entry into the country

indefinitely. The cost for their removal, for voluntary, usually they pay themselves. In circumstances where they cannot, sometimes their countries help or the employers, if they are workers, will pay for their repatriation and when everything else fails, then the State steps in.

We are thankful, for the first time, we got \$100,000 for deportation for the 2024-2025 financial year. It used to be just \$20,000 all these years. Out of that \$100,000, \$48,000 is left, so it has been used up. Right now, we are tracking down 20 prohibited immigrants who have been avoiding us and those 20, I think will chew up the rest of that \$48,000 that we have left. The latest removal was today, done already, and there was one last Saturday. Even in those two removals, the one on Saturday was paid for by the country of destination. Today's removal is paid for by us, by the State.

On the issue of the measures for dealing with illegal migrants, there are two ways to deal with it:

- (1) try and stop people from entering illegally; and
- (2) ensure that those that enter legally remain legal.

If you have a permit, when you are in the country, and if it needs extension, make sure you extend it on time. If you do not, you become an illegal immigrant.

The first part where you try and stop illegal entry is best dealt with, in a military strategy it is called defence in-depth. You want to be tackling it way, way back before they arrive into the country. One of the tools for that is the Advance Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Record (PNR), mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister the other day, where you get in advance the information of the passengers that are coming in.

There is a process that you go through, and you are able to very quickly screen out those that you need to pay attention to and allow those that are okay to flow through as they come in through our borders. We are putting that submission into this budget proposal for this year, and we will see where we go, but it is a tool that we really need to have – API and PNR. It was not there in 2005 as mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister the other day, and it is now being dismantled, and we need to bring it back in again.

I know I am running out of time, but if we look at the number of illegals in the country, towards the end of last year, we had about 8,000. We did a cleaning up of data, the problem with our system is that it cannot pick up that data. If someone comes in with a business permit from Tuvalu, for example, and then applies to have a study permit, the system will register the study permit and do not cancel off the business permit. So, when the business permit expires, it will register that there is a prohibited immigrant, when in fact, he is not. He now has a study permit for one year.

We did a cleaning up of the data. For now, as it stands, it is just a little over 5,000 from the 8,000 as of today. Maybe I will end it there, and if there is a supplementary, I can then explain it more.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the clarity. It is important for people to know the processes involved, and I thank the honourable Minister for that. My question to the honourable Minister is about the companies that bring in labourers to work for them, and then there are cases of these labourers fleeing off on their own. Is there any process by the Immigration to get monthly follow-ups or feedback from these companies or vice versa? Is there any platform for these labourers to be heard if they could have gone through ill-treatment, exploitation? Lastly, it is a process to find these illegal immigrants, and it comes as a cost to Government and taxpayers. Just the two parts for clarity for everyone.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are towards the end of the review of the Immigration Act 2003, and one of the changes we are inputting into that Act is to sharpen this idea of issuing infringement notices. If you are employing foreigners and you are not, for example, extending their permits on time, you will get issued with an infringement notice; both to the employer and to the employee (the foreign worker themselves). The idea of them being exploited is something that we hope that we can stop, it is very much in the Ministry of Labour area. However, the message that we want to send out to these foreign workers, please, do not just go to the Ministry of Labour, tell anyone if you are being abused and we can come in and help you.

A very quick story, today we were sent out to her place in Koronivia by the honourable Prime Minister. I think, first time a Prime Minister did a spot check on someone who is employing foreign workers. The situation we saw over there is quite bad. The honourable Minister for Labour was there also. The message to them is, tell anyone. Go to the Police, you can come to Immigration or the Ministry of Labour if you feel that you are being exploited where you are working.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for the answers that he has given. One of the reports that I had read somewhere, I cannot remember where, talked about the vast majority of these illegal migrants being Pacific Islanders. I am not too sure if that is correct. I think a lot of them come as families of students or so forth and they stay, bring in patients, and that sort of thing exacerbates. Are there particular measures that the Ministry is looking in relation to that category of over-stayer or illegal immigrants?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, yes, for our Pacific Islanders that come and study in the country, let me say that, those institutions also, if you allow students to come and study without a permit, you will get issued also with an infringement notice if we find out.

However, one thing we find, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is when these students come into Fiji, they give their documents to the administration people in the institutions they go and study in, those people are supposed to lodge their applications with the Ministry and then they go ahead and study. It is because they are not doing their job, those people in those administration sections in those universities or colleges, when they leave the country, we find out that their study permit was not issued so they have been in the country illegally.

I think “illegal immigrant” is not used now; it is really “undocumented immigrants”. A lot of them fall into that category, those from our Pacific Islands. We sometimes just call them up, we talk to their embassies, we talk to the institutions that bring them in and educate them on how to process their applications correctly and timely, so that they are not slapped with a Prohibited Immigrant (PI).

So, when these students leave, they may have two more years to go, but because they did not apply for their permit on time, they go and they are slapped with a Prohibited Immigrant notice. They cannot come back into the country for one year. So, they miss out on their last year of studies. They will have to apply for a prohibited immigrant uplift and if that is approved, then they will come back again.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, I had asked this question previously, the issue about the detention centre. You did mention that the illegal immigrants are first detained before they are being deported. The only reason I am asking this, is because, a few years, when I was briefed at Legalega Research Station, I was told that a portion of that land has been earmarked for a Detention Centre. Could you please elaborate further on what progress has been taken?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, all I can say that funds were given in the budget for the detention centres. As to the progress of where it is right now, I cannot tell you now, I will have to go and find out.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think that all the honourable Members of this Parliament, will join you, honourable Minister, in expressing our condolences on the death of a member of your staff at Lagilagi Housing, which is very close to where I live. She may have only been an office cleaner, but I have been an office cleaner myself. As you well know, a person's worth or value is not in the level of work he or she does, but in the contribution he or she makes to the wellness of the organisation. You have our sincere condolences.

Honourable Members, the next two questions have been withdrawn, that is, Question 43/2025 and Question 44/2025.

(Oral Questions No. 43/2025 and No. 44/2025 withdrawn)

Recent Developments – Outsourcing Industry  
(Question No. 45/2025)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament on the recent developments undertaken in the outsourcing industry?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes without saying that the Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) industry as we call it commonly has undergone some significant growth over the years. It is fast emerging as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors in the national economy. Just for the information of the House and those who are listening in, when we talk about BPOs, that is the traditional form of support centres, and generally those involved just building goals.

Nowadays, there are things that are called Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) centres, Information Technology Outsourcing (ITO) and shared services. Ultimately, from the Government's perspective, we intend to transition to more of the KPO, CIO, and shared services areas, because these are the areas where they are well paid and are areas that may not come under threat once AI starts to get hold of the industry. As we know, we now have robots that are answering calls around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a bit of context, the recent BPO market growth report states that in 2024, the outsourcing market was around US\$388 billion and is projected to reach US\$680 billion by 2033, which means that it will be growing at a compound rate of 6.4 percent from now until 2033. What Fiji has done in trying to diversify its economy, sits well within global trends, and that is why in the National Digital Strategy, there were some very ambitious targets.

I am pleased to report that the BPO, KPO industry continues to grow. From when we took office, up till as I speak, there has been five new centres already established in Fiji. The most recent is called Apex and you will see it on the main road in Martintar, Nadi, when you pass Hungry Jacks on your right.

Our closer neighbours, Australia and New Zealand are starting to understand that there is a very good offering for services, particularly outsourced services, developing in our country. I am told that from those five operations, they will be generating up to 380 jobs and potentially rapidly growing from there. One of the interesting stories about the BPO sector is a company called Pacific Centrecom and honourable Koya will know this company well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will notice that they have started opening offices in Lautoka, Nadi, Navua, plans to expand to Rakiraki, Ba and even Savusavu now that the fibre has now been laid into Savusavu.

What Centrecom is doing is taking the BPO services closer to where the sources of employment are. What that means is, the thinking around developing outsourcing centres simply in the urban areas is no longer the case. We have in this case, one of the largest BPOs in Fiji, moving into some of the areas such as Ba, Rakiraki and Savusavu, which is quite exciting.

There are two other companies, Vuvale Outsourcing and Pepper Advantage, they also are starting to ramp up as well. In terms of recent developments, we are seeing more and more of an interest in this sector, which augurs well for where we would like to head. According to the statistics last year, the outsourcing sector contributed up to AUD\$160 million to the Fijian economy. We are closing in on significant numbers. This year, it is expected to grow to \$200 million and potentially reach \$300 million in the next 24 months. In terms of employment, we are now sitting at 8,000 jobs and climbing. The industry has a very exciting future and, of course, it is important that we continue to support it. The Government of the day continues to support the industry.

In terms of current levels of support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the previous government, there were very good tax concessions put in place with tax-free holidays for investment in ICT infrastructure. So, that has been going well. One of the things that was of concern with the industry, certainly before we came into office, was the fact that there was only one subsea cable connecting Fiji to the rest of the world, which was the Southern Cross Cable.

As this House is aware, because of the *Google* investment, it will totally transform Fiji as the destination in terms of this industry. There is Starlink as well that is now adding further redundancy to this industry. We are very hopeful and optimistic in terms of the trajectory of where we are headed in terms of the industry. Last year, we supported the outsourcing sector with funding of about \$1.5 million, apart from the tax incentives. Certainly, the sector is very well positioned.

One of the things too that is probably creating more momentum now, is the fact that Fiji is now showcasing itself in other countries around the world. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in October last year, Outsource Fiji, which is the primary body for the outsourcing industry, sort of attended the Future Contact Centre Expo in New Zealand, which is a premier event for the region's outsourcing, and was a key platform to actually showcase Fiji's capabilities. I am told that one of the five companies that is now on the ground here came out of that conference.

Apart from that, we are finding that the outsource sector is, when it comes to our young, particularly our youth that are probably not sure about what they want to do when they finish high school, this sector actually provides some wonderful training for them. They go and get trained and exposed to international standards, whether it is phone calls or processing or whatever you do, and you are actually dealing with international companies. In essence, you are actually working offshore but based in Fiji. One of the things that we are planning to do is create more awareness. It is a wonderful pathway for young men and women, particularly when they leave school Year 12 years or Year 13 years and not sure if they want to get to university.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, we recently appointed the new Executive Director for Outsource Fiji, Mr. Josefa Wivou, who is also very experienced in terms of BPOs. We are fortunate to have him on board, and we are looking forward to continue to support this industry. I would say that when it comes to economic diversification, the outsourcing sector will in the next few years be quite a significant contributor in terms of our push to diversify the Fijian economy.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the honourable Minister for his update on the outsourcing industry and the acknowledgement that is actually huge for Fiji. If I could be permitted, my question is twofold, otherwise I will have to stand up twice. In light of the fact that there was a lot of risk diversification that was happening post-COVID, Outsource Fiji went out to the rest of the world,

and specifically out to Europe, a lot of interest shown from some very large companies who wanted to actually do this, purely because they wanted to risk diversify.

