

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 16TH JULY, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 16TH JULY, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.33 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

DEPUTY SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable P.D. Kumar, honourable S. Kumar, honourable S.S. Kirpal, honourable S. Nand and honourable N.T. Tuinaceva.

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, 15th July 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I know many of us have been sick over the last few days, so I urge all of us to please be careful. If you are not feeling well, please let parliamentary staff know and if you are coughing please wear a mask to protect other honourable Members.

I welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Committee of Supply - Votes

For the information of honourable Members, the Business Committee has unanimously approved that the votes taken during the Committee of Supply stage will happen later today. With respect to Activities, Programmes and SEGs will be through acclamation, but the final vote on the respective Heads, will be done electronically.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2025-2026 APPROPRIATION BILL 2025

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, and honourable Members of Parliament.

It is with great honour that I rise to deliver my second maiden address to the Parliament of Fiji. My first was soon after the general election in 2018. Firstly, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to

congratulate you and your team and assure you of my unwavering support in the administration and operations of the business of this House and as is expected of an honourable Member.

I bring to this House, the appreciation, greetings and warm wishes of my voters, as well as my people and the People's Alliance Party in commending the People's Coalition Government under the able leadership and stable administration of the honourable Prime Minister for the tremendous work he has done so far in reclaiming, rebuilding and reuniting Fiji. Further to that, I wish to put on record that I fully support the Government of the day, its ideals and principles and its policies and programmes, which are not only on paper, but in the process of implementation, empowering the lives of the ordinary people and generating economic growth and development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I also wish to pay my heartfelt tribute to the late Vatimi Rayalu, the former honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways for his lifelong service to the nation as a public servant, man of God, grassroots worker, loyal party member and Cabinet Minister, whose actions and deep empathy for both humanity and a green economy has not only restored the faith in those involved in the agriculture sector, but someone whose vision has opened new horizons for agriculture development, marketing, and most importantly, diversification with the twin concepts of the green and blue economy. It is going to be his lasting legacy for Fiji.

I also wish to pay tribute to my late wife, Associate Professor Doctor Litiana Kuridrani, who sadly passed away in February 2021. Her unwavering vision, tireless dedication and quite sacrifices in my life, laid the foundation, and positioned me to where I am today. In life there are tragedies, but there are also personal triumphs for me in receiving the blessing of my children to remarry the new Mrs. Kuridrani who hails from the village of Drue in Sainima District in the beautiful province of Kadavu. I am convinced that with your incredible support, I will do justice in my duty as an honourable Member of this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will fail in my duty if I do not acknowledge the hard work and sacrifice of my people, *vanua* of Vusu and my province of Nadroga/Navosa. My campaign team - Filise Matabogi (campaign manager), Misiwata Naoka (Valley Zone Coordinator); and the campaign team comprising of Josese Yaya, Voate Vasekavu, Mikaele Sarosaro and Ilikimi Tunaka. I wish to acknowledge the loyalty and support of my voters, from the highlands of Navosa, to the coast of Navosa-i-Wai, including the island of Vatulele. *Vina valevu djina na vitokoni.*

I would like to acknowledge my extended families and all individuals that have supported me from the onset, on my journey to politics.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance and guidance by my party and encouragement and inspiration by my Party Leader, during my election campaign in 2022 and until my induction into this House. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the support of my wife Bulou Virisine Sitela and my children Silovate, Bulou Seru, Tevita and Samuela for their continuous support.

In addition to that, I wish to assure all of them that I will make every endeavour to live up to your expectations in articulating your grudges and grievances, and as well as your interests and aspirations. I will be your loyal servant and humble voice in this august House and I will continue to rely on each of you for your guidance and support as I march forward in unison as a part of the People's Coalition Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the ideals, and principles on which the policies and programmes of the People's Coalition Government is based on the mission and vision of the parties in this Coalition Government. It is the sum total collective mandate and will of the people which I must emphasise, needs

to be respected, allowed to be implemented, and to prevail in full measure and anything short of that, is a betrayal to our voters.

At the heart of implementing these and realising these ideals and principles, remain the pragmatic policies and programmes of the Government of the day, guided by the spirit of national reconciliation and unity, as the very basis of impacting national development, reforms and in scripting a vision for the future of Fiji.

All of these can only be realised if there is a national consensus on the issue of the review of the 2013 Constitution. Second, there is an electoral reform, and we find a home-grown solution to fairer representation and power sharing. Third, there is respect for indigenous rights, institutions and structures including the restoration of our rights as it was, prior to 5th December, 2006. Fourth, equitable sharing of national wealth eliminating poverty of access in our urban slums, rural and remote areas. Fifth, effecting national reconciliation and unity with genuine change of heart and making Fiji a safe and secure home for all our people via economic development and affirmative action for the poor and the needy.

On the proposed Budget 2025-2026, I thank the honourable Minister for Finance for designing a budget that is smart, practical and reflects the current economic environment. Allow me to make a quick analysis of the budget.

This budget, Madam Deputy Speaker, is not what the Opposition are attempting to portray. Instead, the budget emphasises a realistic approach based on pragmatic policies and programmes steered by an able leader and a stable administration. It is a budget that: induces confidence, invests in infrastructure; brings improvement and development; empowers our people in both rural and remote areas; is focussed on prudent financial management; seeks to create jobs for our people; and is a timely shot in the arm for resource-based sectors to expand our export strategy net and thereby strengthening our dollar. It is a budget that contains an over-arching objective of improving the quality of life and standard of living of every citizen of Fiji.

This budget is not about balancing of figures but removing of disparities in development by equitable sharing of our national wealth. This budget is not about freebies or creating a dependency syndrome as was the case with the previous government, dangling carrots at their voters. It has not let any sector of our economy starve of empowerment and paves the way into the future with real development and accelerated growth.

This budget is neither a sugar-coated budget nor a budget drafted in panic. It is responsible budgeting whose announcement has in fact created panic and fear across the floor of this House, as the honourable Assistant Minister for Information rightly questioned it, where is the alternative budget? If they do not have it, then, please just sit down and keep quiet.

Gone are the days, Madam Deputy Speaker, when facts and figures were concealed, projects placed under (R) were held to ransom and when one man controlled one third of public finances and called the shots at the whim of his master. This budget is all about good governance and transparency and it belongs to and is warm heartedly owned by the people of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, neither the Government made this budget with the advice of academics nor with the influence of the politicians. It reflects the wishes of the people who made their submissions and stood up with this Government to get counted in our pursuit to reclaim, rebuild, and reunite Fiji. It is for these reasons and many more highlighted in this debate and by the general public Madam Deputy Speaker, which convinces me like any rational thinking person to register my full and unwavering support for this Budget.

Empowering rural and remote communities. Madam Deputy Speaker, the key to national development, economic growth and long-term prosperity for Fiji lies in empowering our rural and remote communities who are engaged in our agro-based sectors and that can only be achieved, through the way this Government is actively seeking to do so by:

- (1) constructing and maintaining roads in our rural and remote areas as well as our urban slums;
- (2) connecting every household with regular and clean water supply;
- (3) managing our drainage systems averting threats from flooding;
- (4) expanding the national power grid and using solar energy to ensure every household has access to electricity;
- (5) ensuring every household is safe and secure from criminal elements, disease, and substance abuse;
- (6) transforming our health care and medical services to be second to none in the Pacific;
- (7) developing and diversifying our agro-based sectors to create meaningful jobs and be the basis of economic development and thereby seek to increase our dollar value with a viable national export strategy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, agro-based industries always create meaningful jobs and help bring development to our rural and remote areas, such as better roads, electricity, water supply, health care, law and order facilities, business development and these in turn create new opportunities, thus, expanding the base for economic development and growth. It puts land and labour to productive use and develops capital by agro-entrepreneurship.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I think the experiences of COVID-19 is not a distant memory now but a timely lesson for us all. On 21st April, 2021 when a lockdown was imposed, a massive 115,000 people lost their jobs and another 10,000 were placed on part time jobs. More lost their jobs due to the foolish “No Jab, No Job” policy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, even if one were to calculate for 130,000 people went jobless that year and each having an average of 2 dependents each, the livelihoods of a total of 390,000 people were affected. For the first time in our history, we saw people lining up, risking their lives for food rations because they had no home gardens, farms or had simply abandoned agriculture, had they had a home garden or farm and were cultivating the land, there would have been food for them to survive. I believe this is the most important lesson of all that we should have learned from the wrath of this deadly pandemic as we brace for the challenges of the future.

This is the point that I wish to address in this House, Madam Deputy Speaker, the importance of agriculture in addressing the question of food security. Had the previous Government paid attention or adhered to the Food Basket Concept Programme that was under implementation by the SDL Government in 2006, we would not have run out of fresh home-grown foods and vegetables and ended up as a nation on the brink of collapse with the impact of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). This is now taking on a toll on lives and the economic development of our nation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will briefly speak on two pressing issues – substance abuse and child rights – which I believe has been a grave concern to our society and will be a direct hindrance to our development and therefore needs to be addressed now.

Substance Abuse is a paralytic social ill. It is destroying every fabric and value that is binding in our families, societies, cultures, and religions. If this issue is not controlled now, it will lead to a moral and social collapse. It is time that everyone in this House is of the unanimous view to review the laws related to the Crimes Action, Criminal Procedure Act, and other related laws.

To ensure those who are found to be in possession of drugs, trading in drugs, manufacturing or growing drugs, or engaged in drug trafficking to be dealt with swiftly and with harsher penalties like they do in countries like Indonesia where the death is a penalty for such hefty crimes.

Child Rights, under Section 41(1)(d) of the 2013 Constitution, there is a provision of protecting a child from abuse. But I believe what needs to be done, is to inculcate a strong respect for human rights in a holistic version, within a local context not to violate our religious and cultural principles. I am hopeful that we can address that with the impending review of this Constitution.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, Fiji is indeed at a crossroad. The utterances we make in here and outside about our economy, the decisions that we make, the relationships that we break, or build is set to determine our future. Therefore, I think it is not a big ask by our Hon. Prime Minister to commit ourselves to bipartisanship in this House and thereby through dialogue and consensus, building and seeking solutions to our problems and chart the course ahead.

Just a week ago, Fiji and the world witnessed the installation of the *Turaga Na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*. Fiji watched in awe as the people of Lau from far and wide gathered in unity to celebrate this milestone event, whilst at the same time displaying the beauty, authenticity and richness of our traditional Fijian culture. However, this is only one part of our shared identity as a nation. Within our Fiji lies a rich tapestry of different cultures, languages, histories, and religious beliefs. It is my hope that this new era heralds in a Fiji where each and every one of us feels like we all belong to our various cultural and religious practices are respected, because therein lies the stepping stones for unity and progress.

The late father of the *Tui Nayau*, the first Prime Minister and second President of Fiji, the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara will always be remembered as an icon of peace, progress and prosperity as the motto of the old Alliance Party stated and I believe many of us still remember his last television interview and the inspirational poem he recited from the works of another icon of humanity - Mother Teresa. Allow me to conclude by reciting that poem, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I quote:

“Do it anyway
People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centred; forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway.
If you are honest and frank, people may cheat on you; be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building; someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you have got anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God; it was never between you and them anyway.”

With these few words, I thank you for this opportunity of address and I offer my best wishes to all of you. God bless Fiji and God bless us all.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Inosi Kuridrani and especially for those wise words at the end of your second maiden speech. I welcome you and the *vanua vakaturaga o Vusu* back to your Parliament.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise in full support of the National Budget 2025-2026. It is a budget that hears the war cry of the honourable Prime Minister, a war against poverty. It is a budget that pays attention to details taking simple yet meaningful changes, baby steps that count as aptly coined by honourable Aliko Bia that improve the wellbeing of our people and moves us in the right direction out of poverty into productivity, out of welfare into wellbeing.

Majority of our people who take buses daily will appreciate the 10 percent decrease in bus fares. Our most vulnerable, living on social welfare, will appreciate the increase in their welfare allowances which our government has been progressively doing since coming into office.

The reduction in VAT to 12.5 percent will be appreciated immensely by our people, while we work with Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) to manage the prices of goods. The handover of titles to our people living in informal settlements and in public housing will appreciate their security of tenure and are able to borrow with their real property.

The \$10 million allocated to deal with the HIV crisis showcases real commitment to addressing this pandemic. The allocation for a Drug Rehabilitation Centre under the Social Welfare Department shows real commitment to dealing with harm reduction and prioritising the physical and mental wellbeing of our people at risk, especially our children who currently have nowhere to go.

Our people will appreciate the increase in police presence with 1000 more police officers to find the drug dealers to secure our streets and communities especially at night and give confidence to our tourists to enjoy the nightlife in Fiji.

Our parents and guardians will appreciate the continued \$200 Back-to-School Assistance for over 200,000 children. The continued allocation of various line ministries to the National Action Plan (NAP) to prevent Gender-Based Violence (GBV) shows our real commitment to making our women safer in our homes.

The increases in budgets in the social services sector, education, health, social welfare, women, children, housing, rural development, roads, water, bridges, walkways, local government, sports, our agriculture sector, our law enforcement; these are services that Government provides and we are prioritising these services to our people to improve their daily living and raise them out of poverty.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am most encouraged by the commitment of our Government to our children. There are budget allocations under line ministries to operationalise the historic Child Care and Protection Act and Child Justice Act. Thank you, Minister for Children for your continued commitment to our children. There is an increase in the funding for the construction of the child wellbeing centre for \$342,000 and a grant for the running of the centre at \$150,000. There is a grant on the urgently needed Drug Rehabilitation Centre of \$200,000. I wish the Ministry all the very best in securing donor funding and valuable partnerships working with the ministries of Health and Justice in providing these much-needed services. It will be a first for Fiji, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am hopeful both centres will be up and running in the coming financial year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the deficit of the budget of around \$880 million is mostly equivalent to the cost-of-living relief package in the budget. We are a government that knows what you need Fiji. We are a government that is capable of carrying and managing this debt for you. We have demonstrated fiscal responsibility and stabilising the economy. It is a good debt we are willing to take on because we see, we hear you and we are dedicated to serving you.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I share the sentiments of my fellow members to offer my sincerest condolences on the sad loss of our colleague and dear friend honourable Vatimi Rayalu. I for one, valued

his company. He was a man of few words but bellowed with honesty and passion. We will miss him dearly. I pray for comfort and peace for his family. I welcome my *tau*, honourable Inosi Kuridrani back to Parliament. It was a memorable time in Opposition sitting beside him in the back row as new MPs learning and of course moving forward together. Congratulations *tau* for making the voyage to find your *bulou* in the south.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I too condemn the illegal acts of sacrilege committed at the Samabula Hindu temple. Though the motives are still unclear, we as a nation must be united to call out this crime and educate continually on the need to show utmost respect for our places of worship, as religion is a strong pillar of our society.

It is with profound humility and deep emotion that I take a few good minutes to share my personal experience having recently returned from a truly sacred journey. The installation of Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara as *Tui Nayau*, *Tui Lau* and *Sau ni Vanua ko Lau*. Please allow me to share some deep reflections and a vision for the future as it pertains to the budget and to the general well-being of our people. Congratulations to the province of Lau. Thank you honourable Prime Minister for your leadership that has made this installation possible. Thank you to all our voters of the Coalition Government that has brought the change to restore what was only hidden, not lost. Like a phoenix rising out of the ashes, it has been a journey of resurgence.