The first question is, have we managed to tap into that, or are we in the process of tapping into that, because it is quite huge for Fiji? And just related to that also is, as you mentioned, there are some companies that are now venturing out beyond Suva because of the accessibility of the digital infrastructure that we have. Will you be looking at providing or extending the boundaries of these tax-free zones so that we can make it more incentivised for those that would go? And it is also employment opportunities out in the Northeast, there are a few other places, Lautoka would be at the end of the day because of accessibility and all of those issues. Will you be looking at that also? It is important. It is an industry that can provide, the statistics that came out of the Australian government, about 10,000 people employed in the industry every year. So it is huge for Fiji.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I thank the honourable Koya for his question. Of course, one of the wonderful things, if you would like to put a positive spin on COVID was, whilst the whole world was actually shut down during COVID, the BPO sector in Fiji was probably one of the few locations that was actually open and operating. I was actually involved with Outsource Fiji at that point, and we did reach out to Government at the time to request that they become an essential service and that led to the ability to start onboarding customers.

At that time, at the height of COVID, Philippines and India were closed. Fiji was one of the few locations that was open. It certainly opened up the eyes of a lot of customers in this space in terms of risk diversification and Fiji was then starting to be viewed as an option, a genuine option for risk diversification rather than these large companies putting all their eggs if you like or chickens into these large outsourcing places like Philippines and India.

What has happened since then, Mr. Speaker, we now have a lot more awareness happening. At that time when COVID happened, the BPO Council then which became Outsource Fiji, had not fully evolved or fully set up, and because of what happened, there was a lot more funding put into Outsource Fiji, and we were then able to start doing outreaches in terms of awareness. Just a few weeks ago, I was talking on a sort of, one of those podcast kind of calls with a lot of stakeholders in Australia talking about what Fiji could do. It has created a lot of lift in terms of awareness, and I expect that to continue as we try and manage the rapid growth of our industry in Fiji.

The answer to that question is, yes. I am seeing a lot more awareness happening. We are now actually formally showcasing the country and its capabilities, and perhaps during COVID people just knew Fiji for the sun, sea, and sand; not much else. Suddenly the BPO sector is now viewed as having a genuine offering.

One of the exciting things that I think will come out as well now that *Google's* invested is other types of technical skill-hubbing will probably happen out of Fiji. I am talking about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and cyber security type of opportunity.

In terms of Artificial Intelligence, a lot of us may not be aware but there is already 45 young men and women sitting in an office in Garden City doing AI for one of the large accounting firms in Australia. So the capability is already in this country and they are already working on AI type solutions for their customer.

On top of that, Mr. Speaker, cybersecurity, an analyst in the area of cybersecurity, starting graduate, will get paid something around £30,000 in the UK or US40,000 to US50,000. What that means is, we have an opportunity in this transition with economic diversification to genuinely raise the wages and salaries of our young. I am not saying we are going to pay them \$100,000, but even if it is

50 percent of that, it is still a very good salary. Some of us started as a graduate on \$7,000 or \$9,000 when we came out of university.

In terms of risk diversification and a digressed a bit in terms of the opportunities, there are some large opportunities. In terms of the tax concessions as asked by honourable Koya, as he is aware, Vanua Levu is already a tax-free zone anyway, but the tax concessions are generally granted on specific companies. I would imagine that, that should sort out the concessionary requirements but I am sure if there is any need to having a look, we will probably, sort of relook at the legislation if required, but right now everyone is taking up the offer. We are pleased, Mr. Speaker, with where we are progressing with this industry. There are a few things that need to be worked on.

One is, we do not actually have a proper education curriculum to train a lot of these young men and women, so that is an active discussion right now with the FNU in terms of trying to train them. Hopefully, we will be able to get the young men and women trained in call centre training before they arrive on site with the employers. So those are some of the things that are being worked on, but certainly right now, I have to say the industry is in a very good place. If we can work on education, and of course, if you remember from the National Digital Strategy yesterday, I talked about data protection. That is another fundamental piece that needs to be looked at as a serious player in the global sense. So, once we get those two in place, and of course, the cyber security settings which Fiji is very committed to, I think there will be very promising days ahead with this sector.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you have talked about no proper curriculum, the need for more specific education, and also about taxation issues as well. My question is along that line, because particularly when it comes to knowledge processing, outsourcing, the specific skills that we need to ensure that forensic accounting and so forth, training is so important, because at the same time, we are losing our people. Apart from the tax incentives, as we want to grow, private sector investment and public sector investment because we want to entice them, is the public sector also willing to provide, particularly, infrastructure is so important, can you elaborate further on this?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, like I shared a couple of days ago, sometimes if the private sector is given the right kind of framework, they generally can drive the whole, or take most of the risks. In this case, certainly in terms of public sector investment and private sector investment, a lot of the private sectors are already mobilising. Another thing that is required is the creation of business park type areas, or areas where these BPOs, as they come through, can be located. The private sector is already mobilised. Centrecom at the moment works with Grace Road, for example, to use their buildings.

In that sense, the public sector has not really had a need to actually develop any actual physical structures. But certainly, as some of these BPO operations move into some of the other semi-urban areas, let us call it, and it needs some infrastructure development, whether it be communications or roading, I am sure the Government will look at it favourably in terms of trying to develop and support the sector.

Fortunately, right now, the tax concessions seem to be attractive enough for them to take the risk in terms of some of the other areas of investment, particularly, as you mentioned, the public sector requirement. At the moment, we do tax concessions. Now and again, we entertain specific requests from some BPO operations. In the broad sense, it is very much a private sector led industry at the moment and certainly where we can help is trying to develop the education curriculum, as I alluded to, and FNU has been quite happy to take the lead on that front.

MR. SPEAKER.- Given the time, I will propose that we now take our afternoon break, but before we do, we will entertain the Suspension Motion from the Leader of the Government in Parliament.

**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 two Oral Questions, Written Question, Bills and Motions, there are three listed.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now ask honourable Members who wish to intervene. There are none.

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 a break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.06 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.42 p.m.

Expected Downturn – US Trade with Fiji  
(Question No. 46/2025)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask my question, I would like to apologise to your good self and to the honourable Prime Minister for my tardiness.

My question is:

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service and Public Enterprises and Information inform Parliament on what other markets and old markets he wishes to re-establish as per his statement in the press in the first week of April with respect to the expected downturn in US trade with Fiji?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was looking at the Standing Orders while we were talking about Orders, et cetera, I saw here one word, ‘concise’, in Standing Order 45(4). I can say, ‘yes’, but we have asked, “What other markets”? So, I will say a little more than just say ‘yes’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent announcement of the imposition of tariff by the United States Administration had implications for Fiji, particularly in relation to our largest export market. The US remains a vital trading partner for Fiji, and it is essential that Fiji continues to strengthen that important trade relationship.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or honourable Members will recall that when I made the statement that honourable Koya is referring to, I made the point that we had been promoted by the imposition by the United States of America. It has taken us to the level of China. It is considering us into the same level as China, so we must either punch our way out of it. Someone asked me whether we go into a trade war, and I said, “No, we are not big enough to have a trade war.” All we have to do now is to roll with the punches, stay on our feet, wait for the compulsory count of eight. Hopefully, the bell goes before that.

Yes, we are looking at other areas, and I must thank the honourable Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications for being proactive in that area, having had talks with some Trade Commissions and our own Trade Commissioners that are out there in the field. Right now, as we speak, Ambassador Koya is also on the ground looking for other alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has long been committed to expanding its trade horizon, not only to reduce dependency on any one market, but also to ensure that our exporters have access to a diverse and resilient range of markets. Last week, Sir, I was in Singapore and Indonesia, and those are two more of possible destinations for our exporters.

In line with our National Development Plan and Fiji's Trade Policy Framework, we are pursuing multiple strategic initiatives, which I will now outline.

One of the key markets we are focussing on is Canada, which is emerging as a key destination for Fiji's agriculture and value-added products, and we have a lot of our diaspora now living and being successful in Canada. With Fiji Airway's commencing direct flight to Canada in 2022, we have already seen a positive uptake of fresh fruit and vegetables in the Canadian market. The potential for further growth in this market is significant, and Fiji Trade Commission's North America Office is actively engaged in conducting surveys and discussions with the Fiji Islands stores in Vancouver. We have sent our greetings to them, and we thank them for their continued interest in their homeland.

To ensure that we fully capitalise on this potential, our Trade Commission Office will allocate additional resources and focus on deepening market research and assessing participation in key Canadian trade shows. This will complement the great work already underway in the United States, which will continue alongside our expanded efforts in Canada.

Our traditional partners, Mr. Speaker, Sir, North America, Australia and New Zealand, will continue to be our primary trading partners, and we are actively engaging in both countries that are closer by - Australia and New Zealand, through regular trilateral discussions to ensure continued and enhanced access to these vital markets.

In 2024, these two markets combined accounted for approximately 18 percent of Fiji's total goods exported. Our focus remains on initiatives that streamline trade processes by addressing and removing non-tariff barriers, ultimately making it easier for our businesses to export to these countries.

In addition, Fiji is evaluating the potential benefits associated with acceding to the Pacific Agreement on Closed Economic Relations (PACER Plus). The Ministry of Trade has undertaken consultations with domestic stakeholders to gather valuable feedback on the perceived benefits and concerns surrounding that Agreement.

Those consultations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were crucial in understanding the specific needs of our exporters. Based on the insights received, the Ministry of Trade is actively advancing discussions on key issues such as market access, trade facilitation support and development assistance, all of which are fundamental to increasing Fiji's exports.

On United Arab Emirates (UAE), Mr. Speaker, Sir, in expanding our focus further to the Middle East, another key initiative being explored is enhancing Fiji's trade relationships with the UAE through a regional economic partnership agreement. Ministerial-level discussions began between our two Ministers of Trade at the margins of the World Governments Summit in February of this year.

However, the momentum was achieved during the Forum Trade Officials Meeting where the Ministry of Trade presented Fiji's proposal to Senior Regional Officials receiving a very positive feedback. As we speak, dates are being finalised for the initial round of discussions and negotiations. This partnership holds great potential for diversifying Fiji's exports and tapping into the rapidly expanding Middle Eastern economy.

In China, Mr. Speaker, Sir, complementing our Middle Eastern engagement, we are also pursuing opportunities in Asia, particularly with China. We are aiming to negotiate a development-friendly Fiji-China preferential trade agreement, and that agreement will focus on creating favourable conditions for Fijian export of products in the Chinese market, one of the largest and fastest-growing economies globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, China represents an untapped market for Fiji, offering a wealth of opportunities to its expanding middle class, increasing demand for premium and speciality products, and its strategic position as a global manufacturing hub. Additionally, the country's evolving consumer preferences for high-quality and sustainable products, such as agricultural goods, seafood, and natural health items, align well with Fiji's export strength. With the Chinese Government's push for greater international trade partnerships, Fiji stands to benefit from improved market access and the potential to diversify its export portfolio in this fast and dynamic market.

On the European Union (EU), Mr. Speaker, Sir, increasing Fiji's export to the EU remains another critical priority for the Government. The implementation of the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) has been a significant step in that direction. One of the priority areas

for growth is the processed fish, particularly canned tuna and tuna loins, which hold significant potential to create jobs and generate income for our people.

The IEPA provides a special provision known as global sourcing. This provision allows Fiji to source fish from other compliant vessels operating within the Pacific, provided the fish are landed and processed in Fiji, and meet EU's food safety and sustainability standards.