My connection to Lau runs deep in my veins. The *Turaga na Tui Nayau* is family. His paternal grandmother, Qolikoro Fonolahi, mother of the late *Tui Nayau*, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and my father's maternal grandmother, Kalolaini Fonolahi are sisters, both hailing from the *Yavusa Toga* of Sawana in Vanuabalavu in Lau. Further anchoring me to that blessed ocean is my maternal grandmother, Anaseni Lupe Vakaloloma from Nasau, Moce in Lau. Her mother, Milika Koroi, was from Vakano in Lakeba. So, I took the opportunity to present my *boka* to the *Yavusa Tupu vua na Turaga na Tui Ra*, a village with direct kinship ties to Dravo. I am grateful for these roots that bind me to the *vanua o Lau*.

Madam Deputy Speaker, witnessing this ceremony was more than observing tradition. It was feeling the *vanua* breathe. Seeing the distinct and vital roles played by the various islands of Lau, brought a renewed sense of pride and purpose to us all. It was a powerful affirmation of our enduring heritage. Perhaps the most stirring sight, the one that truly speaks to a secure future for our culture, was the active participation of our young people. Seeing the students of Ratu Finau Secondary School step forward with such reverence to fulfil their roles in the traditional presentations upon the specific request of *Turaga na Tui Nayau* himself, moved me deeply. *Malo vakalevu Turaga na Tui Nayau*. Thank you for remembering our youth. Thank you for empowering our youth. Thank you for building that critical bridge between our present and our future, ensuring our culture, traditions and way of life are carried forward with strength and pride by the next generation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while we reflect on the profound cultural significance and unity embodied in the installation of the *Tui Nayau* of Lau, a shadow was cast upon this auspicious occasion. An attempt, feeble on its face, yet deeply damaging, to tarnish its dignity and disrespect an integral pillar of *iTaukei* tradition and Fiji's very identity.

I speak of the deliberate misinformation, the outright lies propagated on social media regarding the arrival of the Tongan navy vessel carrying the Tongan nobles, the royal family members, and the gifts to be presented by His Majesty the King to the *Tui Nayau*. The honourable Member Ketan Lal, who is not here today, publicly alleged without foundation, that this vessel failed to receive proper clearance at our borders before travelling to Lakeba. These assertions are false.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the bitter irony is stark. Just days ago, in his own budget response, the honourable Member passionately advocated for the effective regulation of the digital space to combat

misinformation and racism. Yet in this instance, he has administered the very poison he condemned by recklessly making a public statement published in the *Fiji Times* on 6th July that the Tongan Navy broke the law and arrived illegally without verifying the facts readily available to him as a Member of Parliament is a grave breach.

This is not merely irresponsible, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a dereliction of duty. His actions have: damaged the reputation of the sovereign Kingdom of Tonga; damaged the reputation of our border security and biosecurity of Fiji; and undermined our longstanding relations with Tonga, relations built not just on neighbourly goodwill, but on centuries of deep family ties and shared traditions, as well as to the many Tongans who live in Fiji. The consequences of honourable Lal's words extend far beyond political point scoring. It has injected ill will and risked creating hostility where none existed.

I know this because this concern was raised with me by the Tongan nobles and royal family members who were hosted at the *Yavusa Toga yavu* at Onewai in Tubou Village. Honourable Lal owes a profound apology to His Majesty the King of Tonga, Her Majesty the Queen of Tonga and the people of Tonga whose dignity he has insulted.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as honourable Members of this House, we bear a higher responsibility. Spreading demonstrably false information, especially that which risks damaging vital international relationships and cultural harmony, is a fundamental violation of trust. Furthermore, honourable Lal's focus on falsehoods stands in jarring contrast to the true spirit witnessed in Lau. Honourable Lal professes to be a youth advocate. Where was his voice praising the profound and moving participation of our young people, the students of Ratu Finau Secondary School, who embodied the future of our traditions at the *Tui Nayau*'s installation? That was the story deserving of his platform, not fabrications designed to sow discord.

Let us be clear. Such actions have no place in our discourse, especially concerning an event of such deep cultural and national significance. I urge the honourable Member to reflect, retract and offer apologies demanded by the gravity of his error.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to express my gratitude, which extends widely to the skilled and dedicated crew of the *MV Yavirau* for ensuring our safe passage to Lau and return. I thank Goundar Shipping Limited for the approval at the last moment for their boat to transport the extra 300 passengers overbooked on the *MV Yavirau*, given the time-sensitive schedule of the installation. Of course, my huge appreciation to the generous household of Nabau in Tubou Village for opening their doors and hearts to host me and my daughter Ameera with such warmth.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I took my daughter Ameera on this journey for a reason. She participated fully, sitting with reverence for up to eight hours straight on the *gatu* walkway during the main installation ceremony. While the ceremony was solemn, the life of the *Vanua* was also joy. Ameera, alongside with the teen daughters of honourable Ditoka and honourable Vosarogo, found such connection and happiness mingling safely with villagers and visitors. They were so immersed in the warmth and the security of the *vanua*, they were often arriving home later than their parents. This safe and vibrant environment for our young people is a testament to Lau's strength.

Upon consulting with several traditional leaders, their view was that our justice and welfare systems are to consider sending our child offenders, street kids and school dropouts to the village to be supervised in undertaking community work and rehabilitation through integration back into daily village life. It is something our line ministries can consider in the coming financial year, as you allocate funding and projects to help our children and youth at risk, especially as part of the diversion programme under the Child Justice Act.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the installation was not just a change in leadership, but a powerful reaffirmation of Lauan identity, a weaving together of deep roots and vibrant new shoots. Having just returned from my first visit to Lakeba and my second visit to Vanuabalavu, I deeply reflected on the state of development.

As a daughter of Kadavu, another maritime province, the parallels in our challenges struck me deeply. What I witnessed in Lau reflects a broader truth. Our maritime provinces remain trapped in a cycle of rural neglect. Despite their vast potential, they lack the basic infrastructure that defines modern development. This is not just a Lau story; it is a story of every maritime province in Fiji. The lack of equitable investment has left our coastal communities vulnerable and disconnected. The Lauan philosophy prevails. Make the most of what you have, be it God-given or government-given. Life is what you make of it, *a meca ia afika ga*.

Yet amidst these challenges, I acknowledge progress and partnership. I thank the Coalition Government for the budgetary increases across the ministries, as clearly articulated by honourable Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management. A special mention of the critical fortification of Tubou's seawall, defending a vital economic centre in Lau. I acknowledge the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu for his vision being realised with a commitment of \$250,000 to the project.

Madam Deputy Speaker, fixing seawalls, providing solar units and small assistance that help our people daily in maritime provinces, while they are vital, cannot anchor an entire province's future alone. Lau's struggles mirror Kadavu's. They mirror the cries of Lomaiviti, Bua, Ra, Rotuma, the *vanua ni vasu o Udu* and many unreachable areas by connectivity and roads.

My contribution to the National Budget is in full support, and in the same breath, I wish to pivot my speech to some general observations that we can keep in the back of our minds as we roll out the budget in the coming year. Not just merely improving the systems, we, as a government have inherited, what about a change in the system? We need to ask ourselves, when will our maritime and rural provinces receive the comprehensive and sustained investment they deserve?

Madam Deputy Speaker, many have visited China and seen the firsthand economic activity within the provinces using their resources and thriving culture tourism, which ensures preservation and young people being involved. China has alleviated poverty of close to a hundred-million people by empowering their provinces. They have opened up their provinces to foreign investment and streamlined land laws to be more investment-friendly. When we focus on the local solutions with direct investments from our national budgets, our provinces can fund the shared priorities by all – *iTaukei*, Indo-Fijian, Rotuman, Chinese, all Fijians who live within the province.

We need to empower our *vanua* and *iTaukei* structures, not just to be advisory bodies, but they can also make decisions that affect those who live within the provinces. It means working together to build roads, schools, clinics, and economies that serve everyone. This is the path to true grassroots empowerment, Madam Deputy Speaker. I ask the honourable Prime Minister to consider the proposal of bringing about real change in empowering those who lead in our provinces, including our chiefs, to be empowered with more than just an advisory role, but actually making decisions that truly lift our people out of poverty.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I just want to quickly address another case of misinformation by honourable Rinesh Sharma, who stated yesterday that 40,000 people migrated overseas last year. Firstly, this is incorrect! But more importantly he keeps belabouring the point not just here, but also on social media that this a new trend happening within the Coalition Government. That is incorrect. In 2016 - 26,000 people, 2017- 27,000 people, 2018 - 26,000 people and then in 2022 - 28,000 and 2023 - 29,000 so the numbers are on average the same, but the seven long years Madam Deputy Speaker, they did not

skill our people to fill the labour gap. They closed down the TVET colleges, but under this Government we have reopened our vocational training centres; institutions like Nadave, Navuso, Pacific Polytech, National Youth Training Centres providing scholarships, especially prioritising our school dropouts and unemployed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the previous government decimated and silenced the unions. Our government has shown genuine concerns for our workers. We have restored the confidence and trust of our workers through tripartite consultations. We have paid our civil service their due, pending for years. We have increased the pay of our civil servants without a job evaluation exercise. All of these to help alleviate poverty and manage the cost of living. We have increased the minimum wage within the first two years of coming into office, to alleviate poverty and meet the daily cost of living.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to conclude we are a government that knows your needs, because we have lived amongst you and fought alongside you and sacrificed much for 16 long years to be where we are today. We did not come this far just to hand out lollipops. Madam Deputy Speaker, I fully support the Budget.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Members of Parliament, and Ministers, I rise in this Chamber today out of a deep sense of duty and a duty to speak plainly, speak honestly and to speak for the ordinary Fijian, whose trust in this Parliament should never be misplaced.

Before I commence, Madam Deputy Speaker, with my speech proper there are a couple of things I just wanted to acknowledge. First of all, let me acknowledge the sad passing of honourable Minister Rayalu, a wonderful human being. I hope his family is in good spirits after his sad demise.

I also want to pay tribute to a remarkable human being and a true son of Fiji that we lost, some may know about, some may not. This is Dr. Parma Nand, the cardiothoracic surgeon who resided in New Zealand but is a son of Fiji. He saved many lives and helped tremendous amounts of people. He was a devoted human being, a kind and humble human being and renowned for his cardiothoracic surgery. He also performed hundreds of heart bypass operations and heart transplants, and this was a very proud Fijian. Madam Deputy Speaker, he is also the one who established Heart International, which assists many people. His legacy will live on, and he has literally touched many hearts. I hope we can somehow even posthumously acknowledge this generous and wonderful human being.

Also, I want to take the time, Madam Deputy Speaker to condemn what has transpired at the Samabula temple. As much has been said, it requires condemnation because that is not Fiji. It never has been. It should never be. It never will be. So long as we do not let it happen.

There is another acknowledgment that I need to do. Out of a sense of duty also from my own home and historically is to acknowledge the appointment of the *Tui Nayau*. His family and my family have a huge history. Congratulations to the people of Lau and of course I have a sense of duty from my own home to ensure that I do this.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when we stand to debate a budget, we are not actually debating lines in an account book, we are debating the future of Fiji, the future of our families, businesses, and our communities from Taveuni to Tavua, from Suva to Seaqaqa.

Let me begin by congratulating the Government on a fantastic budget. Truly fantastic! Fantastically contradictory. Fantastically inconsistent. I can see the honourable Minister for Finance smiling. A budget that defies economic logic and fiscal honesty, all the while being wrapped in political marketing. It is almost poetic, because prior to the last election they campaigned against debt. They decried borrowing as financial doom. They shouted from their own pulpits that the debt was unsustainable and now we are presented with a deficit of nearly \$900 million and they expect some applause.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have listened carefully to the honourable Minister and his team. We have read all the summaries, the colourful slides, and the grand talk of building security, stability, and prosperity. Very important points, but when you actually strip away the slogans, the reality is plain. The budget is actually built on borrowed money. *Dinau* is what we were told. It is built on wishful promises. It is built on the hope that someone else will foot the bill tomorrow. All these may not be wrong and we shall see. However, does it match what they were actually saying when they came into this House.

The Government boasts of providing relief of over \$800 million in cost-of-living measures. A VAT cut from 15 percent to 12.5 percent. Zero-rating continues for 22 essentials. Bus fare subsidies. Back to School Grants. Pay bumps for civil servants. These are not new, but good measures. On paper though it sounds fantastic. It is good. On paper, it sounds generous. But Madam Deputy Speaker, let me first ask. Who increased the VAT in the first place? They did. They increased it by 6 percent and by giving us a 2.5 percent discount, they want applause? Honourable Minister you created this cost-of-living crisis that we have.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I wish they be a bit original and find another word. They keep borrowing, honourable Usamate's "hogwash." There are many words in the dictionary.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Whose pockets will carry the burden when the ink on this budget dries? Let us look at the facts. The deficit will be \$886 million. That is about 6 percent of our GDP. That is not a small gap, that is a chasm. It will be filled not by magic, not by slogans, but by loans. We will borrow to pay for daily groceries. We will borrow to pay for the salaries, and we will pay over half a billion dollars in interest alone, before we touch a single pothole or lay a single metre of new water pipe.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what I understand and I stand to be corrected, I think the ratio with respect to our capital expenditure (CapEx) and operational expenditure (OpEx) stand at 19:81 That is huge - 81 is OpEx. Never before. It does not quite gel. This Government tells us our debt-to-GDP ratio is better than before, yet the same Government has pushed it right back up to nearly 80 percent. These are the hard-core facts, and the so-called relief. It is only relief if savings reach the people's hands. When FijiFirst was in government, we zero-rated essentials, which they are continuing. We put in the checks and the tracking, we gave FCCC a special budget of roughly about \$300,000 to police this and see whether the reductions were passed on. We gave the tools to audit, fine and enforce all of that. Where is that? If it is there, fantastic. If it is not, where is that? Where is the machinery today? Tell us how much you are actually giving to this particular task force.

The Government's plan, Madam Deputy Speaker, is to hope that supermarkets do the right thing. If they do not, then will the honourable Minister go on TV and with his political clout that he has, go on air and threaten price controls? Is that what is going to happen?

Madam Deputy Speaker, we must ask, how do we expect every small shop, in every settlement to comply when we do not have enough inspectors to actually police them? This is not economic leadership, this is wishful thinking; wishful thinking does not put food on the table. It does not stop retailers from pocketing the difference. We all know about unscrupulous retailers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the truth is, the cost-of-living pressures are real. I feel it. You feel it. Every family feels it, but a VAT cut is not the cure,. It is a band-aid. The real cure is to grow more food at home, make our farmers stronger, fix the supply chain bottlenecks, give every farmer fair price and every fisherman a fair market. Yet where is that in the Budget?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I think the honourable Deputy Prime Minister needs to find another line too. Where is the bold productivity push? Where is the real plan to modernise agriculture? It is a shame we have lost honourable Vatimi Rayalu, because he was very forward thinking.