The Ministry of Trade has officially commenced the process of activating the global sourcing provision under IEPA, and once activated, that provision will significantly boost Fiji's ability to export more processed fish to the EU, providing a vital economic opportunity for our tuna industry and our people.

On Pacific Island Countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are equally committed to reinvigorating our trade relationship within the Pacific Island region.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful to the honourable Prime Minister for his response. Honourable Prime Minister, there was one part of the question that related to old trade partners and my question is related to the UK, Sir. Is there a chance that we can liven up the relationship with UK with respect to hell of a lot more trade, bearing in mind also that our own aircraft fly up to Singapore, which is halfway? You are filling the top of the aircraft and also the bottom of the aircraft and is much easier nowadays. So, will we also be looking at strengthening our relationship, bearing in mind also that the Caribbean takes full advantage of the UK and its relationship with the UK and the Commonwealth? Will Fiji be doing the same, Sir, maybe even with the Commonwealth?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure honourable Koya is aware that we have continued our discussion with them since they exited the European market. We will continue to try and re-establish those markets of old days. You will recall that we had all our sugar going to the UK under a marketing body that was there which shifted the focus to the EU but, yes, we will continue to pursue that. In my discussions last week with the former Prime Minister, he is very willing to assist us in that. He came all the way down to Singapore and we met there - Sir Anthony Blair. I used to call him Tony Blair.

#### Exploration of New Regional Air Routes (Question No. 47/2025)

HON. S. TUBUNA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament whether Fiji is exploring new regional air routes, in partnership with other Pacific Island nations, to enhance intra-regional tourism and trade?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide a response to the question raised by the honourable Member on whether Fiji is exploring new regional air routes in partnership with other Pacific nations to enhance intra-regional tourism and trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we know, Fiji is strategically positioning itself as a central hub for connectivity within the Pacific region. In regions where geographic isolation presents real challenges, the presence of Fiji Airways becomes more than just a service. It is a vital bridge to connection opportunity in the wider global community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our national airline, Fiji Airways, has been instrumental in enhancing regional connectivity across the Pacific, particularly for island nations lacking direct international air services.

It is deeply humbling to know that Fiji Airways serves as a sole air link connecting Tuvalu and Kiribati to the rest of the world.

While these nations may not have direct international flights, they benefit from Fiji Airway's extensive network, which includes connections to major hubs in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. This connectivity facilitates tourism, trade and cultural exchange, contributing to the economic development of the smaller island nations.

Fiji Airways has established direct flights to destinations such as New Caledonia, thereby, facilitating increased tourism, trade and cultural exchange within the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways plays a crucial role in fostering regional economic integration and connectivity across the Pacific. It is the only airline linking Fiji with several neighbouring island nations, including up to 11 weekly flights to Tonga, and up to 10 weekly flights to Samoa, seven to Port Villa, one to Honiara, Fiji Airways enables vital passenger and cargo movement that supports trade, tourism and the broader economic development.

Its ongoing commitment in expanding regional air routes reflects not only commercial strategy, but also Fiji's broader objective of advancing regional cooperation. This aligns with the shared goals outlined at the Regional Aviation Ministers Meeting held in Suva in March 2025, where stronger, more sustainable aviation networks were identified as a priority for inclusive Pacific growth.

Exploring new footprints in other unserved regional markets which includes American Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands and the various islands are being explored. However, commencement of new routes needs to be supported by a feasible business case.

In that regard, our national airline continuously engages with respective Pacific Islands to explore ways of strengthening its relationship and better serving the market.

#### Written Question

##### Detailed Breakdown - Official Overseas Travel (Question No. 48/2025)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information provide Parliament with a detailed breakdown of all official overseas travel from 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2024 to April 2025, including -

- (a) the number of official trips taken by each Deputy Prime Minister, Minister, former Minister and Assistant Minister, along with the destinations visited;
- (b) the cost of each trip; and
- (c) the subject of each trip?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- May I respond to the question in accordance with Standing Order 45(3) within seven sitting days of asking your question.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 09/2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 1st May, 2025, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with a right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill of 2025 proposes critical amendments to the Land Transport Act 1998. These amendments are intended to address the operational and regulatory challenges that have arisen, following the implementation of the Open Taxi Rank System (OTRS) and the re-introduction of the Base and Stand system for the taxi industry throughout Fiji.

As honourable Members may recall, this OTRS was introduced following amendments to the Land Transport (Budget Amendment) Act 2021 and came into effect on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2022. The system was designed with the aim of promoting fairness, improving flexibility and reducing illegal operations by allowing taxi permit holders to operate from any open taxi rank on a rotational or first-in first-out basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the intentions behind the system were commendable, practical experience on the ground has revealed significant shortcomings. Since its introduction, the OTRS has contributed to unnecessary traffic congestion in major urban centres such as Suva, Lautoka and Nadi. Enforcement agencies including the Fiji Police Force, LTA and Municipal Councils have faced considerable difficulties in monitoring operations effectively.

There has been a notable increase in illegal taxi operations, congestion, disruptions, misuse of permits and selective provision of day and night services to the public, undermining the objectives of a public transport system. Passengers, especially women, children, shoppers, the elderly and even the sick, have been left stranded because of the current taxi situation.

Furthermore, it must be highlighted that the OTRS was introduced, following limited consultation with key stakeholders, which resulted in considerable resistance from operators and a lack of public understanding about the operational framework. Those shortcomings have impacted on the efficiency and success of the system and, ultimately, the confidence of both, operators and the travelling public.

Sir, recognising the gravity of these challenges, the Ministry, in close collaboration with LTA, undertook a series of nationwide public consultations in the Northern, Western, Eastern and Central Divisions. The feedback received was clear and consistent.

Stakeholders who expressed serious concerns about the operational inefficiencies, congestion issues and regulatory weaknesses associated with the OTRS strongly supported a return to a more structured, regulated and transparent operational framework.

Accordingly, the Land Transport (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025 is proposing to amend the Land Transport Act 1998 to:

- remove all references to OTRS;

- reinstate the framework for taxi bases and stands;
- liberalise the definitions of bases and stands;
- allow expansion into urban areas or native *mataqali* land;
- delete the provisions of the Public Service Vehicle Levy that was introduced under OTRS; and
- update related definitions and regulatory powers.

The reintroduction of the Base and Stand system is expected to improve traffic management by designating specific areas for taxi operation, thereby easing congestion in urban areas. It will strengthen regulatory oversight and enable better enforcement by the Fiji Police Force, LTA and Municipal Councils. It will enhance transparency and fairness in taxi permit allocations, providing a formal, structured and orderly system of operations.

Additionally, the reinstated system will allow Municipal Councils to generate revenue and strengthen the financial sustainability of local government structures. More importantly, it will ensure equitable access to taxi services across suburban and rural areas. To facilitate the implementation of the Base and Stand system, the proposed amendment seeks to amend sections 2, 24B, 65 and 113 of the Land Transport Act 1998. This modification will provide the legal flexibility required to introduce the Base and Stand Framework.

In the spirit of inclusiveness, relevant key stakeholders were consulted, as I have mentioned, and concerns and comments were taken on board. The implementation of the new framework will be overseen by the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, in collaboration with LTA. Any financial implications arising from the legislative changes and implementation will be agreed under the LTA's existing operational budget.

I should add that this will assist in the regulation of the current thriving pirate transport sector. Given the significance of these reforms and the urgent need to restore order, transparency and efficiency in the industry, it is important that Parliament consider and pass the Land Transport (Amendment)(No. 2) Bill 2025 without delay. Hence, the need for Standing Order 51.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a short and brief contribution on this; the only grave objection we have is, why is this being under Standing Order 51 when in your own speech right now, you mentioned the lack of consultation with respect to the Open Taxi Rank System? Now, you are going through this and trying to remove that without any consultation whatsoever. So, a suggestion would be, Sir, that this may be ought to go to the right committee and be brought back in the next session of Parliament. It is a small Bill, we understand it, and maybe we can take it to a committee to get some consultation done because I know for a fact that this is a highly thought of matter, there are differences in opinion with respect to OTRS, and that will require some consultation exercise that needs to take place.

Bearing in mind also that you yourself, honourable Minister, have just mentioned that in your opinion, there was not enough consultations done in the initial stages of the OTRS. That is our submission, Sir, and we think it is only fair that it goes to a committee and be brought back. There is no urgency currently in this, it is not a matter of life and death, but it is something that needs to be vetted carefully by a committee so that the public can be consulted on this.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there any more contributions from the floor? I now call on the Minister for Transport to give his response.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments.

MR. SPEAKER.- If I can just make an observation, honourable Koya, regarding the use of Standing Order 51. One may call the tyranny of Standing Order 51 is brought about, I think everyone is using it from both sides of the House, before and now, so we are caught. I am powerless to do anything about it, we are locked into the system as it were. The honourable Minister has identified Standing Order 51 to be used for this purpose, so we are with him.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast

Ayes	-	34
Noes	-	14
Not voted	-	7

Motion agreed to.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT ON THE  
LEVUKA TOWN COUNCIL 2016-2017 ANNUAL REPORT**

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Levuka Town Council 2016-2017 Annual Report that was tabled in Parliament on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

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

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address the Consolidated Review Report on the Levuka Town Council 2016-2017 Annual Report. The Committee, in deliberating the Report, was informed of the challenges encountered by the Council in its future plan of Levuka. Being the heritage site comes with major maintenance work and requires funding for the heritage and monumental sites. Like any other Municipality, Levuka tries to deliver the service needed by its ratepayers.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significant key findings and recommendations were highlighted during the deliberations of the Report and site visit are as follows:

- (1) financial management;
- (2) rate arrears;
- (3) Levuka Government services; and
- (4) infrastructure development.

The Committee anticipates that these recommendations will assist and improve the Council's service delivery. On that note, I commend the Report to Parliament.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion on the Consolidating Review Report on the Levuka Town Council 2016-2017 Annual Report. The Reports are a bit outdated. Some findings and recommendations are very important, and the Ministry is looking forward to take the Council forward in having more collaboration and provide guidance and oversight on the operational issues at the Levuka Town Council. It is a small Council with only about 144 ratepayers, with a population of 1,400.

One of the major challenges that the Council is facing right now is the ability to generate enough funding to support the operations of the Council. We are thankful to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture and Heritage for coming on board and assisting the Council in upgrading and maintenance of some of the heritage sites around Levuka.

Levuka is the first capital of Fiji. If you upgrade these heritage sites, it can be a tourist attraction and can provide economic benefits to the local people of Levuka. I have also been advised by the honourable Minister that a Japanese company has been contracted to do a review on how those heritage sites can be upgraded.

It is also very interesting to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is one of the small municipalities with newly appointed Special Administrators as well as the staff, and they have done their best in the collection of arrears. For the past three years, they have had some inroads in the collection of rates for this small Council. It is very interesting to note that the small Council in Levuka has gone to the extent of doing more collection, enforcing and strengthening their collection strategies to try and collect more from the ratepayers.

Another challenge right now for the Council is to upgrade some of the infrastructure that they have. Funding has been allocated for them to upgrade the Nasau Park, but now the Councillors and the Administrators are doing some more revised scoping so that they can also do a full upgrade of Nasau Park.

An issue that was also raised is in regard to some of the old streetlights in Levuka. I will also be assisting Levuka by installing some solar streetlights that have been donated by the Chinese Government. Hopefully, these type of facilities can assist Levuka in that area.

What the Ministry is doing now is to ensure that their financial reports are up to date. The Ministry, through its Audit and Compliance Unit, are now working closely with Levuka Town Council in ensuring that their financial reports are up to date, so that the Accounts can be audited by the Auditor-General. It is something that the Ministry is currently working on to improve some of the financial aspects of the Council.

In moving forward and with support from the Ministry, we have noted that the Council needs to generate more activities in town. I am so thankful that some offices and have also set up in Levuka, like the Land Transport Authority (LTA). That can assist the people of Levuka in getting some of the services that are normally provided in major towns and cities. So, them getting closer to the people of Levuka will assist not only improve Levuka, but the whole of island of Ovalau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I want to thank the Special Administrators, the Chairman, as well as the staff of Levuka Town Council for doing a good service to Levuka Town, as well as the people of Ovalau and the people of Lomaiviti.

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

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

Levuka is an important town for many reasons. Levuka was Fiji's first capital and Fiji's first UNESCO World Heritage site. Levuka was Fiji's first capital from 1874 until 1883. In 1989, it was designated a historic town and has been recognised a UNESCO World Heritage status in 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the recommendations of the Committee is funding to improve the condition of all recreational parks and public conveniences. Recreational area plays a very important role in enhancing the quality of life in urban environment by providing residents and visitors with spaces for outdoor activities and also for relaxation.

There is an urgent need to improve the condition of recreational parks and conveniences in the Old Capital for the people of Levuka and for those visiting Levuka, including the tourists. I was in Levuka recently and have seen the condition of parks and I agree with the Committee's recommendation that urgent attention be given to the parks.

They have Special Administrators and CEO, who should come up with innovative ideas and share ideas with the Council and the Ministry of Local Government, and improve parks and come up with more recreational areas in Levuka for the people of Levuka and for visitors to Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another recommendation of the Committee is the monumental sites and buildings, and it should be maintained. I fully agree with the Committee's recommendation, and I urge the Ministry of Local Government to work very closely with the Department of Heritage to reinstate the Heritage Grant for the maintenance and upkeep of the monumental sites. There are many monumental sites in Levuka which needs to be preserved and protected. We should not forget that the monumental sites in Levuka attracts people from other parts of Fiji and abroad which boosts economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee has recommended that Levuka Town Council work closely with Fiji Roads Authority and other stakeholders to address the issue of poor road conditions, blocked drains and streetlights that are not working. During my visit to Levuka earlier this month, I have noticed the poor road condition in town area. Road maintenance work should be done at the earliest. Only part of the area was tasselled. Very poor! I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government to ensure that the Ministry work closely with Levuka Town Council and address the poor road condition, drainage and poor streetlights at the earliest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another recommendation of the Committee is on monitoring. The Committee found that the Ministry of Local Government and the Council need to improve their coordination in order to improve service delivery. Lack of co-ordination between the Ministry and the Council should not affect the ratepayers and visitors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, service delivery to the ratepayers and people of Levuka should not be compromised.

Although Levuka Town is not a big town, it is an important town with many historical sites. I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government to ensure that there is good networking between Council and the Ministry to ensure that best services are provided to the ratepayers, people of Levuka and visitors to Levuka Town.

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 plan for repairs prior to it becoming more problematic for the people of Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Special Administrators and CEOs have special roles. They should show some leadership and ensure that there is better planning and systematic approach so that best services are provided to ratepayers, the citizens of Ovalau and all visitors to Levuka Town, including tourists. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity and I support the motion.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion before Parliament and thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for its Report on the Levuka Town Council for the period 2016-2017, and I support the constructive recommendation of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a concern that the Levuka Town Council has not observed proper accounting protocols, and I urge the Ministry of Local Government to ensure that the Council exercises proper financial management and oversight of the Council, albeit a very small one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to comment briefly on the sad state of affairs in Levuka which the honourable Chand has mentioned is the Old Capital and, of course, it is a well-known UNESCO World Heritage site. Levuka is in dire need of basic infrastructure. Its roads, apart from some recent repairs, are in a deplorable state, making it difficult for residents and visitors alike to navigate in town. They did not even have a functioning mortuary, forcing grieving families to bury their loved ones on the same day under distressing conditions, and the ring road around Ovalau, again, needs attention, especially the road from Bureta to the town itself.

Mr Speaker, if we do not act swiftly, Levuka risks losing its UNESCO status and that would be a national embarrassment. I would suggest with respect that time is of the essence, and we must take immediate steps to restore and maintain the heritage of our colonial town before it is too late. Periodic reports have highlighted the need for Fiji to strengthen site management and dedicate proper resources to Levuka's conservation efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Levuka's youth face limited employment opportunities, forcing many of the young people to leave the island in search of work in Viti Levu, especially Suva. This brain-drain weakens the very community that should be breathing life into the town's economy. Levuka has relied almost entirely on the PAFCO tuna cannery for jobs, and greater efforts are needed to attract new industries or stimulate new economic opportunities in tourism, agriculture and small businesses in the old capital.

Mr. Speaker, I believe there is great potential for ecotourism and sports tourism in Levuka, but investors will not go or visit the town for investment if basic infrastructure and services particularly, healthcare, remain substandard.

Mr. Speaker, another pressing issue in the town is the location of the power station which must be relocated out of town. Its presence is not only unsightly but also environmental and safety concerns. Moving it to a more suitable location would open up valuable land for better use, enhancing the town's appeal for tourism and development.

Mr. Speaker, Levuka is just not another town, it is the birthplace of modern Fiji, the site where Fiji was ceded to Great Britain at Nasova, and it is a place that represents the fusion of cultures that shaped our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Government must commit greater resources to restoring Levuka's infrastructure and improving public services, creating an environment where businesses and tourism are able to thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, Levuka has a shortage of homes available for rent for public servants, especially teachers. And I would urge the relevant Ministry to examine the problem and address it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to briefly contribute to the motion that is before us. Before doing that, I would like to thank the honourable and learned Attorney-General for a bold statement.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to go directly to the key findings. Yesterday, when we were dealing with the Lautoka City Council, I raised that the Councils have issues in terms of the review of the legislation, and it was the Councils who have told us. However, in response, the honourable Minister

stood up and said that he has brought three amendments to this Parliament which was approved and which we are aware of.

What I was basically saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was that the entire Local Government Act needs to be reviewed and that is the submission from the Councils. Not only the Local Government Act, but the other legislation - Town Planning Act, Subdivision of land Act, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 3.4 - collection of rate arrears, again, in Levuka, the Committee noted the increase in the rate arrears, so I want to ask, what is the difference between the previous Council and the current one? Is there any improvement, or is it just more or less like an employment centre? That is something that the honourable Minister needs to look into.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other issue that was raised during our visit was that before, the smaller Councils like Levuka, Tavua Town Council and Savusavu Town Council, the Ministry used to provide the salary for the CEOs. That has been discontinued, Mr. Speaker, and I humbly request the honourable Minister to liaise with the Ministry of Finance so that they can be assisted. As you have said, they have insufficient funds, and that was what we found out during our visit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other issue that was brought to us was Nasau Park, and the honourable Minister had touched on that. However, what we were told was contrary to what the honourable Minister said. We were told that they had made a submission to do the entire redo or upgrading of Nasau Park, but that type of fund was not given to them and they were unable to upgrade the Nasau Park. But I urge the Ministry to consult the Ministry of Finance because Levuka is a very important and very historical place and I urge if that assistance can be provided to them as well. Generally, this is my observation, being in municipal councils for the last couple of years.

In general, I would like to express my deep concern regarding the critical state of Municipal Councils in service delivery. It is evident that these Councils have reached a crisis point with failures in basic functions and are now posing a direct threat to public health and safety. I want to reiterate what I was saying yesterday, I think the Special Administrators of the Councils were not bothered, honestly.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, no, please, do not take me wrong, I am trying to relay what I have observed and what I have heard. I am not trying to blame the Government; it is the people down there. I think they are not doing their job.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- The last one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I hope the honourable Minister will revisit what I am trying to say, Government has engaged the consultant to do a master plan. In the 2023-2024 Budget, \$1.5 million was allocated. Then, again, in 2024-2025, \$2.2 million was allocated. When we visited the Councils and when we talked about this work on the master plan, there was a huge disconnect. The Councils are not even aware of what is happening. They have their own plans. They are telling us that they want to do the extension of town boundaries. The consultant was hired to see where the industrial area, the commercial area and the recreational area should be. That is the scope of work that was given at that time, unless it has changed. If they are not connecting the Ministry and the Council, then it is a waste of money.

I heard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but *nahi aare yaar*. So I ask the line minister to look into that, thank you, Sir.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask this question, why are we discussing the 2016-2017 Annual Report? In the last session and in this session, we have these two honourable Members of Parliament on the Opposition side, lecture us about good governance. No action! I can tell you this, when we were appointed, within one year, I completed the Annual Report for the Ministry of Justice from 2016 to 2022 and Attorney-General from 2017 to 2022. That is real action.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted that one of the key findings is the review of the legislation. That is what you should have done, honourable Bala. We heard it. I can tell you one thing, the draft review of the legislation is just before me on my table, and I am going to discuss that with the honourable Minister. It is coming. You are going to see changes here.

You are talking about the audit. That must be said by the honourable Minister and the Permanent Secretary. The status of Levuka Town Council and any other Council is dependent on the key performance of the Minister. You failed to do that! That is your legacy – the legacy of the FijiFirst Government. What the honourable Minister has done, he has changed the scenario.

Honourable Hem Chand talked about the road. Come on! Everyone knows the good work that the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport is doing in Levuka.

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It is not only Levuka, it is in Gau, Korovou and everywhere. The FijiFirst Government totally ignored that.

You talked about the wharf. The people in Levuka are complaining because no cruise liners come to Levuka. Of course, we are talking about the tourism site and the heritage site. You should have done that long time ago.

I am happy that you are concerned about sports. We hope that with your association with the Ba Football Club, you would have put them in good use in Levuka because Levuka produces sporting people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are proud that two of the Drua's key players are from Levuka. The gentleman playing for the Crusaders is from Levuka. The champion weightlifter is from Levuka. In fact, the champion sporting organisation in weightlifting comes from Levuka. However, because of the interference of the past government, they appointed someone else who does not do weightlifting to be in charge of that sport. As a result, the best weightlifter went from Levuka to Australia. If only you know what Levuka can offer to this nation. If only you know what Lomaiviti can offer to this nation. It is in the centre, it is the pearl of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted that the amount of money given under the Head is not sufficient, no real action until now. I urge the honourable Minister for Finance to consider the circumstances about Levuka. Is it fair to compare Levuka with Korovou Town or any other? No, it is not! I believe it deserves professional treatment in terms of finance because they cannot renovate the buildings. They have to – according to the specimen – set by the organisation, and because of that, Government should seriously look into helping and work it out in terms of budgetary support.