Madam Deputy Speaker, where is this plan in the budget? Where is the bold productivity push? Where is the real plan to modernise agriculture, to fund the rural roads so farmers can get their goods to town, to expand export markets from our cane, ginger and seafood. There is a fantastic market waiting for our cane that something can be done but that Ministry is not doing it.

We could be very wealthy out of that particular product and it is a thing called “sustainable aviation fuels”. Do not forget that honourable Minister. I know you have acknowledged it, but that is something that can take us into the future. I hope you do something about it. If you do not believe me, ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka.

Madam Deputy Speaker, whilst they cut duties on frozen chicken and foreign fish, our local producers must compete with imports, with no meaningful protection for their livelihoods. When our local producers fail, so do the jobs that feed our people.

Let me move on to trade,. It is actually the beating heart of our diversification agenda. Slowly it has been reduced to a passing reference in budget briefs. Where is the real commitment to expand Fiji's export base? We are still waiting.

(Honourable Kamikamica interjects)

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, where is the support for agro-processing zones, the export credit schemes, or trade facilitation reforms? We had actually opened new markets for Fiji and ginger, kava, seafood, et cetera. We leveraged trade diplomacy to anchor these investments. This Government, in contrast, has allowed the trade to drift with absolutely no sectoral strategy, from what I have seen, no trade facilitation policy refresh, and the engagement with regional trade frameworks is actually limited.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when you look closely at the trade budget, the picture is even bleaker. A small example is the Department of National Trade Measurements and Standards - \$681,478 is for personal emoluments, yet only \$4,500 is set aside for vehicle maintenance and \$2,475 for incidentals. They are buying a \$70,000 electric forklift and a \$210,000 gantry master meter.

(Honourable Kamikamica interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is actually misalignment of priorities.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Have a look at the last two budgets.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I do not know what that does. How do we justify that when \$22,500 is all that is given to the National Measurement Laboratory, when the Trade Standards Enforcement is receiving \$56,200, while the cost-of-living crisis goes unmonitored? This one, I need to hear more about. It is very dangerously silent.

Madam Deputy Speaker, under the Department of Cooperative Business, \$10 million is being poured into one single cooperative - Yasawa Tourism Marketing Cooperative Limited. What for - no one knows. Is there transparency? We do not know. Has there been benchmarking with respect to the outcomes or is this part of a border cooperative sector reform plan? How will it be distributed? Who decides? How is it being done and on what criteria?

Last year, we saw a \$5 million grant being given to Pacific Polytech. This year, we see \$10 million to a tourism cooperative for marketing. Are we replacing Tourism Fiji? This is one quarter the budget of Tourism Fiji's marketing grant; one quarter. We would really like to know what this is for because it would seem that the budget book is devoid and completely blank with respect to an explanation on that particular \$10 million. I am not saying anything except, could we please have an explanation? That \$10 million grant to one cooperative is larger from what I understand that the Integrated Human Resources Development Programme (IHRDP), the National Export Strategy, all of them put together. What is it? Nobody knows. Because there is no explanation in our budget. That is a massive grant to one cooperative! What about all the other co-operatives? Ten million dollars to do marketing with respect to Yasawa?

Madam Deputy Speaker, trade demands strategy, not sporadic grants. It requires discipline and it is not just the line item. I hope that we get the answers that we need, and I hope the actual ministry is going to get the full level of support that it should, because this is what drives our exports and our growth with respect to MSMEs, et cetera.

Let us turn to tourism. This is the very sector that carried us through post-COVID recovery, and it is now being left almost vulnerable. I understand that visitor numbers are down by 1 percent this year. Australia and New Zealand are flattening. Asia is rising and Fiji is losing a market share. The only intervention being made with respect to the tourism sector is the Departure Tax going up to \$200 without a reinvestment plan, without clarity on how that burden will be offset. Let us be clear, under the previous government, we matched the departure tax with route expansion, marketing campaigns and infrastructure development. We did not push the sector to pad a deficit.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the budget forgets that a high value tourism sector requires sustained investment, not just harvesting what others have built. An investment that is actually getting in on the ground, not something that is still in the pipeline.

Now let me address justice, the rule of law and public safety. It is actually hard to find the right words for what has become of our justice system. We have seen a lot of comings and goings and goings on about the Commission of Inquiry (COI) and the weeks of hearings, the month of headlines, now even moreso with respect to out-of-court settlements, et cetera. By the time all these add up, the taxpayer will be funding a huge bill.

The issue of rising crime, Madam Deputy Speaker, the government announces new 1,000 police officers. Fantastic. I hope that is supported by infrastructure, that is required for those 1,000 officers. We do not get to hear what is heard on a common basis, and everyone knows this – “sorry, we do not have enough vehicles.”

Today, the public is crying out for security; people are being targeted, whether you are a man, woman, or a child. One thousand more officers, but we also must look at the officers who are currently

there. What is being done to support them? Will these new officers come with the same broken-down vehicles?

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will say this also – what the others have spoken about – there is a loss of our people. You ask any businesses, there is a severe loss of our skilled people from our shores. Over 6,000 Fijians left our shores last year for more than a year. Families are split, skills are lost, and hope is carried away. That is something that needs to be addressed. One of the things that needs to be addressed, is our education system.

The 3 percent pay rise for civil servants will not fix this, while housing actually remains unaffordable. Having \$2 billion-plus in liquidity is not actually a good thing. The banks are not dishing it out like they used to. They still have so many undrawn loans from big houses.

We made the hard call when we were in government, Madam Deputy Speaker! We did not promise the moon while handing out whatever we needed to. We did not have. We borrowed, yes! But we borrowed for assets that built roads, airports and ports. We modernised laws, digitised the system, merged departments and we did not flinch.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me just finish off. I do not stand here just to criticise, but I offer some recommendations for the government to work on, maybe to improve the budget. Keep the zero rating. That is good. Maybe increase it. Borrow only to build, invest in productive infrastructure, not short-term ones. Unblock the private investment, digitise approvals – it is happening, but it is not happening fast enough – incentivise exports and support the MSMEs even more. This is the area that will make Fiji grow. We want Fiji to grow. Protect our people, make housing affordable, address the brain drain, and reform policing. The honourable Minister is working very hard to actually do that. Restore integrity in our legal system; it has gone missing. The integrity is gone. People are actually looking at it and wondering, what the hell is happening. Above all, commit to a transparent fiscal consolidation path.

I will finish off by saying, when we did leave, we did not govern for applause. We governed for results. It does not matter what they say.

(Honourable Kamikamica interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I have one answer for that sly little laugh. We were the fifth fastest growing economy in the world. We gave you that! You should have built on it. We rebuilt this nation also from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), cyclones, pandemics, and political shocks. Without crying about, “oh, previous government did this, previous government did that.”

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, would you please wind up?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we also on this side of the House stand ready to protect what is being built in Fiji, to grow what was started and to secure Fiji's tomorrow. To the people of Fiji, keep your eyes open. Ask the hard questions. Demand the proof and not just the promises, because in the end, it is you who will have to pay. Every single cent. I thank the honourable Minister for Finance for presenting the budget. I do not support it.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- We will now suspend proceedings for a break. Parliament will resume in half-an-hour, and when we resume, we will hear from the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage, and Arts.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.39 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

HON. I. VASU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians in the gallery and those listening from their homes, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

At the outset, I extend my sincere appreciation, to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and his staff for his visionary leadership in formulating a balanced and inclusive 2025-2026 National Budget.

I also take this opportunity to warmly congratulate honourable Inosi Kuridrani, my *tau* on re-joining Parliament and I wish him every success in his service to the nation.

Madama Deputy Speaker, the 2025-2026 National Budget reflects the Government's strong commitment to inclusive national development, with transformative investments in health, infrastructure, education, and tourism.

I also acknowledge the Government's continued support to vulnerable groups, with an additional 5 percent increase in monthly payments for all social welfare recipients and government pensioners, building on last year's 15 percent rise. The new 10 percent nationwide bus fare subsidy will ease transport costs for all Fijians, especially students, senior citizens, workers, and rural communities, further reflecting a caring and inclusive approach to governance.

The record allocation of \$611.6 million to the health sector, including a \$10 million HIV response, demonstrates a people-first approach to public well-being. Significant infrastructure spending, such as \$284 million for water upgrading and over \$387 million for roads, underscores the Government's focus on connecting rural and urban communities alike. With \$847 million allocated to education and expanded tertiary support, the future of Fiji's youth, especially *iTaukei* students, is being empowered through access and opportunity.

I would also like to commend the inclusion of full-time appointments for early childhood education teachers. This reflects the Government's commitment to uplifting all Fijians. In tourism, the \$93 million injection in revitalising one of Fiji's key economic pillars, creating jobs and encouraging indigenous entrepreneurship in cultural tourism.

I commend the Government for the 3 percent salary increase for all civil servants. A timely recognition of the dedication, hard work, and unwavering commitment of our public service workforce. This gesture reflects the government's genuine appreciation for those who serve our nation every day. Altogether, these investments not only reflect sound governance, but also lay a strong foundation for the economic empowerment and social upliftment of the Fijian people across all levels of society.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous support and collaborations that has shaped this budget. The increase allocation for the Ministry is a direct result of extensive consultations and strategic inputs, particularly through our engagement with land owning units, provincial councils, *bose vanua*, the Great Council of Chiefs and key stakeholders. This forum has helped us to ensure that this budget reflects the real needs and aspirations of our people. Their voice having formed our priorities and shaped the allocations that will empower the *iTaukei* people in the years ahead.

I rise today to present the proposed budget for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage, and Arts for the 2025-2026 fiscal year.

Madam Deputy Speaker this budget is more than figures and allocations. It is a road map for cultural preservation and empowerment of *iTaukei* communities and sustainable development of our resources. I am pleased to report an allocation of \$41.2 million for the coming year, an increase of \$1.8 million from the current financial year. This increase affirms our government's commitment to enhancing the well-being and prosperity of the *iTaukei* people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before outlining our vision for the coming year. Allow me to briefly highlight several key achievements from the 2024-2025 financial year. We successfully revitalised the GCC which held a productive meeting in May 2024 for implementation of previous resolutions and addressing pressing issues. We also celebrated the successful reopening of the GCC meeting house and the historic sitting of the first ever GCC meeting held inside the complex.

The GCC secretariat engaged all 14 provinces and Rotuma through *bose vanua*, the meeting focuses on *vanua* governance and social structure. A landmark MOU was signed with the Fiji National University (FNU), to establish a Diploma in Traditional Leadership and another with Pacific Specialist Healthcare to improve health outcomes. In development support, over \$1.5 million worth of projects were implemented through the *iTaukei* Resource Owners Development Fund. We also completed the consultations on the Water Catchment Standing Trees Compensation Policy and submitted amendments to strengthen village governance and combat social challenges.

The *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission (TLFC) achieved 1,438 chiefly titles confirmations and surpassed targets in records preservation and digitisation.

In 2024-2025 Financial Year, the TLFC successfully surveyed 16 land parcels in Serua, Ba and Kadavu and mapped 129 villages across Kadavu, Rewa and Southern Lau, completed 38 confirmations of *iTaukei* land ownership with Register of Native Land (RNL) issued and commenced mahogany lease surveys in Vanua Levu.

The *iTaukei* Institute of Language and Culture conducted 36 revitalisation trainings and launched a handicraft exhibition programme.

The CATD Nadave saw 194 students graduate with a 90 percent employment absorption rate, alongside capital development including construction of dormitories and workshop upgrades.

The *iTaukei* Lands Trust Board approved 2,834 new leases covering 14,929 hectares and generating \$1.95 million in annual rent and \$49.08 million in lease premiums. Lease arrears were reduced by 30 percent.

The *iTaukei* Affairs Board conducted traditional land tenure workshops, leadership trainings for women and youth and 172 *Tikina* council meetings across the nation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this year's increased allocation will drive strategic investment in leadership, land management, culture, education, and community resilience. We will convene the next GCC meeting in November 2025 and commence Traditional Leadership Training at Nadave in August. The GCC Secretariat will be strengthened, and its implementation team will evolve into the *iTaukei* Administration and Implementation Team. A \$361,957 allocation will support the roll out of the GCC Review Report and preparation of the GCC Bill.

The *iTaukei* Resource Owners Support and Development Fund has been allocated \$3 million to support over 60 business projects through interest subsidies and technical oversight via a new Project Management Unit. We will fund preservation, dispute resolution, and land surveying under the TLFC, including a \$510,000 for a mahogany plantation survey in the Northern Division. Cultural revitalisation continues with a \$45,000 investment in training programmes and support for the Traditional Knowledge Database and *Volavosa* Dictionary Review.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government has allocated \$1 million to go towards preparations of Fiji's hosting of the Melanesian Festival of Arts and Culture (MACFEST) in 2026, which will support infrastructure assessments, the establishment of a MACFEST Secretariat and the mobilisation of our nation's delegation of artists.

For CATD, Nadave a \$920,000 operational budget and \$1.052 million in capital expenditure will expand its capacity to 350 students and upgrade facilities. The centre's five strategic pillars: skills training; economic empowerment; cultural revitalisation; spiritual development; and sports and nutrition, guide this transformation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the iTLTB targets 2,500 new lease approvals and \$171.94 million in revenue, with a 60 percent arrears reduction goal. Committee on Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) rental subsidies will receive \$6.9 million through the Ministry of Agriculture.

The iTLTB will receive an increase in operation grant of \$4.7 million funding provincial council operations, traditional ceremonies, village development plans and leadership training for youths and women. We will advance Jobs for Nature initiatives and deploy the vulnerable assessment tools in partnership with Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk offices.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of the Permanent Secretaries, CEOs, Chairman of the GCC, chairmen of the provincial councils and staff of the key *iTaukei* institutions in the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs, including Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL) and iTLTB in successfully implementing the 2024-2025 budget. Their collective efforts both in Suva and throughout the provinces have laid a solid foundation and we look forward to an even more impactful and successful 2025-2026 financial year.

In conclusion, this budget reflects a unified vision. A thriving *iTaukei* community rooted in tradition, yet confidently navigating the future. From landowners and youths to elders and cultural custodians, every initiative is crafted to empower, preserve and uplift. We stand at a pivotal moment. The challenges before us – climate change, economic uncertainty and social transformation demand, bold, inclusive, and strategic action.

Let this budget be our promise; a promise that every *iTaukei* child will have the opportunity to thrive, that our elders and traditions will be honoured and that our communities will be resilient, vibrant, and forward looking.

It is with great pride and deep responsibility that I commend the 2025-2026 Appropriation Bill to this august House. May God bless our beloved Fiji.

HON. V. LAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, those watching the proceedings live through various digital devices, ladies and gentlemen, I extend a warm welcome and a very good morning, *namaskar* and *bula vinaka* to you all.

Before I speak on the Budget, I would like to take this opportunity to urge the Government to implement robust measures to safeguard places of worship and strengthen laws to criminalise acts of sacrilege. The heinous act of damaging deities at Samabula Shiv Temple on Friday last week is not just merely an attack on our faith and community, but an affront to the principles of humanity, religious harmony, and national unity. Despite numerous advocacies, it is very disappointing to see that sacrilege rears its ugly head time and again. Such acts should be denounced in the strongest possible terms.

On the Budget, Madam Deputy Speaker, on this side of the House, we firmly advocate for robust accountability and transparency, which are fundamental pillars of good governance. As Members of Parliament, we are committed to ensuring that the budget accurately reflects the aspirations and priorities of all Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, prior to the 2022 General Elections, the Finance Minister used national debt as a tactic to manipulate public sentiment and sway votes in his favour. After forming Government, he disregarded the debt levels and began borrowing heavily, resulting in a national debt of \$11.7 billion, which now accounts for almost 80 percent of the GDP, as rightly pointed out by the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

In his first budget, presented in 2023, honourable Professor Prasad introduced a deficit budget of \$447.6 million, representing 3.4 percent of the GDP. Last year, he presented a deficit budget of \$505.3 million, accounting for 3.6 percent of the GDP. For the new financial year, the deficit budget stands at \$886 million, increasing to 6 percent of the GDP. These figures demonstrate that the government is merely borrowing to cover its expenses, further exacerbating the national debt. Notably, the budget lacks any plans to repay this debt. It is quite extraordinary, Madam Deputy Speaker, that instead of reducing the debt, honourable Prasad is now increasing it. During his time in Opposition, he was the most vocal advocate for debt reduction, and you know it very well. He relentlessly propagated information about the national debt. He focused very narrow-mindedly on the nominal debt value, while we contextualised matters and emphasised the debt-to-GDP ratio.

It seems there has been some intellectual reform, as honourable Prasad now takes an about-turn, ignoring the nominal debt levels and focussing solely on the debt-to-GDP ratio. Perhaps he is desperately trying to remain relevant, as public confidence in him and his government erodes due to the chaotic and volatile nature of government operations. While the budget commendably sustains social protection and shields vulnerable Fijians amidst a slowing global economy, it exhibits structural weaknesses and warrants parliamentary attention, particularly its underinvestment in productive capital relative to operating expenditure.

The international economic climate is challenging, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects global growth of 2.8 percent in 2025, well below the historical average of 3.7 percent. This has immediate implications for Fiji through tourism revenues, remittances, trade flows and borrowing costs. Domestically, growth is expected at 3.2 percent in 2025, slightly revised down from earlier forecasts. The budget wisely deploys counter-cyclical measures, cuts in VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent, reduced duties on key food items, expanded social welfare and pensions, and pay rises for all civil servants. These will cushion household incomes, uphold aggregate demand, and preserve social stability. However, the fiscal structure underpinning these policies is lopsided.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in 2025-2026 the expenditure estimate is \$4.83 billion, and out of that operating expenditure is \$3.91 billion, which is equivalent to 81 per cent and the capital expenditure, is only \$926 million, which is 19 percent of total expenditure. So, this means over 80 cents of every dollar is consumed by recurrent costs, salaries, subsidies, and transfers, rather than invested in infrastructure or long-term productivity. Comparatively, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank often recommend that small economies maintain a capital share near 25 percent to 30 percent to drive future growth. By this benchmark, Fiji's current trajectory under-invests in assets that expand future GDP capacity, such as roads, digital infrastructure, advanced health systems, and resilient water projects.

The long-term economic cost of under-investment is stark. Productivity stalls. Without consistent capital injections, the economy risks a lower growth ceiling, eroding future tax bases needed to sustain social programmes and higher vulnerability. Structural deficits raise logistic costs, data investors, and expose Fiji more acutely to climate, commodity, and geopolitical shocks.

Intergenerational imbalance, under the Financial Management Act 2004, budgets are obligated to balance the needs of current and future generations. A heavy tilt to operating spending may be short-changing future Fijians.

Parliament is urged to consider these measured refinements to strengthen the medium- and long-term growth outlook:

- (1) Rebalance the expenditure mix. Aim progressively for a capital share of at least 25 percent by 2027, in line with the National Development Plan's infrastructure ambitions.
- (2) Deepen public-private partnerships. Leverage Fiji's new legal and policy frameworks to attract private capital for major roads, water, ICT, and renewable energy, easing fiscal burdens.
- (3) Protect priority capital lines. Ring-fenced strategic infrastructure allocations against the ad hoc cuts to maintain project continuity.
- (4) Operational efficiency drives. Undertake a public service delivery review to trim low-impact administrative overheads, redirecting savings into capital projects.

Parliament is entrusted not only to steward relief for our citizens today, but to build a platform for resilient, inclusive growth tomorrow. This budget should be the start and not the end of a conversation on how we systematically lift our capital expenditure, drive productivity, and honour our intergenerational obligations under the Constitution and the Financial Management Act. By recalibrating our spending structure, even gradually, we secure not just security, stability, and prosperity today, but ensure that tomorrow's Fijians inherit an economy that is stronger than we found it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Prasad in his Budget Address announced a few incentives in response to extraordinary circumstances. There seems to be some confusion in this regard. Therefore, I would like to remind honourable Prasad that the extraordinary circumstances that he is responding to were created by his own previous two budgets, where VAT was increased to and then maintained at 15 percent, which absolutely decimated any remnant effects of the post-pandemic economic rebound because he taxed consumption – he taxed the very thing requisite for economic activity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in this budget, reducing VAT by 2.5 percent is an insult to the ordinary Fijians, who seek relief from the rising cost of living. The hardships and suffering of ordinary Fijians will continue unabated, especially those who do not have a regular income. Because on a basket of goods costing \$100, he is giving them a relief of only \$2.50. What good will \$2.50 do? If we use the 2022 VAT rates, where VAT was 9 percent, the same basket of goods would cost ordinary Fijians at least \$6 less. That \$6 was enough money to pay their taxi fare back home from the supermarket.

On behalf of ordinary Fijians, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would urge honourable Prasad to not punish the people in this manner, please! They have done nothing wrong, perhaps the only mistake was voting for him in the last elections, which I can assure him they will not repeat in the next one. The 2025-2026 Budget Estimates indeed allocates a higher envelope to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, rising from \$452 million in 2024-2025 to \$466 million for core Ministry operations, not including additional capital injections and HIV-specific allocations. This reflects commendable recognition by the Government of the deep vulnerabilities in our public health system. Vulnerabilities that were starkly exposed during the pandemic and have been exacerbated by NCD burdens, rising mental health cases, and a growing HIV crisis.

However, budgets are only as good as their execution. In Fiji, historical trends and persistent bureaucratic bottlenecks raise legitimate concerns about how much of this increase will be effectively felt on the ground, particularly at suburban high-population health centres like Valelevu, which ironically serve the majority yet often receive the least attention. Drawing directly on the situation at Valelevu Health Centre – because I reside there, and which caters to a vast swathe of Nasinu, the country's most populous corridor – several systemic operational failures become glaring:

- Light fittings and air conditioning left non-functional for months, compromising basic safety and care standards.
- Radiology department non-operational for months due to a malfunctioning x-ray machine.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Where?

HON. V. LAL.- Listen, then you will know what I am talking about.

- Laboratory forced to outsource routine tests to CWM Hospital -- delaying diagnosis, straining tertiary centres.
- Chloramphenicol eye drops is out of stock for public facilities for two years, yet, abundantly available in private pharmacies, indicating no global supply constraint, but a national procurement or stock management failure.
- Recalls of chloramphenicol injections, atorvastatin tablets, and iron dextran injections, all from Indian manufacturers, highlight serious pharmacovigilance lapses and questions the prudence of further partnering with the same sources without stricter quality controls.
- The stockouts of common medications like diazepam, losartan, amlodipine, metoprolol, verapamil, salbutamol, beclomethasone, ipratropium, methotrexate, colchicine, levothyroxine, carbimazole, warfarin, GTN, spironolactone, madopar, erythromycin, nitrofurantoin, cotrimoxazole, zinc, children's elixirs like paracetamol and flucloxacillin, and supplies like syringes, methylated spirit and povidone iodine remain routine. These are just a few of the long list of out-of-stock items.
- Procurement remains overly centralised under mSupply, yet local-level logistics and emergency purchases are hamstrung by rigid financial instructions.

These failures, despite recurrent budget increases, reveal the extent to which bureaucratic gridlocks, not mere funding shortfalls, are undermining healthcare delivery. It is also critical to observe that the Government's well-intentioned decision to phase out the contract-based system in the Civil Service, has paradoxically eroded incentives for performance, particularly in critical sectors like Health. The Civil Service now largely functions under permanent tenure, with no direct output or performance linkages, weakening urgency and accountability. In health, these entrenches complacency precisely where dynamism and rapid responsiveness are most needed, leading to issues such as months-long non-repairs of vital infrastructure and medical equipment.

While the budget allocates additional sums for wages, it offers only a 3 percent across-the-board pay rise, a figure plainly dwarfed by the 100 percent to 200 percent salary differentials available overseas, a primary reason for the accelerating exodus of not just nurses, but also doctors and allied health professionals. Retention incentives like the 2024 Nurses' Retention Allowance, while valuable, have not been systematically extended to medical officers, pharmacists, lab scientists, radiographers physiotherapists and other allied cadres.

These groups are integral to any functioning healthcare system yet find themselves largely unprotected from overseas poaching. It is not simply pay. Many professionals are migrating for:

- predictable rest breaks;

- guaranteed staffing for fair shift rotations;
- safer working environments including protection from patient aggression; and
- institutional respect.

Yet the current budget documents of a no explicit provisions for rest facilities, mental health support for routine for frontline workers, or incentives for working unsocial hours beyond standard overtime, all starkly inconsistent with the global health HR best practise.

The repeated quality problems culminating in the recall of chloramphenicol, atorvastatin and iron dextran illustrate the urgent need for the Ministry of Health with FRCS and the Fiji Pharmaceutical & Biomedical Services to rethink its regulatory model before aggressively introducing Indian Pharmacopeia medications. While importing from India can be cost-effective, it must come with:

- (1) strict quality certification from WHO-prequalified facilities;
- (2) third-party testing batches on arrival;
- (3) and a fully independent pharmacovigilance unit with teeth to issue bans and recalls.

Failure to do so may violate the constitutional guarantee to life and health under Section 38 of 2013 Constitution by knowingly exposing Fijians to substandard or unsafe products. Considering these realities, it is critical for Parliament to demand precise answers:

- (1) What portion of the Ministry of Health's increased allocation is specifically earmarked for direct improvements to peripheral health centres like Valelevu?
- (2) How will it be shielded from reallocation to tertiary hospitals or head office operational overheads?
- (3) How does the Ministry plan to enforce quality standards for new pharmaceutical imports from India, beyond relying on manufacturers own paperwork?
- (4) What is the timeline for fixing the Valelevu X-ray machine, replacing laboratory equipment, and ensuring all lights, basic infrastructure and rest areas are promptly repaired?
- (5) Will there be a public audit of facility maintenance backlogs?
- (6) Beyond the 3 percent across-the-board pay rise, what retention incentives are planned for doctors and allied health staff?
- (7) Will there be structured rest time, mental health support programmes, or hardship allowances for those working unsocial hours in high-volume facilities?

This budget like many before it, increases the health allocation, ticking a political box. But without rigorous operational reforms to break bureaucratic inertia, enforce maintenance contracts, protect medicine quality, and genuinely invest in the well-being of all health workers, these figures risk amounting to little more than ledger lines. True security, stability and prosperity, as the budget slogan claims, will come not from higher votes alone, but from a health system that works when a patient in Nasinu walks through the door — with lights on, machines functional, medicines safe, and staff respected, rested, and ready.

There are also a lot of false promises made by this Government that I wanted to address, but in the interests of time, I cannot go into them in much detail.

- (1) Re-construction of Penang Sugar Mill. Several times. The Sugar Minister has informed this House about rebuilding the mill, but there is no allocation for this in the Budget.
- (2) People of Tuirara and Naidiri settlements in Makoi, Nasinu were promised that the land they were residing on will be subdivided and blocks will be given to them, but nothing has happened.

- (3) No allocation in the Budget for the construction of a new Nalawa Police Station. The police officers are still occupying the temporary house constructed by the community and we had visited them. This house was leaking and during the rainy season, officers face a lot of difficulties to carry out their duties effectively. This station looks after a huge area - from Nakorotubu District, Nalawa and part of Saivou District.
- (4) Long standing issue of water problem between Nalawa and Madhuvani settlements remain. There are five primary and two secondary schools, an urban centre, Nalawa Police Station and two health centres in the area.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Virendra may I disturb you just for a second. I have given a precedent to honourable Koya, I let him speak two minutes over, so I will give you the same respect.

HON. V. LAL.- Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

A water source has already been identified to cover these areas, but nothing has been done. Madam Deputy Speaker, in my concluding remarks, I would just like to point out that this Budget is not visionary and as such I do not support it. It is short-term survival funded by debt, is leaving future taxpayers burdened. Let us set aside politics and get back to what is really important. The everyday cost-of-living and the dignity of Fijian families. The era of excuses is behind us. The era of action is upon us. May God bless Fiji and its people.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I will also allow the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports to speak two minutes over time as I had done with honourable Lal and honourable Koya.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august House, *muju sa cola vina*. Let me begin by extending my heartfelt congratulations to:

- (1) The Fiji Deaf Rugby 7s Teams both (Men and Women) for their outstanding victories in the finals of the Pacific Rim Deaf Rugby Tournament in Australia;
- (2) Team Fiji for their exceptional performance at the Pacific Mini Games in Palau with Team Fiji's sprinter Heleina Young crowned the overall outstanding female athlete. Ms. Young won three gold medals (400m, 200m, 4x400m) and two silver medals (4x100m, Mixed 4x400m);
- (3) The FIJI Water Flying Fijians for their triumphant win over Scotland at our very own HFC Bank Stadium, in front of a historic home crowd; and
- (4) Honourable Inosi Kuridrani for rejoining Parliament yet again and I wish him well.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our Fijian athletes continue to fly our flag with pride showcasing Fiji not only as a formidable sporting nation, but also as a world-class tourist destination. Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a privilege to respond to the 2025-2026 National Budget presented by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Professor Biman Prasad. Before I proceed, I give thanks to God for bringing us this far.

Commitment to Development, I acknowledge the Coalition Government's steadfast commitment to national development, prudent fiscal management, and inclusive governance. This Budget reflects a delicate balancing act meeting national priorities amidst global uncertainties while staying the course of fiscal consolidation and addressing our people's pressing needs.

I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and his team for their work. I also thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership during these challenging times. As Minister for Youth and Sports, I wish to underscore the importance of sustained investment in two sectors crucial to our nation's future, our youth and our sporting community. While I support the broader vision of Government, I must raise solicitude not only as the Minister but on behalf of every young Fijian whose dreams for a brighter future must be matched with tangible investment.

Investing in Youth is a National Imperative, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has been allocated \$23.3 million in this Budget, a modest reduction from the previous year. This includes a 3 percent adjustment to wages and salaries, which places some constraints on our programme delivery. Nonetheless, we remain fully committed to delivering targeted, high-impact initiatives that serve our young people across the nation. Youth development is not optional, it is essential to our national progress. The youth crisis cannot be ignored. Madam Deputy Speaker, our young people today face a range of challenges:

- youth unemployment remains high in both urban and rural settings;
- drug and substance abuse continues to destroy lives and families;
- HIV/AIDS cases are rising, particularly among those under 35;
- children and homeless youths are now visible across our towns and cities; and
- petty crime, violence is growing, driven by frustration and lack of opportunity.