I fully commend the recommendations by the Committee, and I invite the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Deputy Prime Ministers to visit Levuka and see what it is like. I fully support the motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine walking through the streets of Levuka - Fiji's first capital, UNESCO world heritage town that speaks volume about our nation's rich history and you are met with the sites of the colonial era, architecture, the echoes of thriving commerce and the whispers of the past. But look closer, Sir, and you will find these historic treasures, struggling under the weight of neglect, insufficient resources in relentless amount of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I offer my unwavering support for the Consolidated Review Report of the Levuka Town Council 2016-2017 Annual Report, which provides not just a review of the Council's challenges, but also a roadmap for actionable improvements. This Report touches on areas critical to the sustainability of Levuka's heritage status and its future as a vibrant municipality.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the report is more than a document, it is a reality check. It reveals some hard truths about Levuka's struggles, limited funding, rate arrears, non-compliance with financial regulations, deteriorating infrastructure and challenges in maintaining UNESCO heritage requirements. Yet, it also showcases the resilience and dedication of the Levuka Town Council. Despite those hurdles, the Council has implemented forward-thinking measures, like a finance manual, standing operating procedures for financial compliance, and efforts to collaborate with stakeholders on heritage and community projects.

We must commend the Council on projects, like the completion of the new Levuka Market, plans to upgrade Nasau Park and the home composting initiative. Those are prime examples of determination against odds, and they deserve our recognition. But recognition alone is not enough Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Council cannot shoulder its burden alone. They are fighting to preserve the historic charm and relevance of Levuka - a town that is not just a local treasure, but a global one celebrated by UNESCO.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Heritage Act 2024 is a step in the right direction. It provides a framework for managing heritage sites, like Levuka, and aligns Fiji's policies with UNESCO standards. It introduces measures like heritage management plans, restricted development zones and community involvement, all of which are pivotal for the sustainable preservation of Levuka's unique identity. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act will only achieve its full potential if it is backed by concrete actions and here, I believe the Government must do more.

Supporting private owners for heritage compliance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of the historic buildings in Levuka are privately owned. These owners are expected to meet UNESCO's stringent preservation standards using specific materials and maintaining the original facade of their properties. The cost of doing this is often unaffordable, especially for families on modest income.

Without financial support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can we reasonably expect these individuals to comply? How can we ensure that Levuka retains its UNESCO designation? I strongly urge the Government to consider two critical measures.

- (1) Heritage preservation grants, direct financial assistance to private owners for restoring and maintaining their historic buildings; and
- (2) Tax credits for heritage compliance, tax incentives for individuals who invest in preserving heritage properties.

These steps would not only help preserve Levuka's cultural fabric, but also stimulate economic activities, attract tourists and enhance community pride.

Infrastructure needs an oversight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Council has made progress, infrastructure remains a glaring issue. Poor road conditions, blocked drains and declining public spaces are challenges that must be addressed urgently.

The Council's initiatives, such as collaborating with Fiji Roads Authority are commendable, but they need stronger backing from the Ministry of Local Government and other stakeholders. Similarly, the Ministry must enhance its oversight and support for Municipalities like Levuka. Timely audits, efficient resource allocation, and better collaboration are essential for empowering Councils to perform effectively.

Levuka, a national treasure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka is a town that carries the weight of history. It is not merely a collection of buildings; it is a symbol of our heritage and identity. As the first municipality in Fiji, Levuka has been a leader in history, and it can be a leader in preservation as well.

We must act now by supporting the recommendations of this report, implementing provisions of the Heritage Act 2024, and with providing targeted financial assistance, we can ensure that Levuka not only retains its UNESCO designation but thrives as a beacon of culture, history, and community.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members for their constructive and destructive contribution and taking note of the points raised thereafter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee fully supports the execution of its recommendation by the Council. I support the motion before this august House and thank you, Sir, for the opportunity.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

### **CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – NASINU TOWN COUNCIL 2011–2017 ANNUAL REPORTS**

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Nasinu Town Council 2011-2017 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2025.

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

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to comment on the Consolidated Review Report on the Nasinu Town Council 2011-2017 Annual Reports. The Council provided its service to seven wards and 50 informal settlements. Nasinu is served to be the fastest growing urban centre in Fiji, with major residential, commercial and industrial zones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the significant key findings and recommendations that were highlighted during the deliberations of the Reports, as well as the site visit exercise that was taking place, areas that we were looking into was:

- the financial management of the Council;
- rate arrears;
- the infrastructure development; and
- solid waste management.

The Committee anticipates that its recommendation will assist and improve the Council in its

service delivery. On that note, I thank you, Sir.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I contribute to the motion before the House this evening, first, I would like to comment on some of the comments that were raised by honourable Bala. The first one is on the legislation review.

I was telling this House for us to review the legislation but during his time as Minister, he never took initiative to review the Local Government Act. I want to inform the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are reviewing our legislation, that is, the Local Government Act, as well as the Town and Country Planning Act 1947.

The next one, he also raised the question whether the Special Administrators that we have appointed were more effective than the previous Administrators. We have to inform honourable Bala and the House, yes, they are very innovative, and they have come up with new ideas, with new strategies of improving the service deliveries of most of the municipal councils around our country. The Report that we are looking at today is a very old report, 2011-2017, but nevertheless, there are few things that we can learn from it.

I must thank the current Chairman of the Nasinu Town Council, as well as the Administrators and the staff of the Nasinu Town Council for working together and coming up with new initiatives, new strategies to improve the service delivery at Nasinu town.

One of the very important issues brought by the Committee is strengthening financial compliance, which is something that the Council has done, that is their monthly consultations are now carried out and also reviewed by senior officers. Another important aspect of the recommendation by the Committee is on the revenue collection and debt recovery.

Nasinu, when the Administrators were appointed, they operationalised a debt recovery unit responsible for collecting arrears as well as the rates for Nasinu Town Council. As of March 2025, arrears recovery has improved by \$400,000 compared to the past two years, with total arrears collected as of March standing at \$2.5 million.

One other new strategy that the Council and Administrators have implemented is to address urban safety and social issues is – they have this new initiative which is called “Hands across Nasinu” -- where they are partnering with other agencies, schools, police, and community groups to try and address some issues that are happening around Nasinu.

Today, the Council have already installed 130 solar lights, in high-risk zones. That is an achievement itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir. And I have also received a report from the chairman of the Nasinu Town Council. They have done a forensic audit of Nasinu Town Council for this 2018 and 2020, and they have found abuse of funds, close to \$3.7 million. I must thank the Administrators for coming up with this, because we need to go to the bottom of this and find out. Some of these are hindering the development at the Nasinu Town Council.

Another important area they have looked at, is working with informal settlements and also, urban villages they have reached out to these informal settlements close 50, as alluded earlier by the Chairman. They have also done consultations as well as some civic awareness on these urban villages and settlements on the importance of ensuring their waste collection issue is well-maintained. A good example, we are also trying to formalise one of the informal settlements, Mamas Place in Caubati. It has been here for quite some time, in 2017, even during honourable Bala's time. We are trying to formalise it. It should have been done a long time ago. Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to again thank the Chairman, Administrators of Nasinu Town Council, as well as Acting CEO and staff of Nasinu Town Council for doing a good and great service to the people of Nasinu.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a young mother stands on a roadside in Makoi, her children at her side, excessively watching cars move forward in a traffic jam. What should be a 10-minute journey to school takes over an hour. People are frustrated, their time wasted, productivity lost. But it is not just her story. It is the story of thousands of residents in Nasinu. Traffic congestion is not just an inconvenience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a symptom of deeper challenges within an urban planning and infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak in support of the Consolidated Review Report of Nasinu Town Council's 2011-2017 Annual Reports. This Report provides us with an honest reflection of Nasinu's past and present, its successes and challenges and most importantly it lays the foundation for progress. While the findings are critical in many aspects they also highlight the Council's efforts to address systematic issues. My intention is to offer balance insights and give credit where it is due and urge action where it is needed.

Nasinu is not just another municipality. It is Fiji's most populous town, home to over 92,000 people. As the fastest growing urban centre it plays a critical role in Fiji's economic and social landscape. Its seven wards represent a diverse community of families, businesses and industries, but rapid growth brings rapid challenges none more frustrating than infrastructure and traffic management. Nasinu traffic woes have become a daily struggle for its residents. With key routes connecting Suva to Nausori running through the municipality, Nasinu bears the brunt of heavy vehicle loads.

The lack of coordinated urban planning has resulted in poorly maintained roads, insufficient intersections and a lack of alternative routes. The council has also faced difficulties enforcing traffic management, especially in areas with unregulated street parking and roadside vendors. Add to this, the increasing population and growing car ownership, and we have a recipe for gridlock.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine the economic cost of thousands of hours lost in traffic. Time is a resource and for many residents that time they could spend earning, studying or simply being with family. Nasinu people deserve better.

Propose solutions for traffic management:

To tackle these issues as strongly as the Nasinu Town Council and the Government to collaborate on the following:

- (1) invest in alternate routes, creating bypass roads and improving feeder roads in residential areas will reduce the pressure on main arteries;
- (2) Smart traffic technology introduced sensor-based traffic lights and real-time traffic monitoring to ease congestion especially during peak hours;
- (3) Public transport hubs. Develop centralised bus and taxi hubs to reduce scattered pickup points and streamline movement;
- (4) Promoting carpooling and cycling. Encourage greener most sustainable commuting options to reduce vehicle numbers on the road; and
- (5) Stricter parking regulations. Implement clear rules to minimise road side disruptions caused by illegal parking.

Mr. Speaker, addressing traffic challenges must be a top priority for any vision to make Nasinu a smart and sustainable city by 2030.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report of the Nasinu Town Council 2011-2017 Annual Reports. As mentioned by the Honourable Minister, this is a very old report. This report exposes financial mismanagement,

government's failures and service delivery shortcomings issues that must be resolved for Nasinu to fulfill its vision of becoming a smart, sustainable urban centre by 2030.

The challenge for the current Nasinu Town Council management right now is how to manoeuvre their way through the negative ripple effects, issues and difficulties inherited from the past. Mr. Speaker, while corrective measures are underway, mentioned by the honourable Minister, financial instability remains a major obstacle to this transformation. Without fiscal discipline, strategic urban planning and meaningful reform, this ambition will remain an aspiration rather than a reality.

Mr. Speaker, the Nasinu Town Council faces a \$14.5 million in unpaid rate arrears, crippling essential municipal operations. This financial instability threatens the foundation on which the council hopes to build a sustainable future. A prime example is the Valelevu Ground redevelopment, envisioned as a commercial and recreational hub, yet, 43,000 operational deficits underscore the fragility of Nasinu's finance.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister for Local Government has rightly emphasised that the municipal facilities must be self-sustained rather than depend on continued Government assistance. Recognising this, the Ministry of Local Government has mandated audits of all municipal financial accounts. Rate collection strategies now rely on profiling arrears and include the service of arrears notices, field visits to defaulters, and salary deductions.

Additionally, as mentioned and stated by the honourable Minister, the ratepayers facing financial difficulties may apply for a write-off rate arrears, which the honourable Minister approves under the Local Government Act. Mr. Speaker, Nasinu cannot afford bold infrastructure projects without addressing ongoing financial instability.

The ongoing forensic audit marks a vital step toward financial accountability. However, its findings must spur actions rather than remain a formality. The Council executive chairman, Mr. Felix Magnus, has voiced concerns that billions of dollars have disappeared, compromising essential services. Nasinu's sustainability goals, including climate-conscious infrastructure, improved waste management, energy-efficient urban spaces, and technology-driven public services, cannot materialise without financial security.

The Ministry of Local Government must enforce rigorous oversight across municipalities to prevent governance failures from stalling economic and urban development. Despite its challenges, Nasinu can recover and thrive if governance strengthens transparency in financial controls and accountability measures. Recent reforms include the introduction of finance, manual and standard operating procedures to promote financial discipline. However, unless actively enforced, these measures remain empty gestures instead of meaningful reforms. So, without financial stability, infrastructure projects will stall, sustainability initiatives will lack funding, and urban planning will remain theoretical.

Decisive action is required now if Nasinu embraces technological innovation, climate resilience, and economic expansion. The Committee's recommendations must be swiftly implemented, including expediting of the review of the Local Government Act, strict enforcement of financial reporting standards, a proactive rate of risk recovery strategy, strategic infrastructure development collaboration, formalisation of informal settlements, and standardised financial reporting across municipalities.

In conclusion, I want to say that Nasinu's financial difficulties are undeniable, but they do not help to define Nasinu's future. Forensic audit-strengthened accountability measures and municipal reforms offer a path forward, but only if leaders act decisively. But cities do not emerge from financial instability. They are built on financial integrity, strong governance, and strategic investment.

Nasinu must take immediate steps to secure its future. Anything less, jeopardises its mission for sustainability, modernisation, and progress. Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on the motion, I would like to make a correction related to the question I asked the Minister, for policing on forensic capability yesterday. Inadvertently, I said that that family incurred a cost of \$57,000. It should have been \$5,700.

Moving onto the motion, I thank the Committee for the Report and acknowledge the findings. We have heard it today, we have heard many times in this Parliament Members asking why these reports are late. We have heard it from the Public Accounts Committee, they have repeatedly raised serious concerns about the mismanagement about Council finances. We must understand why and there are three reasons for that:

- (1) After 2006, there was no Parliament. The Parliament sitting started in 2014, so there was a big delay.
- (2) Look at the history of the Municipal Council – if you go back to the history of the municipal council and no reflection to all the councillors then, there were some very good councillors, who did the work and we can see infrastructure development they have made in towns and cities. Despite that, it must be noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on six separate occasions where successive Governments have been forced to dissolve municipal councils due to gross abuse of power and failure to perform and this includes Suva City Council, Nausori Town Council, Savusavu Town Council, Sigatoka Town Council and even Nasinu Town council, that we are discussing today. Nasinu Town Council was incorporated in 2000 and just after eight years, the Council was dissolved. You may ask why? The reason for that was, again, the way they mismanaged the sub – division project. There was abuse of funds and the council was dissolved at that time. And that led to the establishment of –there was a review undertaken on the local government, on all municipal councils -- and then the Special Administrators were involved.
- (3) The rot that lies in the work culture – staff were operating under outdated collective agreements and they enjoyed conditions unheard of, in both Government and Private sector. Let me just give you just one example of a council that I will not name. They were given 32 days of annual leave if they were earning more than \$10,000, with the ability to accumulate up to 124 days. And below \$10,00 still got 24 days annual leave, 50 days of leave accumulation and 19 days of paid sick leave. So what do you expect? These were some of the legacy issues that I am talking about.

The other problem was that some of the Annual Reports were as old as 2003 – 2004 that were not presented in Parliament and there were a number of councils who did not do it then. So, by that time, when we started to accumulate everything and were trying to find where all the accounts were et cetera, I will give you the example of Nasinu. In Nasinu's case, I had made a statement about it previously, that it is the most corrupt Council that we have ever had. I will tell you what happened there.

The honourable Minister is right when he pointed that the accounts were in shambles because they were in shambles! No invoices, accounts cannot be reconciled. So many consultations took place with the Auditor-General's Office. We did not know where to start and where to find the information? That was how difficult the Nasinu Town Council was. However, out of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge the effort of one public servant, Anurashika Bari, the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Nasinu Town Council. She brought private sector discipline into the broken public institution. She turned the Council that was operating in red into green. She exposed deep rooted corruption from rate collection. Staff used to go collecting rates from house to house, and never deposited it into accounts. Also, in the market, there were council staff who took bribes to give stalls.

They would take a bribe to allow you to build a stall on the roadside. So, all this was going on in the council.

Procurement fraud is very well known in Nasinu Town Council, where they were buying half a million dollars' worth of printing papers, and that matter is before the courts and people were charged. These were issues with the Nasinu Town Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite that, a lot of work was done in Nasinu Town Council, for example, the rate profiling, which started in 2020-2021. What the smart CEO did, which was mind boggling, she classified people who owed below \$500, people who owed \$500 to \$1,000, et cetera. She tried to understand who was not paying, and she found out that people who had money were not paying, it was not the poor. Those were business people who were elites of our society living in good houses were not paying. Those were some of the discoveries made at that time.

The last point on the Local Government Act. The review of the Local Government Act needs to consider many things, and we started the process. The honourable Minister is very well aware of it. We have completed the Town and Country Planning review, which was done with the past directors of the Town and Country Planning, for example, Mr. Gavidu. They were all involved in the review exercise and that work is completed – the subdivision of Land Act, because all these legislations have an implication on Local Government Act because we have to define the work.

MR. SPEAKER.- You round up, honourable Member.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will keep my contribution to this particular Annual Report very short and precise. Before I do that, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the Committee for the deliberation on the Report itself and the recommendations they have come up with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one thing I still fail to understand. I was reading through the recommendations yesterday and today again, especially the Ministry of Local Government has strengthened its oversight and monitoring for municipalities. According to the Local Government Act – yesterday I said this as well – Local Governments are supposed to be independent institutions. Previously, we had given recommendations that Municipal Councils should be run as commercial entities, and not a subsidy for service-based organisation. There is a lot of potential for these Municipal Councils to generate good revenue and develop the towns and the boundaries within their allocated areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday we were doing Nausori Town Council, today we are doing Nasinu Town Council, and very soon we will be doing Lami and Suva. Why can we not merge these four Municipal Councils into one and have a metropolitan city, and one governing body governs it all, rather than allowing certain different agencies to be running separate areas? The issue is, if we look at how the area is divided, Cunningham falls under Suva, Caubati is under Nasinu, and then comes Khalsa Road, which is again under Suva. It is better to have one metropolitan area and one governing body to govern the whole area, all the way from Lami until Nausori. A lot of issues would be resolved.

If we look at the accounts of this particular Municipal Council, because of corruption, I do not understand why the Ministry of Local Government is still failing to provide one uniform accounting software to all the Municipal Councils. We already have Suva City Council, which is using a proper software and is working efficiently for them. We can replicate that particular software to other Municipal Councils. We have been recommending, but when these Councils come up, someone is using MYOB, someone is using a trial version, and once the trial version expires, they still do not have the data in their database. We need to look at the holistic picture of how we can approach rezoning all of three or four municipal councils into one and running it more efficiently, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, yesterday I had urged this as well. We need to have Local Government Elections now so that the Minister can have some very qualified, well-known, renowned Councillors -those who are actually up to par – to explore innovative ideas on how they can develop their towns and cities. The honourable Minister was talking about innovation, and I still remember the Christmas tree from Nausori last year - very innovative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding Nasinu Town Council, residents have been complaining about two specific issues. One is garbage collection – there is still a lot of rubbish lying beside the road. While Town Council has been making efforts to clear these areas, I believe the mentality of the people needs to change, especially those who continue to dump their rubbish by the roadside. We need to change the mentality of the residents. Some people think that even though you have the rubbish cart there, they tend to throw it outside and not inside. So this is a simple thing that we should take pride in as a citizen of that particular Municipal Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that, I would like to ask another question regarding forensic accounting mentioned by the honourable Minister. Who did it? Where is the report? Was this actually advertised? We also like to have a report with our Committee as well. We are doing the auditing of all the financials that are coming to the Public Accounts Committee. It would be of great help, if we can have that. Once again, I would like to thank all the Committee Members, and I support the Report before the House.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee and the honourable Members who have already spoken about both the Levuka Town Council and on the Nasinu Town Council. The statements made by the honourable Attorney-General and the honourable Minister for Justice about Levuka Town reflects a history of mismanagement, history of corruption, and history of dictatorship in how councils were managed. A lot of the problems we are now seeing, in terms of infrastructure dilapidation, that occurred in places like Levuka. One very noticeable feature of the previous government was they ignored areas where they did not think they were going to get votes.

When I went to Kadavu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was shocked and disappointed at the way in which that island was neglected - the hospitals, the government quarters - and very similar things happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to town and city councils. I will just give you some figures to make this point clearer: approximately \$79.8 million is owing in arrears as of 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2025. When the Military government, and subsequently the FijiFirst government, and I know my friend, honourable Bala, in his Maiden Speech in 2014, promised that there would be elections. But then I know who told him later on, 'Hey, come on'. He was very honest. He wanted to do it, because he was an elected Councillor and a good Mayor. He did a lot of good job.

(Laughter)

He did a lot of good jobs in Ba, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but what they did since then completely destroyed the infrastructure and the management. Yes, yes, they were elected Councillors. Yes, some of them were dissolved for corruption. This happened because there was a system where you had Councillors coming from different wards, there was accountability about drains, about grass, about water, clogs, et cetera in different wards. The council was operating like a Parliament. The council accounts were audited. There was accountability in the management and governance of the council. During that time -- and honourable Kumar knows this, she is the loudest outside there, but she knows -- some of the ministers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are on record of writing off arrears of individual ratepayers because they were controlling everything from the Minister's office. They are talking about politicisation of administrators now, but they were the worst offenders, and we are still dealing with the rot that happened between 2006 and 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we came in, we said very clearly, we did the assessment of the infrastructure. And when they talk about lack of funding, that is true! None of the town and city councils in the country, Mr. Speaker Sir, have adequate resources to keep up with the infrastructure damage, infrastructure neglect that was done. Today, the very people they were trying to please -- they did away with stall fees, they did away with all the rates, they did away with business licence. Where the hell are you going to get the money to run the councils? And that is what happened.

At the end of the day, the very people that they wanted to help by giving all these freebies because they wanted to win an election, are the very people who are suffering today. We, as a government, we do not want to do that. That is what we are saying to our people. People in Nausori told me, they complained about the fan, Minister we are happy to pay the stall fees, we are happy to pay something, as long as this infrastructure is there.

This is what happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this Government in the last two years are going to look at, I had some discussion with people in Nadi, which is a tourist town, and government has plans. We have already put in money in the last two years.

Some of the town and city councils things have worked out well. Markets that were not completed. Projects that were not completed, we are putting additional funding. Lautoka Swimming Pool, Ba Stadium are all failures of the people who are sitting on the other side and today they are talking about corruption and accountability. This is a report from 2011-2017, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what it takes.