To be honest, these are not just statistics, they are red flags of crisis, and this crisis demands not only policy responses, but real investment. If we under-invest in our youth, we risk creating a lost generation, disconnected from education, employment and society, and more likely to place strain on our justice and health systems. The power of youth is an untapped asset.

Madam Deputy Speaker, youth represents nearly one-third of our population, around 300,000 Fijians aging 15 to 35. Investing in them is not a cost, it is an opportunity. Youth investment drives innovation, productivity, civic engagement, and nation-building. We have introduced youth training centres, capacity-building programmes, youth entrepreneurship support, and peer-led health and wellness initiatives. These must be strengthened. We cannot expect behavioural change unless we provide meaningful alternatives. Through this Budget, we will continue to prioritise second-chance education, skills and trades training, micro-enterprise grants, community leadership programmes, youth rehabilitation and reintegration.

I wish to therefore correct comments from the other side of the House. We do provide a safety net for those young or youth who fall through the cracks of our formal education system and give them a second chance.

Sports economy, Fiji's sleeping giant, Madam Deputy Speaker, sports remains a key focus for our Ministry, accounting to 72 percent of the Ministry's total budget. This allocation supports:

- (1) overseas tours by national teams;
- (2) engagement of coaches and sports scholarship;
- (3) hosting international tournaments;
- (4) grants for national sporting organisations;
- (5) upgrading rural sports grounds;
- (6) building hardcourts; and
- (7) administrative operations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, sports is more than competition. It is a driver of national unity, health and well-being, social development, and economic growth. Sports contributes to GDP through

remittances from overseas athletes. Sports tourism, broadcasting branding rights, local economic stimulation via events and venues. Since 2004, Madam Deputy Speaker, personal remittances, driven significantly by our athletes, have ranked as Fiji's second-largest foreign exchange earner after tourism. Remittances are not just economic figures. They are lifelines that supplement household incomes and build national resilience. However, our sports infrastructure lags.

The Fiji Sports Council struggles to maintain facilities to international standards and to build new sports facilities - limiting our ability to host major events. Sports tourism is growing, fuelled by Fiji's rugby culture and teams like the Fijian Drua, international sports events generate substantial local revenue and foster national pride.

The Hidden Costs of Underinvestment, the investment does not show up immediately on a spreadsheet or on a balance sheet, but it reveals itself through:

- rising youth injustice system,
- overcrowded juvenile facilities,
- urban frustration and unrest,
- untapped athletic talent, lost to lack of support,
- missed opportunities in entrepreneurship and innovation.

This House must look beyond fiscal constraints to the long-term social cost of neglect.

A Collective Approach, meaningful youth and sports development requires partnerships across Government, civil society, faith-based groups, the private sector and with youth themselves. An outcome-driven approach must be built on collaboration, engagement and shared ownership.

Recognising Positive Measures, I take this time to acknowledge, progress and commend the continued Government support for:

- Scouts and Guides Programmes in primary schools,
- Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for secondary students,
- Youth training centres and skills development,
- Capacity building,
- Research and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

These initiatives signal clear Government intent of leaving no one behind that must be matched by investment.

Our Ministry's Call to Action - Government, through the Ministry of Youth and Sports, is committed to:

- Delivering high-impact, efficient programmes,
- Ensuring value for money,
- Strengthening partnerships with NGOs and development partners,
- Leveraging technology to reach the engaged youth.

A National Agenda, Not Just a Ministry Agenda, the issues we face across multiple sectors, education, health, employment, justice and social welfare. Cross-sectoral collaboration is not optional - it is essential. In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, I reaffirm my belief in the resilience, creativity and potential of our youth. We will continue to seek innovative ways within and beyond the budget to empower our youth and strengthen sports development. Let us not reduce the

dreams of our young people to footnotes in national policy. Let us remember every dollar we withhold today may cost us tenfold tomorrow. In the words of Kofi Annan, and I quote:

“Any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind.”

Let us not risk losing a generation's belief in our ability to include them in the nation's future. Our youth are not only the future, they are also the present. With the right support, they can lead us to a stronger, safer and more prosperous Fiji. Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Members, I commend this Budget to the House and seek all our support in supporting and in shaping a brighter future for our beloved nation. May God bless Fiji.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, just before I give the floor to the honourable Alvick Maharaj, I would like to recognise in the public gallery with us this afternoon the honourable Tingika Elikana, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Immigration from the Cook Islands. Welcome, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and fellow colleagues, a very good afternoon to you all. I rise to deliver the response to the Budget and thank the honourable Minister for Finance and his team for the preparation of 2025-2026 National Budget.

We have heard flowery language and the Budget that speaks to all Fijians equally. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, what I hear, and what countless Fijians across our island feel, is the echo of non-performance over the past two years of this Government tenure, reactive policies, increase in debt, inadequate service delivery, and a fundamental disconnect from the daily struggles of our people.

A responsible government does not use global uncertainties as a shield for domestic inaction. A responsible government anticipates and mitigates these challenges with strategic long-term vision, not with piecemeal intervention and belated acknowledgement of crises that have been allowed to fester on its watch, over the last 30 months.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government thinks that we are still living in the 19th century and they can fool the public with old politics – politics of taking from people for the first two years and giving hands out during the last two years before going into elections. As we say in Hindi, ‘*pahale batoro*, or rather *looto fir baato*.’ These politics will not work in the 21st century. We have a educated populace and they understand what is being done.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government boasts on \$800 million cost of living package with the VAT reduction as its centrepiece. What a nice way to slide the debt amount of \$800 million underneath the carpet. The honourable Minister for Finance tried to put a narrative that this borrowing of \$800 million is to mitigate the high cost of living, but failed to tell people this will add to operational costs and not capital projects.

Which right-thinking government makes a budget with 81 percent operational costs and 19 percent capital projects, Madam Deputy Speaker? They claim this will put money back into the Fijian’s pocket, but let us be honest, a 2.5 percent VAT reduction is merely a drop in the ocean for families drowning in the rising tides of expenses. This is not a groundbreaking relief, or a token of gesture, slowly recognising the pain our people have endured due to inflation and lack of significant action on cost of living during 2023 and 2024.

There was a massive response from the honourable Minister for Finance when I called for a reduction in VAT in May this year. He was all over the place explaining why VAT cannot be reduced,

but just within two months he brings the VAT down by 2.5 percent. I wonder, did he lecture himself before deciding that the VAT needs to be reduced or someone else politically pressured him to reduce the VAT because elections are just around the corner?

Madam Deputy Speaker, people of Fiji will not be fooled by 2.5 percent reduction, as this will just be \$2.50 per every \$100 spent. Instead of a blanket VAT cut, a truly effective approach would be highly targeted subsidies on essential goods directly managing and audited, possibly through the digital voucher system for vulnerable families. We should also implement strong consumer protection laws with transparent price monitoring.

While on this, Madam Deputy Speaker, yesterday, an honourable Member tried to lecture me with regards to the butter pricing. The fact remains that the price has gone up and people of Fiji are suffering. The Government and the honourable Member who was trying to lecture me, should think outside the box! There are alternatives such as price subsidy, tax incentives can be provided to the importation of raw materials or opening up of market to provide heavy competition.

Madam Deputy Speaker, butter is far cheaper in India. Change biosecurity laws to allow import of butter or raw materials from India and this will bring the cost of butter down in Fiji. Think outside the box!

(Honourable Members interject)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, listening to the honourable Members of G9, they all seem to be trying their level best to please the honourable Prime Minister, as they are aware that the position of the Minister for Agriculture is still vacant.

(Honourable Members interject)

Maybe they are being assessed on their performance through the budget debate speeches. To G11, your three leaders are already enjoying their Minister positions. Assistant Ministers and backbenchers of G11, you can continue to make noise as much as you want, but you will not get the substantive Minister's position. There are bigger sharks sitting that side than you are. Shameless! Those honourable Members came to Parliament on the votes of the former Prime Minister. Recognise that, or at least wait till you come back on your own after 2026. If you do, then criticise his policies. If you have issues with the former Prime Minister, at least carry his values and the vision he had for Fiji.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members! Take your seat please, honourable Maharaj. There is a Point of Order from honourable Tubuna.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Member is going all over the place and is not....

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Can I please have your Point of Order, honourable Tubuna?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- He is going all over the place and is not responding to the Budget Speech. It must be relevant.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- What is your Point of Order, honourable Tubuna?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Irrelevant to the....

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Nothing is irrelevant!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- ...budget! Standing Order 60.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Tubuna. Honourable Maharaj, carry on.

Honourable Maharaj, I am sorry, you referred to this side of the House as “you guys”. Would you please, with the decorum of Parliament, do not call them “you guys”.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I will repeat, Madam Deputy Speaker that without you guys, how shameless the honourable Members of this Parliament can be, especially G11. You as honourable Members came into this Parliament on the votes of the former Prime Minister. Recognise that, or at least wait till you come back on your own after 2026. If you do, then criticise his policies. If you have an issue with the former Prime Minister, then at least carry his values and visions he had for Fiji, Madam Deputy Speaker.

(Laughter)

Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order! Honourable Members, please just let him speak.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Members, you were campaigning against this honourable Prime Minister, whom you have started supporting now, and still you have the modesty to try to lecture us! I leave it to the people of Fiji to decide who they can trust come 2026, whether it is the members of G11, whether it is the current government, or whether we have our upcoming leader, honourable Inia Seruiratu, who is true to his values and honest to his vision he has for Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have populaces who can still afford 15 percent VAT. At the same time, we have 100,000 Fijians surviving on social welfare, who cannot even afford 10 percent VAT. We need to provide targeted support, support which is not abuse. We need a government that has a longer vision for the country and sustainable growth for this country.

What we should have done is first, promote cashless payments, get statistics if business failing, falling in the category of small to medium enterprises are declaring the correct amount of income and then roll out Vat Monitoring Systems (VMS) to those businesses who are playing with the system. I am a firm believer in everyone playing their role in contributing to tax in nation development. It is better that 10 people pay \$10 in tax, which equates to \$100, rather than making one person pay \$100. The tax burden gets distributed this way.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on targeted expenditure and support, little too late and too little. This Government points to a 5 percent increase for social welfare recipient, 3 percent pay rise for civil servants, a 10 percent bus fare subsidy and \$200 back to school assistance.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while any relief is welcomed, these are the best minor adjustments or maintaining existing initiatives. A 5 percent increase in social welfare is a significant sum against the inflation our citizens have faced, for the last two years.

A 3 percent pay rise while it is welcomed, does little to address the real erosion of purchasing power for our hardworking civil servants over the last 24 months. Most of our civil servants will now be paying PAYE tax as their income will surpass \$30,000. We need a dynamic social protection system tied to the robust cost-of-living index, ensuring that increases for vulnerable groups genuinely keep pace with inflation, a system that should have been put in place in 2023.

Social Welfare recipients were close to around 90,000 which was highly criticized by the current minister and ensured Parliament that there are many who should not be receiving the money but under her own watch it is amazing to see it has gone up to 107,000. We wonder where these recipients came from, is there political interference now? Or are these recipients basically political supporters?

Madam Deputy Speaker, while 10 percent subsidy in bus fare from stage 1 to stage 3 may only be around 10 cents to 30 cents, the actual amount the government is going to lose through this incentive could be in the millions, which could have been used in the health sector.

Now coming to crime, drugs and HIV – a crisis of their own making. The establishment of a Ministry of Policing with a budget of \$3.8 million and a Narcotics Bureau is presented as a decisive response to escalating crime and drugs. The honourable Minister for Policing yesterday said a decisive decision from the honourable Prime Minister is to create a new ministry, let me add to that statement. A decisive decision to create a new ministry to accommodate a new alliance as a minister, maybe that was part of the new Coalition agreement.

This Government has allowed the drug and crime crisis to fester throughout 2023 and 2024 reaching epidemic proportions on our streets and within our communities. Anti-drug unit or Narcotic Bureau with the Fiji Police Force was abolished by this government and when the drug issue went out of hand, this government started blaming the previous government. The new ministry and bureau are merely reorganisations, they do not guarantee effectiveness. This is an admission of the non-performance and neglect of the last two years, and a desperate attempt to catch up.

We need a holistic, community-led approach to crime and drugs. This includes:

- (1) Massive investment in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes;
- (2) Robust youth-focused preventative education and recreational programmes;
- (3) Community policing initiatives;
- (4) For HIV, a multi-million dollar comprehensive public health campaign focusing on prevention, testing, and treatment access.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the new requirement for mobile wallet accounts to be registered with a TIN within six months and mandatory annual asset declaration for sole traders are presented as measures to combat tax evasion and money laundering. The six-month transition for mobile wallets is insufficient for hundreds of thousands of users, many of whom are in rural areas with limited access to formal documentation. For our hardworking small business owners and entrepreneurs, a mandatory asset declaration is an increased bureaucratic burden and will surpass our already struggling small businesses.

Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the entire tax structure is needed to shift the burden away from regressive indirect taxes and towards a more equitable progressive income tax system that genuinely benefits the low and middle-income earners, something obviously absent from their policy agenda these past two years. On the same note, now small and medium size businesses are required to register for VAT and install VMS if income is above \$50,000.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the installation of VMS does not come cheap. To install VMS, it will cost small to medium businesses close to around \$10,000 to \$15,000. These businesses do not even make that type of profit, to install VMS or be registered in VAT. This will increase the burden of doing business. Most of these businesses are regarded as mummy papa shops, whereby the employer is the employee - him or herself. Now, even to lodge VAT return they will have to employ another person which will come at a cost. So, just imagine what will happen, the price of goods has to go high to cater for the salary of additional staff. Businesses will just pass this cost to consumers contributing to higher cost of living. Such lack of foresight coming from honourable Minister for Finance is not acceptable. He is a professor! He does not need a businessman to tell him all this. This is the problem when one lacks the practical knowledge of doing business.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji Police funding and expansion – more bodies, less trust. The government boasts of an increased budget to \$240.3 million for the Fiji Police Force, with plans to add 1,000 personnel, resulting in a high officer-to-population ratio.

This is an over-reliance on force and a failure to address the root causes of crime which have been evident for the past two years. More bodies do not automatically mean less crime, especially when the public confidence is low. Without addressing poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities and the rampant drug problem, adding more police simply creates a larger reactive force, not a proactive solution for the community's safety, a strategy that has repeatedly fallen short in their first two years. We need better-trained, better-equipped and community-oriented officers who engage with citizens to solve problems, and build trust.

Madam Deputy Speaker, now on the education sector, entrenching equality. I would like to directly question the funding to Pacific Polytech. I wonder how come the Members of Parliament cannot see what is happening. No amount of explanation will justify the funding provided to Pacific Polytech. There is still a huge disconnect between the workforce requirement and what is being taught at this institution. I know tomorrow I will be making headlines in social media from fake social media accounts but that does not bother me. This is daylight robbery, and I must say, some people running this organisation would be the first to leave the country if on the eve of election next year there is a sign of change of government.

Why is Nadave CATD, a Government-based Technical Institute just given a budget of only \$1.1 million while Pacific Polytech is given a budget of \$7 million? Nadave is a technical institute under the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs to train and empower *iTaukei* youths. Why did we give money to Pacific Polytech, we would have given the same money to Nadave Institute under the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs, they would have been able to open campuses all over Fiji to empower *iTaukei* youths. This institute appeared before the Public Accounts Committee and had requested \$3.9 million and they were just given \$1.1 million compared to Pacific Polytech which is given \$7 million. No amount of justification can justify one of the biggest education scams under this current Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- My simple question is why prioritize a private institution over a Government-owned institute that was formed to empower our *iTaukei* youths? The Government says a \$65 million grant will be fully flexible, empowering school managements. Madam Deputy Speaker, this flexibility without robust, transparent, accountability and oversight is a recipe for mismanagement and rampant inequity. Removing restrictions on fundraising is publicized as empowering.

(Honourable Members interject)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order! Can I just ask those three gentlemen to please tone down? I can hardly hear honourable Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, this will disproportionately benefit well-connected urban schools with wealthy parent bodies, leaving under-resourced rural and maritime schools even further behind, creating a two-tiered system where access to quality education depends on parental income, not on a child's potential, a problem that has deepened under this Government's watch.

Madam Deputy Speaker, \$153 million for scholarships and to increase allowances. My simple question is, why students are still studying privately. This question is directed to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka. I acknowledge his words in the previous term of Parliament and I quote, "free education from primary till our students graduate from university; absolutely free" - I wonder what has happened to this ideology honourable Gavoka when we have thousands of student studying privately in our universities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government is planning to build a new \$2 billion national hospital and allocating \$63 million for CWM Hospital maintenance. I say, "forget about \$2 billion which is a visionary white elephant, first do the maternity unit at CWM Hospital that was initiated by the FijiFirst Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Public-Private Partnership project needs to be extended to other places in Fiji. Currently it is concentrated in the Central Division. Why is the public deprived in other districts of such services? General Practitioners, Laboratory Technicians and Dentists have spoken to the honourable Minister and have already applied with the Ministry of Finance, yet they have not been granted the approval to provide the service. Does the Government have no money to pay them?

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Health is moving towards registration of medicinal product through which Indian Pharmacopeia cannot enter Fiji though the Government has signed an MOU with the Indian Government. The Ministry of Health needs to go and learn from agencies such as Biosecurity and its own food unit on how permits should be given to import products into the country. The current registration process and import permit is so incumbent that it will only increase the price of medication in Fiji. As about IP medication, it will never be allowed in Fiji due to the registration process that is initiated by Ministry of Health. How can a government agency expect wholesalers and importers to enter every product into the system with batch and expiry to request for a permit to import medication? If I am importing the same product from the same supplier from the same country every month, I will have to apply for permit 12 times a year. This does not make sense. Wholesalers carry more than 1,000 items which is imported on a monthly basis. How can the Ministry expect importers to request for permit for each item every time an order is raised?

Madam Deputy Speaker, \$78 million for Fiji Pharmaceutical & Medical Services (FPBS) is meaningless if our citizens still face chronic shortages of essential medicines on the ground; a consistent complaint throughout 2023 and 2024. Last year's FPBS allocation was \$95 million and this year it has been reduced to \$78 million. How can we expect better service delivery with a reduced budget? This is prevalent in the public health sector and the new bureaucratic process mentioned above will also ensure shortage of medication in the private sector. This is a typical example of Minister and Government saying something else and the civil servants doing something else.

On the same note, let me say this to the honourable Minister for Immigration, "your staff at the Immigration Department are telling people that the honourable Minister is unaware of what is happening at the Department. There is a big disconnect of what transpires on the ground and what the honourable Minister is saying. This is very worrying, honourable Minister and you need to take control of your Department. When people ask about opening hours of Immigration Department till 8.00 p.m. and passports to arrive by June end, your staff are telling them to go and ask the honourable Minister because it was his statement, not theirs.

Passport is a paid service, it is not a free service. People pay for the service as well as for the passport. Why do we fail to keep extra passports when it is a paid service, and government makes money

by issuing passports? The cost of an individual passport in Fiji is just few dollars but the Department of Immigration charges more \$200 and still we cannot keep passports. Charging so much for a service that cannot be even provided by the department.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with regards to Nasinu Super Specialty Hospital, will the facility be accessible to all or just to those who can afford private care - a concern that has not been adequately addressed in their first two budgets?

Madam Deputy Speaker, when we look at the facts, when we listen to the voices of the people, when we hold this Budget against the backdrop of this Government's performance over the past two years, it becomes clear that this is a budget that attempts to make up for non-performance and represents missed opportunities. It is a budget that reacts to problems that have escalated due to this Government's lack of substantive action since 2023, rather than proactively addressing their root causes. It is a budget that continues to rely heavily on external grants and loans rather than fostering true self-sufficiency through robust domestic policy.

The Fijian people deserve more than eloquent rhetoric. They deserve a government that constantly delivers tangible results, fosters genuine confidence through transparent and accountable governance, and builds a resilient, equitable future for all Fijians, not just a select few especially after two years where this has not been constantly achieved.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, you have gone two minutes over your time, please wind up now.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This Budget does not fully meet the crucial test. Madam Deputy Speaker, I humbly request the Government to withdraw and re-submit a sensible budget with the theme "Building Security, Stability and Prosperity".

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I honour the protocols of acknowledgement in the House from the honourable Prime Minister. For those who are sitting in the public gallery, a pleasant greetings in this last day of Members contribution before we go to the Committee. To all the people of Fiji who are watching through the various media platforms, warm greetings to you from your Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that we all agree that there is no perfect budget. Never has been and never will be and as much as there is nothing perfect in this life or in this world. Tailoring the financial year of a nation is not an easy task. It is daunting in the sense that while you are only forecasting for the next 12 months, how you will raise money and spend it without falling off the cliff, you must also do so with the projection of what that next 12 months will mean in the next 10 years or so. This is something that Members of the FijiFirst Government Party before only know very well, because in their budgets they have done that very badly. Their bad forecasting in the last 16 years gave us an almost disastrous starting point, and that has been referred to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the past two days, we have heard three choruses being sung by the Opposition. I am not sure how many are indeed in the Opposition and how many are just warming seats for now, secretly gathering signatures for their parties, or maybe going on to join another. Maybe, Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Leader of the Opposition should do well by doing a loyalty check on those sitting to his left and those behind him. As the maverick Prime Minister of the UK, Winston Churchill once taught his protege when he asked the Prime Minister looking across the Westminster Abbey, "Sir, those all across the aisle are our enemies?" Prime Minister with his renowned British dry humour said to his protege's son, "Those sitting across are on the other side. The enemies are behind you."

And so maybe a word of warning to the honourable Leader of the Opposition. You see, the honourable Alvick Maharaj who just spoke before me, his speech was a speech behind a speech. What he was saying to the Leader of the G11, is that maybe none of them will become full ministers, he is probably already making a pact on this side to become one.

I come back to the three choruses, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, the denouncement of the sacrilege at the Samabula Temple of worship. It is a chorus that we all should sing together as leaders and indeed with a loud voice. Say to all Fijians that it is not right to enter any place of worship and cause its destruction. It is wrong and has no place in our multiracial Fiji. Parents, community leaders, youth leaders, women leaders and national leaders like us must all do our part in speaking out against these acts of violence against religious freedoms.

Secondly, the chorus of congratulations to the installation at Narocivo Village and Tubou last week. I join the chorus of congratulations to the *Turaga na Tui Nayau Sau ni Vanua o Lau* and *Tui Lau*, Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara in his recent installation; 56 years after that of his late father and the central founding father of our post-Independence Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

I also want to thank the various households in the chiefly village of Tubou for warmly receiving the thousands of visitors to the island to witness the event. I also want to thank the *Yavusa* Delaikorolevu of Levuka Village for their warm reception of the Government delegation to the island of Lakeba. And to my uncle, *Turaga Daulakeba*, it was indeed a proud moment for me to witness the *talasiga* placed on you on the same day as the installation on the installation ground. I am sure that all your people of *Delaikorolevu* clan in Levuka and everywhere else in Fiji and around the globe were proud to be witnesses on the day. Personally to the people of *Drekeivuci*, in particular, *vuvale* Nautuutu, *malo valevu a veimaroroi ena vica a siga ni soqo mai Lakeba*.

Now the third chorus, Madam Deputy Speaker, from the other side has been about the Budget not being good enough. They have used phrases like lazy budget, lollipop budget and candy budget. I must say to the two honourable Members, the honourable Bala and honourable Pillay that lollipop and candy are not good for you. The honourable Kumar says it is a risky budget based on borrowing. The honourable Leader of the Opposition says it is an unsustainable budget and lacks long-term vision. This chorus, Madam Deputy Speaker, has been sung very badly. In fact, after me, the honourable Usamate will try to harness the already badly harmonised tune of this chorus, and it is a bad chorus for two reasons:

- (1) If they listened very well in the last two days they would have known that it became apparent after the fourth speaker, he was saying the same thing that she said, she was saying the same thing that he said. The honourable Usamate will say the same thing and he might even collapse the entire chorus after me.
- (2) It was clear as daylight they made no attempt to provide in the alternative and the honourable Aliko Bia laid this challenge yesterday. Madam Deputy Speaker, you must call yourselves the alternative government, not just because you are a government in waiting. You must wait with something for the people. You cannot be waiting for nothing and with nothing. That is exactly what they have presented in this House in the last two days.

Grandstanding about how bad this Budget has been, but says nothing and at least in one item what anyone would have done differently. Now, the people of Fiji have witnessed, this is a government in waiting with nothing. The honourable Kiran yesterday had to remind me that they did nothing about the termites. Now, it will cost us millions of dollars to replace Government Buildings, houses, homes in the West and in the North to get that fixed. Now, the worst thing about this, Madam Deputy Speaker, is they knew about it, but they choose not to do anything about it.

Honourable Koya identified agriculture as something that we should prioritise. Now, Madam Deputy Speaker, they should go back and look at their budget books in their days in power and the agriculture allocation that we have made in the last three budgets. We are delivering in two and a half years what they have promised in 16 years.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at a time when global uncertainty continues to test our natural and national resilience, Fiji now stands at a pivotal crossroad, one that demands bold actions and clear priorities.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the honourable Minister for Finance and his dedicated team for their tireless effort in formulating this Budget. Their work reflects the People's Coalition Government's commitment to sound economic management and responsible stewardship of public funds. The 2025-2026 Budget is people-centric, one that balances fiscal responsibility with practical investments aimed at reducing the cost of living and improving essential services. It lays the foundation for a more secure, stable and prosperous Fiji for all. This inclusive Budget includes relief for all Fijians, the hard-working parents, single mothers, fathers and determined entrepreneurs, farmers striving to export their produce regionally and globally, persons with mental and physical disability, investors and the backbone of the government's machinery, our dedicated civil servants.

The reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12 percent puts \$250 million into the pockets of all Fijians. It gives them extra buying power. With an increase of 5 percent in social protection and 10 percent of bus fare assistance, the increase in Civil Service pay, giving them additional spending power, this Government means what it says, to empower people and make good the call of the Prime Minister on war against poverty.

Three years ago, Madam Deputy Speaker, the baton was passed on to us. Today, it is our calling, responsibility bestowed to us by the people of this country. We are seizing this opportunity in this moment to take Fiji forward. Again, I reiterate, raising that standard of living is our challenge.

In the words of the honourable Prime Minister on Monday, 15th July, 2025 our mission is to destroy poverty and the clutches of stagnation, poor work ethic, lethargy, underemployment and underutilised potential. This is the honourable Prime Minister's command, and they will be our marching orders in the next financial year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry for Lands and Rural Resources has been allocated a total of \$40.6 million in the next financial year budget, an increase of \$4.1 million from the last financial year. This timely and strategic investment enables the Ministry to continue fulfilling its core responsibilities to administer, manage and regulate Fiji's State lands and mineral resources sector effectively and efficiently. With this Budget, we aim to secure land accessibility for all Fijians, improve access to clean and safe drinking water and foster a conducive regulatory environment that supports business growth, development and sustainable resource use. This Budget reflects the Government's overarching theme of building security, stability and prosperity. The Ministry's programmes are well aligned with the national development pillars of economic resilience, people empowerment and good governance

Madam Deputy Speaker, for any Ministry to function, it must be empowered with the appropriate legal framework. In this regard, the Cabinet has recently approved the review of the State Lands 1945 Act and the Land Use Act 2010 – two key pieces of legislation that underpins the Ministry's core function. To ensure timely progress, I have issued a clear instruction to the Heads of Department to proceed in line with the timeline submitted to Cabinet. In parallel, we are also developing Fiji's first-ever Valuation Act, a critical legislative milestone, which is currently under review by the Office of the Solicitor-General. With a budget of \$114,000, the Ministry will engage legal and technical expertise where necessary, and conduct nationwide consultation to ensure all stakeholders, from landowners to investors, have their

voices heard. These reforms are not just about removing obstacles, but about balancing national interests with the needs of landowners and the economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, land is not merely a resource. It is the foundation of identity for all of us, our culture, and the opportunity for our landowning communities. In recognition of these, a total of \$1.4 million has been allocated to support two major survey projects:

- (1) mahogany plantations and a survey of Government assets and
- (2) the properties situated on *iTaukei* land.

These survey efforts are crucial as they provide the legal basis for lease registration, enabling landowners to receive the full benefit of land development. Currently, \$3.3 million is paid annually to landowning units for Government asset leases, while a further \$5.5 million is paid through the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board by the Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited for mahogany plantations. This work strengthens land tenure security, supports economic empowerment and ensures landowners are not disenfranchised in our development journey.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Freehold Buy-Back Scheme programme of Government has been reintroduced. Many have again made this a racial issue without understanding the historical dispossession that has made many village bounties all that these villages have. The scheme is not and never was designed to take land by force, as many have made this out to be. Out of the 24 parcels of land that were the subject of buyback in both the 1989 and 1993 schemes, all have been mutually negotiated between willing buyers and willing sellers of the freehold to the native-owned landowning unit who once had landowning titles to them. This is always and will always be done on an arm's length and no less. We welcome the \$5 million allocation for this programme and this budget.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to support the land development and modernising our services, the Ministry has introduced an e-lodgement of all survey plans, a significant step in our digital transformation journey. This system allows surveyors to submit their plans online, which means our staff can review and process them quickly and more efficiently. It not only saves time, but also improves transparency, makes important land data easier to access, and speeds up decision-making for the Ministry responsible for making one of the country's most valuable assets, land. This is a critical move that will help us serve the public better, reduce delay, and support a faster development across Fiji.

Access to clean and safe drinking water is not a luxury, it is also a basic human right. The National Development Plan of 2025-2029, places a strong emphasis on ensuring that rights are realised, especially for our rural and maritime communities who have waited for this for a very long time.