So, all I am saying, is all the Members of the Opposition side, including the honourable Leader of the Opposition should get a little bit honest. I know they do not like it when I talk about the past. I know they do not like it at all. They are very upset, but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our responsibility to keep reminding the people of this country what happened in the past, because we do not want to repeat the same mistakes. This Government is going to fix the town and city councils and the infrastructure.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you Deputy Prime Minister Prasad. There is a certain time of the day like the famous itaukei expression *na Balolo* rising, I always notice a sudden surge of exuberance and enthusiasm amongst our Members of Parliament. They rise their voice their views and intervene, to interject so loudly and mostly around 6pm, and that to me is like that saying, thank God it is Friday, seems to be thank God it is 6 pm. So, the noise will subside thereafter and I hope that is the case.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members for their contribution and take note of the points raised in this august House. I want to thank honourable Premila Kumar for positively highlighting the corruptions in Nasinu Town Council she discovers when she becomes the line Minister. I thank her for intervention that clearly shows the laxity of her predecessor. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to support this motion before this august House

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

## **REVIEW REPORT – BIOSECURITY OF FIJI 2011-2013 ANNUAL REPORTS**

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

That Parliament debates the Review Report of the Biosecurity of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Report, which is tabled on the 13th of March 2025.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to present the findings of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence following the review of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji's operations from its 2011-2013 Annual Reports with additional updates on current developments.

The Committee acknowledges the vital role that the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) plays in protecting Fiji's agricultural, environmental and economic assets from biosecurity threats. However, several key issues demand urgent attention and strategic policy responses.

The Committee strongly recommends a comprehensive review of BAF's fees and charges to ensure all services are fairly priced, enabling the authority to sustainably meet its expanding mandate. Such reforms would also support a much needed job evaluation exercise and improved service delivery.

While a recent Cabinet decision endorsed the reorganization of BAF, transferring BAF under the Ministry of Agriculture, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture promotes agricultural growth while BAF must remain an impartial regulator. The Committee therefore recommends that BAF continue to operate as a semi-autonomous body to preserve its regulatory independence.

The termite task force in collaboration with BAF has made commendable progress in controlling the spread of the Asian subterranean termites, using both in-ground and above-ground baiting methods.

The Committee recommends additional resourcing for advanced methods like tree injections and trap and treat baiting. Moreover, assistance to affected households must be prioritised based on need. Similarly, the threat of the giant invasive iguana demands a national eradication task force and robust support for communities during breeding seasons. The Standing Committee had an opportunity to visit Qamea where we saw first-hand some of the work that the BAF team are doing there.

The Committee supports BAF's request to transition from short-term emergency declarations to long-term infested biosecurity control areas, to better manage persistent threats such as the subterranean termites, fruit flies and taro beetles.

The Committee also highlighted the need for urgent legislative reforms to enforce Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) on vessels in Fiji's waters that are turned on at all times, this would strengthen maritime security.

On the export front, although 52 commodities have been approved for export to New Zealand, only 22 are actively traded. Delays in market access processes and pest detection management remains a challenge.

The Committee noted that BAF has robust emergency response plans and protective measures in place for their staff dealing with new pests and diseases. However, more resourcing is needed to enhance detection at ports including acquiring additional x-ray machines and introducing sniffer dogs trained for organic material.

Mr. Speaker, the inspection of domestic cargo, particularly wooden items and root crops remain an area needing formalised ship crew training and mandatory biosecurity declarations during inter-island travel. On human resources, BAF has made staffing gains, yet retention is still difficult due to

limited incentives. We urge the Authority to implement career development programmes, flexible work policies and non-financial incentives to retain skilled personnel.

To conclude, the Committee recommends continued investment in public awareness campaigns, particularly around termite and the giant invasive iguana threats. Community education is a vital tool in strengthening our national biosecurity posture. The Committee believes BAF is an essential safeguard in our nation's health economy and biodiversity. On that note, I commend the motion and this Report to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have a list of six speakers with me. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to contribute to the motion before the House. I will go right into the Report. The Committee recommends that the review of the fees and charges need to be undertaken to cater for the increasing demands of BAF operations as it is getting more complex due to the transnational crimes and the volume of people who are travelling, to ensure sufficient funding and to support growing responsibilities, improve service delivery and enhance biosecurity measures and to conduct job evaluation exercise for the very hard working staff that they have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking in terms of Automatic Identification System (AIS), the Republic of Fiji Navy and MSAF have land-based AIS devices to track the movement of international vessels in Fiji's waters. However, the Committee was informed that the tracking of these certain vessels has become challenging as ships are not required to activate their AIS, making navigation more difficult. We have been seeing that Cabinet is looking into some of the Acts for amendment, and I commend the Government for that, to improve efficiency in the process, and that is necessary.

However, just two days ago, 90 kilogrammes of methamphetamine was caught at Auckland Airport. As I alluded, they are in Government for more than two years now, and it is an absolute failure on their part of securing our borders, in terms of our domestic points of entries; absolute failure. The honourable Minister for Civil Aviation said, "we are looking into it." That is not the answer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I expected. The airport is getting congested and is something that we also need to look into, because the figures that they are harping about with the visitor arrivals, most of them are transit.

Speaking on the termite issue, I do not know what to call this exercise, a vote-buying exercise from the Government? In the first year, 4,077 applications were received, only 775 verified applications have received grants. What about the rest? Because in the first year, they allocated \$3 million, in the second year, they allocated \$2 million, and this is a growing issue in Lautoka, Nadi and Ba. It is a growing issue, and they are reducing their funding. Are they thinking backwards?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, something I would like to ask them, the people are still waiting for this funding, yet the Government is not even aware. If someone accesses this funding, and goes and buys untreated timber, they are repeating the same cycle and it is a waste of taxpayer fund. It is something that the Government has failed to look into and properly implement.

In January 2025, the last point I have here is, Cabinet approved the re-organisation of Biosecurity, endorsed the de-listing of Biosecurity as a public enterprise from Public Enterprises Act 2019 and agreed that the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji to be reassigned as a statutory body reporting to the honourable Minister for Agriculture. Conflict of interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture promotes agricultural development, while BAF acts as a regulator. This could present as a conflict of interest when both the regulator and the promoter – which is the agriculture – roles are managed by the same Ministry. The Committee notes that BAF

management was not consulted prior to the reorganisation. They came into power harping about change, public engagements, consultations – here actions speak louder than words – and that is the practise of the Government, talking about change, consultations and people engagements. Now, they say, “it is past practise, they did it, we will do it”, but that is the change that they work with.

In terms of consultations, lack of people come to these consultations which shows the confidence they have in this Government, very poor. On that note, I support the Report before the House.

(Laughter)

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Review Report of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji for 2011-2013 Annual Report, that was tabled in this august House on 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2025. While the Ministry fully supports the Report, the question we need to ask ourselves is, why has it come more than 10 years later? This should be one of the recommendations, the timeliness of the Annual Report from such an Authority as this.

The Report is quite old, but we do acknowledge that the majority of the challenges that are contained therein, are relevant. However, there are other matters that need to be addressed with regards to the functioning of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, even though it has maintained its autonomous status. That will be a matter that the Ministry will pursue with the Board of Biosecurity Authority.

Just to give you one of those matters that is of a grave concern to the Ministry. If you look at the organisation structure of Biosecurity Authority, it is heavily laden with finance and administrative stuff. There are more common cadre staff compared to technical. Over time, the Biosecurity Authority has lost a lot of professional staff – some very highly qualified locals – who have left BAF for some reason, that we will soon find out. The Biosecurity Authority, even though it is autonomous in terms of its status, needs to be developed into a professional organisation and that is what the Ministry will push for, while BAF has come on with the Minister of Agriculture as its line minister. We will make sure that BAF is run professionally and by professionals. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the findings presented in the Report, linking the programmes of Biosecurity Authority of Fiji to the Sustainable Development Goals. We think that it is very much relevant.

The 11 recommendations presented by the Standing Committee, are also acknowledged and will serve as a guide for the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, in terms of the collaboration between the Ministry and BAF in the development of policies and the execution of its programmes.

Before I finish off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just respond to honourable Sharma's sentiments on the regulatory works of Biosecurity Authority. Let me remind you, honourable Sharma, through the Speaker, that Biosecurity has always been part of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the nature of the work, most of the work carried out by the Biosecurity Authority is carried out by the professionals in the Ministry of Agriculture. I hope it is a lesson for you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the contribution of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the Review of the 2011-2013 Annual Report and on that note, I thank you for the opportunity and I support the motion before the House.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I rise today to reflect on the review report of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji for 2011-2013 and the recent transition of BAF to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. These two developments provide valuable insights and pathways for Fiji's future. The Biosecurity Authority of Fiji was established under the Biosecurity Act 2008. It became a statutory body with the critical mission of protecting Fiji's biodiversity, economy and public health from

biosecurity risks. The period covered in this Report from 2011-2013 represents BAF's early years and highlights its achievements, challenges and the impact of its work.

Mr. Speaker Sir, allow me to acknowledge BAF's notable successes during this period. First one is infrastructure and upgrades. BAF built key facilities such as the post-entry quarantine centre at Legalega and modernised pest diagnostic laboratories. It introduced GPS mapping and installed x-ray machines at major entry points, which significantly boosted monitoring efforts. Programme protecting Fiji's biodiversity, BAF began the giant invasive iguana eradication project, containing its spread to preserve our ecosystems. Effective pest management strategies such as termite containment and the interception of the giant African snail prevented significant environmental damage.

Trade and economic growth, by establishing agreements like the Bilateral Quarantine Agreements, BAF facilitated safe and efficient trade while protecting Fiji's agricultural and export industries.

Financial Performance, the annual revenue grew by \$5.5 million by 2013, reflecting BAF's progress in sustaining its operations.

Collaboration and partnerships, BAF built strong relationships with international organisations, aligning its practices and global biosecurity standards. These accomplishments, Mr Speaker, Sir, demonstrate BAF's importance not just in biosecurity but also in advancing trade and protecting the livelihoods of our people. However, the Report also outlines challenges that require our attention. These include resource limitations, operational inefficiencies, and the need for better public awareness. To address these, the Standing Committee has provided 11 thoughtful recommendations. Key among these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are the following:

- (1) Increased funding - adequate resources are needed to address pests, improve facilities and sustain critical programmes like termite and invasive species containment.
- (2) Public awareness campaigns - educating our people about biosecurity risks is vital to ensuring their active involvement in safeguarding Fiji.
- (3) Preserve independence - BAF must maintain its impartial decision-making to protect Fiji's biodiversity and trade interests without conflicts of interest.
- (4) Retained skilled staff - offering career growth opportunities and training will build a strong, committed workforce to tackle emerging challenges.

These recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, provide a clear roadmap for strengthening BAF's role in protecting our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent transition of BAF to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is a significant change. It represents opportunities for better coordination, improved resource use and stronger alignment of biosecurity with agricultural priorities.

With this move, we can ensure faster responses to pest outbreaks and open up new trade opportunities for Fijian products. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must emphasise that this transition must be carefully managed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, BAF's role as an independent authority is critical and we must ensure that its work remains effective, fair and free from conflicts of interest. While I agree this move places BAF in the right Ministry, clear oversight and accountability will be needed to fully realise its potential. Done right, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this transition can strengthen Fiji's agriculture and biosecurity efforts, ensuring that both our environment and economy are protected.

As we move forward, I see key areas where BAF can continue to grow and contribute:

- (1) Sustainable funding.

- (2) Reviewing fees and charges will ensure BAF has the resources to address biosecurity threats effectively.
- (3) Innovation, expanding the use of modern tools like GPS and diagnostics will enhance monitoring and prevention.
- (4) Community engagement - public awareness and education campaigns must be scaled up to involve all Fijians in biosecurity efforts.
- (5) Workforce development - retaining skilled staff through mentorship and career pathways will ensure continuity and efficiency.
- (6) Trade facilitation - aligning biosecurity measures with agricultural trade will strengthen Fiji's exports and boost economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report is a significant step towards strengthening Fiji's biosecurity systems to protect our environment, agriculture and economy. The Biosecurity Authority of Fiji must retain its independence to ensure fair and impartial decision-making. At the same time, its management under the Ministry of Agriculture must be carefully handled to align with national priorities and deliver effective results. By implementing the recommendations in this Report, to ensure that BAF remains a vital and well-supported institution, this is how Fiji can secure its biodiversity, foster sustainable growth and build a future that benefits all its people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute on the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji Annual Report 2011 and 2013 which has been thoroughly perused by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. I would like to thank the Committee for the Report and the recommendations that they have formulated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to comment on the issue that has been raised by honourable Rinesh Sharma on the funding that has been provided by the Government. For the last 16 years, the previous government has not allocated a single cent towards termites; the Asian subterranean termite. When we came into office, that was our first priority to ensure that we address this issue that has not been addressed for a long time. One of the things that I had noted is the lack of information amongst our people.

Honourable Sashi Kiran and I went around Lautoka, Ba and Nadi. When we asked some people there, they did not have information on how they can control termites. They were just told of the breeding season, and they were to burn the termites when they fly at night. They had to switch off the lights. Such advice is very poor, very amateurish and does not have any technical capacity to inform people on what is the cycle of termites and how can we effectively address this problem. We went around and asked the questions, and we noted that the baiting was the most prominent way of trying to eradicate this problem which has been there for the last 15 years. When we went around the homes, we noted that it will become a major problem in the future if not adequately addressed.

In our first budget, we provided \$3 million, and these applications were processed by Lautoka City Council and verified by Biosecurity where we supported about 800 homes. The first thing that we tell them, "do not depend on funds that have been given. Go and buy the baits." One of the things with the previous government is trying to inculcate freebies into the minds of our people so that when they come in, they expect things to be provided for you. We asked them, they said that they could purchase the bait. There is a company who went through the tender process called FLiCK Hygiene. A tender process was conducted, and FLiCK Hygiene Services was given the contract and they are able to provide \$290 for your house to be baited. Last year we provided them with some provisions from the budget and they have baited approximately 1,000 houses in the Lautoka area. We understand and recognise there has to be a national effort on this from the funding that has been given, it is not sufficient but more needs to be done in addressing the issue of termites.

Also, I would like to comment on the reorganisation of BAF with the Ministry of Agriculture. One of the things we noted is the exorbitant cost of the people who are employed. The CEO being paid \$400,000, another guy \$200,000, this is quite exorbitant, and this is the legacy of the previous government. When they want to transfer some of the public roads into statutory organisations, it runs into this sort of thing. They create these structures with enormous cost and the people have to pay. When you ask the exporters, they complain about the enormous cost that have to pay BAF for inspection, et cetera, and all the other services that need to be done by the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji. I do support the motion before the House.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to contribute on the Review Report of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Report. The Report highlights the critical work BAF has done to protect our nation's biosecurity while also addressing areas where improvements are needed. I also want to take this opportunity to talk about BAF's recent move to the Ministry of Agriculture, which I believe is a step in the right direction for farmers especially those in places like Naitasiri, Tailevu, Valley Road and Kavanagasau.

Farming is the backbone of these communities. Our farmers work hard to grow crops that feeds their families, provide income and support the economy. However, they face many challenges. Pests, diseases and invasive plants damage crops and make farming more difficult. Sir, BAF plays a key role in protecting farmers from this threat as shown in the Report. For example, the Report highlights BAF's effort to contain dangerous pests like the giant invasive iguana and they intercept others like giant African snails which pose risk to agriculture and biodiversity.

The building of new infrastructure such as post-entry quarantine facility at Lagalaga and a Diagnostic Laboratory to improve pests and disease management. The facility safeguards through agreements like the bilateral quarantine agreement ensuring that our crop meets international standards. These achievements shows that BAF is doing valuable work.

This Report also points out the challenges BAF faces, resources limitation, public awareness gap and the need to adapt the emerging threat. The Standing Committee's recommendations addresses these challenges and I want to focus on one of the key recommendations, the reorganisation of BAF under the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe the move will bring many benefits. The Ministry of Agriculture already works closely with farmers, helping them grow crop, improve yield and adopt the changing conditions. By bringing BAF under the same umbrella we can create stronger coordination and faster response to issues like pest outbreak. For example, if the pest threatened crop in these areas, the Ministry and BAF can work together to provide farmers with a tool and knowledge they need to protect the farm. The reorganisation also opens the door to the introduction of new crop varieties into Fiji.

Farmers often grow the same crop year after year which makes them vulnerable to pest and diseases that targets those crops. By working with the Ministry of Agriculture, BAF can help farmers diversify their crops giving them more options to deal with these challenges. The Committee Report emphasised the need for financial sustainability and recommends reviewing fees and charges to support BAF's operation. This is a necessary step but I believe the Ministry of Agriculture's involvement can also help and secure additional funding through grant and partnership. With more resources, BAF can expand programmes like pest containment and crop diversification, ensuring that farmers have the support they need to succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another critical recommendation in the Report is raising public awareness about biosecurity risks. Many farmers and communities do not fully understand how pest diseases and

invasive plants can spread and what they can do to prevent them. The African tulip tree, for example, is an invasive species that takes over farming land, making it harder for crops to grow.

The Ministry of Agriculture has set a clear horizon for the farmers, one that empowers them not only to cultivate and produce, but also ensures direct supply of the goods to local market and international exporters. The Ministry has done commendable work in educating farmers on crop cultivation and production methods. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the role of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji is equally crucial in this journey.

Mr. Speaker, BAF must step forward to educate our farmers on the packaging, storage, and fumigating aspects of agriculture export. By doing so, we can enable farmers to participate directly in the export market without having to rely entirely on the exporters. This shift will not only enhance the income to individual farmers, but also contribute meaningfully to national economic growth. It is vital for Biosecurity Authority of Fiji to step up its role in creating awareness and capacity building programme around export readiness, particularly in the area of packaging, handling, and quarantine compliance. By doing so, we will truly unlock the potential of our agricultural sector and empowering our farmers to become not only just producers, but export as well.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on the Biosecurity Authority Annual Report of 2011-2013. Let me start with the obvious and allow me to join the chorus of all those in this august chamber that have talked about the outdated nature of the financial reports that we have been discussing. On the professional side, I would like to say when professional accountants look at outdated information, there is one word that normally comes to mind very quickly, “useless, or more succinctly, absolutely useless.”

Mr. Speaker, I am hoping that over the next, certainly by the time we leave for the next elections, all agencies in Fiji make a concerted effort, to actually bring all accounts up to date. We have had enough of looking at outdated reports. It is not acceptable. There is no accountability when the reports are produced because history has gone way past. I am truly hoping, and perhaps as a message to all the agencies, ministries listening in today, get your accounts in order very quickly.

I note that the honourable Rinesh Sharma had made some comments, and I was going to direct them at him, but because he is here, I will direct it to the Chamber. Honourable Rinesh talked about a potential conflict of interest because the Biosecurity now reports to the Ministry of Agriculture. If honourable Rinesh Sharma had bothered looking at ChatGPT or Gemini, this is what it says and I quote, “In Australia and New Zealand, several government agencies work to safeguard biosecurity.

For Australia, National Biosecurity System in Australia is governed by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, plus the Department of Health. For New Zealand, the primary government agency is the Ministry of Primary Industries of New Zealand. I think honourable Rinesh Sharma was somewhat misleading the House, Mr. Speaker, when he said there was a conflict of interest. What we are doing is just following best practice around the region. Certainly, from this side of the House, there is absolutely no issue in reconfiguring the reporting lines. If anything, it will allow for closer working relationships between the Ministry of Agriculture and Biosecurity, because both entities have a very intrinsic interest in the welfare of our country when it comes to biosecurity matters. It is somewhat similar to what the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation said. At present, the Civil Aviation Authority which is the regulatory authority for all aviation in Fiji reports to the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a couple of other things, I thought I would mention. One of the things that I think we need to start thinking about going forward is, with the size of Government that way it is going, we probably need to look at self-sustaining agencies and the Biosecurity has potential. From 2011 to 2013, they managed to collect \$3 million additional in revenue. Mr. Speaker, Sir, going forward, one would hope that we start focussing on developing self-sustaining agencies in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in term of termites, and I will just talk briefly about it. I would like to be on record and congratulate honourable Sashi Kiran and honourable Sakiasi Tubuna for their hard work on the termite issue in this country. Maybe it went unnoticed, but I would like to record it in this House, they brought the whole issue to light. In fact, the other side of the House kept it all quiet and they did not ventilate the issue like honourable Sashi and honourable Tubuna have done and just like most other things in this House, we are fixing the mess that was brought to us by the other side of the House.

As a final note of contribution, one of the things that we are going to look at in terms of cost of living is using Biosecurity to look at other sources of how we can bring down the cost of goods while looking at other pathways we can use to import goods into Fiji. That is an active thing that is going on at the moment and we will hear more particularly during Budget time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report that is before us is quite useful and instructive particularly in terms of some of the things that it has highlighted. We fully support the motion before the House in terms of the Reports, but I truly hope in the next 24 months, we will be talking about more current information.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I want to say thank you to all the honourable Members who contributed to the debate on the motion before the House. I absolutely agree with the honourable Minister Rayalu and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica on the timeliness of annual reports. However, we did mention that we had found some issues that we could be talking about now and that is the giant invasive iguana. I want to take this time to pay tribute to the team on Qamea for their inventiveness, in hand-fashioning tools with which they capture giant invasive iguanas on the island of Qamea and nearby islands that have been invaded by these invasive species. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with no natural predator and mostly herbivorous, they pose a serious threat to gardens and farms on nearby islands.

In terms of termites, yes, I agree with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica, in thanking honourable Tubuna and honourable Kiran for the work that they have already carried out. I did mention in my opening remarks, that we believe that assistance to affected households should be prioritised based on need. This comes from a visit that we paid to a young man called Francis in Tumuka, Lautoka. We visited him and his house-bound and bed-ridden mother. Their rooms are literally collapsing around him and his mother.

Just to clarify something that honourable Rinesh Sharma who is not in the House right now mentioned about a methamphetamine find at Auckland Airport two days ago, and just to clarify, the first intercept of 50.2 kilogrammes was off a flight from Malaysia while the second intercept was of a flight from Los Angeles. With that said, Mr. Speaker, I thank everyone who contributed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 7.15 p.m.