Turn this commitment into action, an allocation of \$6.4 million has been provided to support groundwater developments throughout these regions, with \$844,000 set aside for small island communities and \$5.65 million dedicated to larger islands. This allocation builds on the progress already made in the 2024-2025 financial year. The Ministry has successfully completed 64 groundwater sources, directly benefiting 21,967 people across 3,049 households. In addition, 8,593 people in 1,455 household now have access to reticulated tap water, which is a life changing improvement in their daily living condition. This is a clear demonstration of our commitment to security stability and prosperity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am probably running out of time here. I will go to the last part before I resume my seat. While technology, equipment and infrastructure are vital, it is our people who drive services during the delivery part of it. Behind every groundwater project, every survey, every disaster response, our dedicated officers are working tirelessly in the field and behind the scene. That is why we are investing in our human resource and it is just as important as inheriting or buying capital equipment. In this regard, twenty-four project positions within the ministry have now been regularised and confirmed.

It is a critical step that provides job security and boosts morale and ensures continuity in the delivery of essential services to our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is more than just formalisation of roles, it is a recognition of the people behind the work. It is about restoring dignity, ensuring stability and giving peace of mind to 24 families whose members serve our nation with dedication, delivering essential services that touches the lives of Fijians every day. While we acknowledge reduction in some areas of our allocation, we do not waiver, we choose not to complain, but to commit. We work harder, smarter and together because this ministry understands that real security, lasting stability and genuine prosperity begins with how we manage what we are entrusted with.

We cannot offer miracles, but we do offer our service grounded in urgency, driven by a purpose and focus on outcomes that matter to our people. In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand in full support of the 2025-2026 National Budget and \$40.6 million allocation to the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources. A budget that strengthens our ability to help build security, stability and prosperity our people deserve.

Before I take my seat, Madam Deputy Speaker, I again join the common chorus of the House in remembering our colleague and larger than life honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. Our hearts are with Mrs. Rayalu and the children. May the soul of the honourable Vatimi Rayalu rest peace. *Moce mada na qase. May God bless us all. Me lagilagi tiko ko Viti.*

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members at this point we will suspend proceedings for lunch and when we come back, we will hear, first of all, from the honourable Jone Usamate. We will resume in one and half hours' time.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.49 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.38 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- First I would like to thank and acknowledge the honourable Deputy Speaker for her help this morning. We shall continue with our Batting Order. There are only three more speakers on my list.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and the citizens of Fiji. Lau and this Parliament has lost a great asset in the passing of the late honourable Vatimi Rayalu. I have known him since we were at USP in the 1980s. He was always focused and forthright and has always been a straight talker and there were some that were not appreciative of that over the years. And indeed that got him into hot water sometimes but it was that very trait however that propelled him to achieve what he did during his time as Minister. My sincere condolences and best wishes to Mrs. Rayalu and his family on their great loss.

Last week we witnessed the installation of the *Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau, na Tui Lau*, Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara. The event was magnificent and a source of great joy and pride for us all. For my children it was particularly so as they observed the events on their mothers home island of Nayau as they watched their cousins play key roles in the events and then off course on Lakeba itself. I wish the *Turaga na Tui Nayau* all the very best during his time of leadership in Lau.

I welcome also my classmate and OB honourable Inosi Turaga Kuridrani back to Parliament. Now, I would like to warn the honourable Bilitavu. You will have to be ready now in case a Point of Order is raised against him from someone on his own side.

The recent events that took place at the Shiv Mandir are shameful. Our right to worship as we please is a fundamental right of all Fijians and it is important that as Fijians always respect each other religions. Racism and not accepting other people's choices of religion are learned and acquired behaviours, they are not genetic. When these kinds of things happen we need to reflect and take action to cull and curtail it.

I would like to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Professor Prasad for overseeing the development of the Coalitions third budget. It is not an easy thing to produce a budget because there are so many policy options to consider and I know all Ministries clamour for more resources. I also thank the Permanent Secretary Shiri Gounder and his team who have done the hard yards in developing the budget. Mr. Speaker, like Government, the Opposition always acts in the best interests of the country. This week, how do we do that, we do that by scrutinizing this Budget, critiquing it, giving appreciation where it is due and by highlighting those things that are detrimental to Fiji and Fijians. We put people first by holding a mirror up to Government so that they can see the impacts of their choices on the people of Fiji.

A budget must always be looked at in terms of the context of the situation we are in:

- This year inflation is down that is a good thing. However, it has been higher in the recent past and that has had a big effect on our people over the past three years. Inflation is down but it is volatile;
- Forecast for global growth is down. That is a worry because anything that affects global growth is going to impact on us;
- There is a danger also of the negative impacts of the US trade tariffs on Fiji especially in terms of the effect on our major trading partners that can also affect us;

- There is a concern that 9 key sections in Fiji still have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. These are some of our key sectors construction, accommodation and tourism, manufacturing and services they have not gone back to the 2019 level;
- Visitor arrivals are lower this year, even though outward bound travelers from Australia has increased the percentage coming to Fiji has declined. There has to be some question for us and how we are going to deal with that;
- Growth in tourism earnings and remittances has been revised downwards reflecting global uncertainty and concerns about visitor arrivals;
- Reserve Bank of Fiji states that there has been easing of tight labour but Fiji Employers Federation says the opposite so we have two scenarios that are given to us;
- Budget deficit is now \$886 million which is 6 percent of GDP; and
- The tax to GDP ratio has dropped to 23 percent from 24.5 percent while the expenditure to GDP ratio has climbed to 33 percent from 31.8. This means that taxes are funding less of our expenditure and we are borrowing more to fund our expenditure. Government is having to borrow more to cover its own expenses. This must be a worry for all of us.
- More and more of Government spending is now on operational expenditure. In 2021 OPX was 67 percent. For this Budget it will be 81 percent. That means 81 percent will have to pay for the electricity, paper, travel and fuel; 81 percent of all expenditure.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a complete, no, no. This is senseless. There are positive aspects of the budget that assists those who face the major challenges in our society. It will help address the cost-of-living that people face. This includes the:

- Reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent;
- Zero-rated VAT items continuing;
- 5 percent increase in social welfare;
- 3 percent wage increase for civil servants;
- 10 percent bus fare subsidy. Although I do note, however, this assistance is not means-tested. It is given equally to everyone across the board.
- Continuation of Back-To-School Assistance of \$250 million.

All of these measures do help the vulnerable. They will be welcome.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was this same Government that exacerbated the cost-of-living, challenged us by its decisions to raise that to 15 percent over the last years. It is offering a 2.5 percent reduction now when it has hurt Fijians with a 5 percent raise two years ago. This little bit of sweet candy does not compensate for all the hurt that they brought. Do not expect to be applauded for trying to dampen a fire that you lit in the first place. Almost all such assistance for the most vulnerable, social welfare, bus fare subsidy are just a continuation of what the former administration did. This current Government is devoid of any new ideas.

This Budget, Mr Speaker, is a candy Budget. It is full of short-term sweetness, to create a momentary sugar rush but it offers no real nourishment for the long-term. The focus on short-term candy for self-gratification by this Government is not new. It started from the time they started in Government. Every single one of them became a minister or assistant minister. They enticed the G11 across, made another three ministerial positions, four assistant ministerial positions. All candy lollipops for everyone. Failed candidates were placed into boards in the civil service all over the place. Short-term candy lollipop for everyone.

This Government's own figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, tell us the story of our fiscal future. The deficit has ballooned to \$886 million. A 75 percent increase, not 5 percent, 10 percent, 20 percent – 75 percent;

almost doubling. The difference between money coming in and going out has increased by 75 percent. Any person in his right mind must realise this is a very, very serious situation.

Non-crisis borrowing, Mr Speaker, Sir, is nearly three times what it was during the Bainimarama and the FijiFirst government. The Bainimarama Government, Mr Speaker, inherited around \$2.86 billion in 2006 and increased that to \$5.7 billion by 2019. Increase of around \$2.2 billion over 12 years. Average annual debt growth of \$2.39 million per year.

- During that time, there was a lot of infrastructure. Roads, highways, bridges, expansion of airports, electrification, water, jetties, and Fiji was rebuilt after numerous cyclones, including the most powerful one that ever hit our country.
- During COVID-19, the debt jumped to \$9.11 billion. There was a net increase of \$3.396 billion. During that abnormal period, average annual debt growth was \$1.13 billion.
- Since the Coalition Government took over, debt has increased from \$9.131 billion to \$11.7 billion by 2026. The net increase of around \$2.6 billion of debt, with an average annual growth in debt rate of \$642 million. During our time, it was running at \$230 million. This Government has raised it up three times over, 300 percent increase in the way that they are going into debt. Non-crisis borrowing is nearly three times what it was during the Bainimarama and FijiFirst government's time. A \$239 million here versus \$642 million on average on this side.
- At the same time, the Coalition Government hiked VAT upwards, bringing great suffering to Fijians.
- We now have a national debt of \$11.7 billion with a shrinking tax base to fund that debt level, as more than 100,000 people have left our shores. A lot of them are middle class, who normally are the ones who spend in our country.

All this is happening with no national crisis, no cyclones, no pandemics. This is a crisis they choose to manufacture themselves.

While in Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Biman Prasad criticised consumption-based growth. After three years in power, he is doing exactly the same thing. He has not changed one iota. He talked about decreasing debt and he has done the exact opposite, with no growth, no crisis, no cyclones. High liquidity in the market. MSMEs are getting some assistance in this Budget, however, there are some aspects that have hurt them and I think the honourable Alvick Maharaj talked about some of these things. The challenge with VMS - I know there is a need to collect the revenue, but the impact it can have on MSMEs, it will be devastating for them.

I noticed that there are some incentives, such as for tour providers. In order for you to get that break, you need to invest around \$100,000. The small tour providers in Vanua Levu, they do not have a \$100,000 laying around. So, that money will only go to the big providers. It is not catering to the small ones. There are concerns amongst employers with the Workers' Compensation Bill, with the Employment Relations Bill. There has been a substantive loss of our middle class who normally spend and stimulate our economy, Mr Speaker, Sir.

The Reserve Bank states that there has been an easing of the tight labour market, but the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation says the exact opposite. How is Government addressing this skill shortage in this Budget? I have noticed that a significant increase in grants has been given to the Pacific Polytech. I can understand the reasoning. There has been in the past too much money given for degrees and so forth. Now they want to put more money into TVET. But we also have providers like the CATD in Nadave, Tutu Training Centre, Navuso Agricultural Technical Institute, Monfort Vocational Technical Education, their apprenticeship schemes, Fiji National University and so forth. Why just this one organisation?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FSAF has recommended that the levy should now be used for training as per its original intent. I personally agree with that wholeheartedly. I think that money needs to go back into training within employers so that we can upskill the abilities of people that are employed. They have also suggested allowing students who come to study at the University of the South Pacific (USP) be allowed to work when they can. Government needs to be innovative in how it addresses the skill shortage using available labour that is willing and wants to work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are seeing an alarming increase in the size of Government. The size of this Government has expanded greatly! We have seen the development of PWD. We have seen, for instance, that the Ministry of Employment wants to pull back its workers' compensation from ACCF back into itself. It is increasing the size of government all over. I believe, Mr Speaker, Sir, that we also have concerns from stakeholders as to why they want to pull the ACCF back. This is completely unnecessary, and Government must take this into account.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service Bill has risen from \$93.9 million in 2022 to \$1.3 billion. You are employing more people, you are getting bigger. Your operational cost is getting bigger and bigger. Vehicle leasing has risen from \$20 million in 2019-2020 to \$40 million today. There have been exorbitant overseas trips.

Globally, Mr Speaker, Sir, the trend is to reduce the size of government. This Government is doing the exact opposite. The worrying thing about it, most of its borrowing is for operational expenses! You are borrowing for things that are not going to create wealth! Government needs to look at its state-owned enterprises (SOEs). I think the honourable Leader of the Opposition has talked about it. Government needs to try to achieve what the former government achieved with Fiji Airways, with EFL, with Airports Fiji Limited and Fiji Ports.

I recommend, Mr Speaker, Sir, that we abolish 10 Ministerial positions, because we have too many Ministers.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- We should also abolish most of the Assistant Ministerial positions, including Information and Justice, and create a Ministerial position for a Minister for Public Enterprises who can focus on making these SOEs more effective. This is very critical, Mr Speaker, Sir. It is very critical that we make the SOEs much more effective. Why is this Government funding things that it should not be funding? Why are taxpayer funds being used for FNPF pension payments? For a select few, just for a select few.

Why are we funding trade union education and school management committees? When that money could build kilometres of roads, could fix crossings, could pay footpaths, to buy medicines that the honourable Virendra Lal was talking about. Especially when you have to borrow to finance your operational expenditure. Especially when you have to do that. While Justice of Peace (JPs) provide community service, introducing a new permanent allowance for thousands of individuals is a significant recurring cost.

A critic would question if this is the most effective use of \$1 million compared to increasing social welfare payments further, or investing in frontline health services. Why do you do this when you are borrowing to finance your operational expenses? It is absolutely senseless. I note the substantive investment into Public Works, FRA, Water Authority of Fiji, LTA and MSAF.

All these budgets have increased except for MSAF, if I am not mistaken. These are welcomed, because expenditures in these sectors, if managed well, and if the projects work well, they will lead to growth. They will stimulate growth. With the establishment of the Public Works Department (PWD), Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must ensure that the problems of the past are never repeated. I know, I was a Minister in that Ministry. Fraud, the *mamalua* fever, all these things must not be allowed to rear their ugly head.

My personal opinion is that the size of the Government needs to be reduced, that it is better to create stand-alone organisations that deliver the operational work, such as what is done by the PWD and WAF, and the Government maintains policy and regulated control. That way you can have a nimble, faster government and a smaller government that is easier to manage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must turn its attention away from short-term candy to long-term growth sustainability. I say that again, Government must turn its attention away from short-term candy to long-term growth sustainability. As part of this, we need to borrow only to fund things that grow wealth and which diversify growth sources. This week, the Government has been misrepresenting some of the things that the honourable Leader of the Opposition has talked about in this address. A lot of this has come from the Government's cheering squad on this side of the House, the Group of 11.

The *Hansard* shows that the honourable Leader of the Opposition was quoting honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Finance's own past words on Cabinet size on debts. He was just holding the architect of this Budget to his own words spoken in this House previously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, integrity is what happens when you do what you say or do not change what you say, just to appease others. That is integrity! The honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change completely missed the point when the honourable Leader of the Opposition was making in relation to climate change.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition talked about the mismatch between the scale and the urgency of the problem of climate change, relative to the advocacy of the budget's response to this most serious challenge that faces us. To simply list existing projects is to side-step the fundamental question of whether the plan is big enough to meet the challenge. Whether the budget adequately addresses the impact of this, the greatest threat that we face in Fiji today!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these two issues that I raised, would be amusing if they were not so sad because they showed either a total lack of comprehension or a very amateurish attempt to do some spin. Before closing, I have a few things that I want to talk about the issues that have been raised here. The honourable Minister for Home Affairs had raised the importance of peacekeeping in his address, which I think is very good. I think he needs to make sure the honourable Minister for Finance remembers that, because the honourable Minister for Finance's address in 2017, he says, for example, "\$78 million for peacekeeping. What are we gaining from this expenditure?" Fiji, in our view, is losing out on peacekeeping. We are not getting value for money. We should review this part of the RFMF expenditure allocation and redirect to some other priority areas. Maybe he has changed his mind, maybe he has not, but then integrity is not just changing your mind just to appease others. That is what integrity is all about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also refer to a statement that was made by the honourable, my good friend, the Assistant Minister for Justice – he is not here.

(Laughter)

I was very concerned with the statement he made when he was talking about the honourable Ketan Lal. This is what he said, "The *vanua* and our chiefs will always be in this land, we call our Fiji."

He said, “we call our Fiji.” Stop with the racist remarks and work collaboratively with us! This is our home! We welcome you and we will also correct you. Let me tell everyone in this country, everyone who is a Fiji citizen has the right to call this place home! No one should be staying in this House and say, “This is my home and not your home, even though we are both Fiji citizens!” We should put a stop! It is those kind of sentiments lead to the kind of things that happened to the Shiv Mandir in Sambula. We as leaders must watch what we say, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last one before I sit down.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will grant you, as Madam Deputy Speaker had done this morning, a concession of two more minutes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The other thing that I was listening to the honourable Acting Attorney-General, Minister for Justice, he was talking about the honourable Leader of the Opposition’s statement. He made the statement, “Cabinet Ministers are elected. They are the authority and the mandate of the people.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet Ministers are not elected. Members of Parliament are elected. When you are a Minister, you are part of the Executive. The ones who are elected and have the mandate of the people is in your role as a Member of Parliament, remember that.

The other thing that he said here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me just finish this. He said, “Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, represent diverse backgrounds and are better suited to debate on issues.” We have said to reduce the number of ministers, let the permanent secretaries run. There is nothing wrong with that. You still have your policy mandate. What I was going to say, the Cabinet Ministers are not elected, they are appointed. Ministers can give policy oversight. This Government can run with only 13, 14, 15 Ministers. Nothing wrong. When we finished, we only had 11 Ministers. And during our time, we had nine years of consecutive growth. All they teaching in your time is the ballooning of debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, sorry, the laptop that Parliament has given to me is too good, it keeps jumping.

(Laughter)

I close, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the words of an economist well-known in this country, that was part of the big drive to develop the tax-free centres and the development of the textile industry in Fiji, economist Navitalai Naisoro, this is what he said, “I humbly request the Government to withdraw and resubmit a more sensible Budget than this building security, stability and prosperity one.”

Far from it. You collect \$4 billion revenue. You spend \$5 billion revenue. You have a shortfall of \$1 billion, which is equal to 25 percent of your revenue and 20 percent of your spending. This will not provide future security, stability or transparency, because you cannot deliver the growth to fund all that. I do not support this senseless Budget.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for accommodating my request to speak today. My apologies to those that I may have disturbed in your speaking order, given the change.

I rise today, Mr. Speaker, Sir in support of the 2025-2036 Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Professor Biman Prasad. I would like to place on record my appreciation to the Minister and his staff, for the hard work put into this Budget.

In contributing to this Budget Debate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will focus on the critical issue of Immigration and Migration Management. As we navigate a rapidly changing global and regional landscape, the way we manage the movement of people across our borders, must be strategic, humane and forward-looking. Migration is not merely a movement of people. It is a movement of opportunity, of skills, of families and of hope. And it is our solemn responsibility to ensure that this movement is safe, orderly and beneficial to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has experienced a steady resurgence in cross-border movement over the past year, in line with global travel recovery trends. From January 2024 to just last month, June 2025, the total crossing into Fiji stood at 1,682,729, driven largely by tourists, returning residents, migrant workers and students. Movement out of Fiji totalled 1,678,897, so a little over 3 million movement across our borders. This surge in demand and movement has placed additional pressure on our systems and resources, reinforcing the urgent need to modernise and invest in digital and operational infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's migration governance is anchored in the Immigration Act of 2003 supported by policies and regulations, and our legal framework safeguards our sovereignty while aligning with international norms and our constitutional obligations. It is through these frameworks that we regulate visas, permits and border controls, ensuring that Fiji remains secure, prosperous and globally engaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Act has been long overdue for a review and I am happy to report that the review is in its final stage and it will be presented in Cabinet and consequently to this august House in the near future.

This review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to allow the Act to be effective and correct in relation to the current global migration trends. Our borders are our front lines, they are managed through close collaboration between the Ministry of Immigration, Customs, Border Police and other security agencies. Our systems should be vigilant yet welcoming. They should be efficient yet thorough. At major gateways like Nadi International Airport, our team works day and night to uphold the integrity of our nation's entry points.

To enhance our work at the borders, the ministry is allocated \$0.97 million for the provision of Advanced Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Record (PNR). These are two separate but complementary data systems. API refers to the collection of biographic data such as names, passport numbers and flight details transmitted by airlines before a traveller arrives in Fiji. It allows our immigration and border agencies to pre-screen incoming passengers, identify persons of interest and prepare for risk-based processing before they even disembark. The PNR, on the other hand, provides a richer context. It includes the passenger's travel history, contact details, payment methods and itinerary.

While API tells us who is coming. PNR tells us how and why they may be travelling. Together they help us detect threats such as human trafficking, irregular migration and transnational crime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these systems are not just about security, they are also about facilitation. They allow us to clear low risk passengers efficiently, improve traveller experience and support our tourism and aviation sectors. In addition to the API and PNR, the ministry is also funded in this budget to establish a Document Forensic Laboratory.

The establishment of the Document Forensic Laboratory within Fiji immigration would significantly enhance the integrity and security of the nation's border management systems. Such a facility would enable the timely detection of fraudulent travel and identity document. Thereby preventing illegal entry, transnational crime and identity related fraud. Equipped with advanced technology and skilled forensic analysts, the lab would support frontline immigration officers in verifying document authenticity more accurately and efficiently.

It would also strengthen Fiji's compliance with International Security standards and facilitate more robust cooperation with regional and global partners in combating document related offences. Ultimately, this capability would reinforce public confidence in Fiji's immigration processes while upholding national sovereignty and public safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the two data Systems, API and PNR, and a Document Forensic Lab are essential border management tools and for too long left on the wayside in previous governments plans. Some of the security related immigration issues we are facing now are because of the absence of these very core essential tools. I thank the Government for its commitment to enhancing border security in the provision of this essential border management tool.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a country that stands for compassion and dignity. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, we honour our humanitarian obligations. While we are not a primary destination for asylum seekers, we are prepared to respond when called upon and we do so guided by fairness, justice and human rights. Irregular migration and transnational crimes such as human trafficking and people's smuggling threaten our national and regional security. We are combating these through legal enforcement, intelligence sharing and international cooperation. The Transnational Crime Unit and our membership in the Pacific Immigration, Development Community (PIDC) are key instruments in this endeavour. On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated funds in this budget to host the 2026 PIDC regular annual meeting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, integration is vital. Migrants who lawfully reside in Fiji, including foreign investors and skilled professionals must be supported to integrate and contribute to our society. Whilst we are constantly being pushed to shorten the turnaround time for processing of work permits for our migrant workers, I would like to plead with employers who are employing foreign workers, to look after them and ensure they are treated with dignity, that their grievances are heard and also that they live in humane environmental conditions. I have personally and has the honourable Prime Minister seen migrant workers living in very inhumane conditions. This is a case that has been investigated as I speak.

Migrant workers must not be exploited. Fiji contributes to migrant workers overseas. As an example, we also proudly participate in regional labour mobility initiatives such as Australia's PALM Scheme, the New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme. These programmes not only offer our people dignified work abroad, but also bring back remittances and skills that strengthen our economy. This is in addition of course to other countries that offer employment opportunities to our citizens for which we are thankful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we look after our migrant workers well, we stand on the high moral ground when we demand receiving countries of our citizens to treat our citizens working in their countries well. We also recognise the immense contribution of the Fijian diaspora, those who have settled abroad but remain connected to our homeland. They are ambassadors of Fiji in the world and their remittances, expertise and goodwill are invaluable. We are committed to enhancing engagement with our diaspora communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this budget, we are funded with \$0.3 million to purchase e-passport enrolment kits for our overseas missions to serve our diaspora community. Also announced in the Budget Address is the reduction of fees of former Fiji citizens who want to regain Fiji citizenship from the current \$3,450

to \$1,500. I know the honourable Prime Minister wants to reduce this even further. This is the way we turn brain drain into brain drain gain. We make it easy and attractive for our diaspora that have left to come back to Fiji and invest and share their experiences that has been gained in their new adopted country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji stands at the front line of climate change. In the face of rising seas and increasing disasters, we must also prepare for climate induced displacement, migration in this context must be seen not as a failure of adaptation, but as a part of a planned, dignified response. Fiji will continue to advocate globally for frameworks that protect the displaced, especially our Pacific brothers and sisters.

Finally, our success depends on strong international cooperation. We work with partners such as the International Organization for Migration and the UNHCR to build capacity and align our systems with global best practices. We also work in collaboration with our development partners in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, migration management in Fiji is ultimately about balance, protecting our sovereignty while upholding our shared humanity. It is about ensuring that migration serves the public good while respecting the dignity of every person.

I am pleased to inform this august House and the people of Fiji that Fiji citizens holding valid e-passports are now eligible to use Australia's SmartGate system in all their airports, also commonly referred to as eGate when entering and departing Australia. This important development reflects Australia's recognition of the high security features and ICAO compliance of Fiji's biometric e-passport and marks a positive step in improving travel facilitation for our citizens.

Using SmartGate, Fijian travellers will enjoy faster, more convenient and contactless processing at major Australian international airports, significantly reducing wait times and enhancing the overall travel experience.

Mr. Speaker, this milestone not only strengthens our bilateral ties with Australia but also underscores the integrity of our border systems and identity management infrastructure.

In light of this progress, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has initiated plans to engage in similar discussions with New Zealand authorities with the objective of securing the same privilege for Fijian e-passport holders entering New Zealand. We will pursue the same with our big destination countries in the Northern Hemisphere.

Our vision is to ensure that Fijians are able to travel more freely and efficiently across international borders while upholding the highest standards of national security and international trust in our travel document system.

Mr. Speaker, while I am on the subject of passports, I am pleased to report that the new stock of 100,000 passports has begun arriving into the country, receiving the first batch last week, the next batch of 25,000 towards the end of this month. I would like to offer my sincere apologies for those that may have been inconvenienced by the passport shortage. There is a plan already in place to deal with the passport backlog including extending office opening hours to 8.00 p.m. when the 25,000 books batch is received. I do not know where honourable Maharaj got his information from. I heard him speak this morning on this issue.

The target is to clear all backlogs by the end of next month and bring passport processing back to normal. In addition, we would like to reduce the turnaround time for normal processing from 15 to 10 working days and for urgent from three to two working days. An allocation of \$5 million is also provided in this budget for the purchase of a further 200,000 blank passport books.

Mr. Speaker, let me just turn very quickly to permit and visa processing. Over the last month, our staff have been working hard to clear backlogs in our permit and visa processing system from June. It was found out that a total of 31,144 permit applications were stuck in the system. As new systems were

introduced into Immigration, the integration did not happen well, and 31,144 permit applications were stuck. They worked on it and I am pleased to report that they have cleared that 31,144 applications and in doing that clearing, they found out there were 9,843 applications that still required full processing. Out of those 9,843, they have cleared as of this morning 6,831 and we expect to clear the remaining 3,012 at the end of this month in two weeks' time. When that is done, we expect that the visa processing and permit processing as well would flow. So, there was this stuck up in front when we were trying to clear the permits that were coming in just to give an idea as to the number of permits that we deal with. From last month to this morning, we have received over 1,000 work permit applications. They were coming in and there was like a drain, there was a bit of rubbish stuck in front, and they were just clogging it. I would like to thank the management team and immigration officers for their hard work. They have been working tirelessly to get this cleared and we hope to improve on the services that we provide when it comes to visa and permit processing when this is all done and in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion the 2025-2026 Budget is a decisive step forward in positioning Immigration as a strategic enabler of national security and socio-economic growth. The recognition of Immigration as a standalone Ministry coupled with increased funding and modernisation initiative marks a new chapter in our efforts to build a professional, responsive and future-ready immigration system. I reaffirm the Ministry's commitment to delivering on these priorities with integrity, discipline and innovation, guided always by our duty to serve our people and protect the sovereignty of our nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to deliver his right of reply.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members of Parliament for their contributions during the debate on the 2025-2026 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was deeply honoured to attend the installation of Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara as *Tui Nayau Tui Lau* and *Sau ni Vanua ko Lau*. The National Federation Party (NFP) has a proud and historic connection with the chiefly house of Lau. It was the wisdom and leadership of the late Tui Nayau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, that the NFP and its late leader Siddiq Koya agreed to the terms of Fiji's Independence.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was able to reaffirm my appreciation to the people of Lau, as I was the inaugural recipient of the Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara Visiting Fellowship at the University of Otago in 2007. The fellowship is a prestigious award established to honour the memory of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, a prominent figure in Fijian history. It allows academics, particularly from the Pacific region to visit and collaborate with the university. The fellowship provides opportunities for research, teaching and cultural exchange. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of that fellowship, I was able to spend six months as a visiting professor at the University of Otago. My attendance at the installation respectfully reaffirmed those historic ties with the people of Lau. I extended my warmest wishes to Ratu Tevita for a reign that brings unity, prosperity and peace to Lau and through that, to our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and many honourable Members of this House, together with many organisations, including the Great Council of Chiefs, have rightfully condemned in the strongest terms the desecration and sacrilege at the historic Shiv Mandir at Samabula last Friday in broad daylight.

I visited the temple a few hours after the incident and I know the honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs also visited the temple.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commissioner of Police and his officers deserve our appreciation for the swift action in arresting the alleged culprit of this heinous crime. Let me also say, that this is not a time for blame game and recrimination. It is a time for unity and reconciliation. We must allow the law to take its just course. At the same time, no one should use the incident to incite ill-will and hostility amongst our

communities just for political expediency. What is important is the restoration of a place of worship that has historical significance and to ensure that such crimes do not happen in any place of worship, be it a church, temple, mosque or a shrine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn to the Budget and let me begin by responding to the description to the Budget by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Before that, let me make some personal reflections because the budget is not just an economic process. Budget is also a central political process. That means how we practice politics can be as important as how we pursue social and economic policies.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I first joined politics as a young man in 1999. I did that under two great leaders, the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy and our Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, who worked from the opposite sides before the 1999 election in the interest of the country to give this country the 1997 Constitution. After the defeat of both the National Federation Party (NFP) and Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), both leaders gracefully accepted the results and the defeat. The honourable Prime Minister made a remarkable comeback into politics through the same policy of cooperation and working together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not come into politics to look after myself and I will be responding to that a little bit more in relation to one of the honourable Members later. One thing that I learned, sitting in the Opposition for eight years, is that envy and hate in politics is a complete waste of time. I think the policies and the approach to politics that we have taken under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister has changed the political landscape of this country. It has brought freedom. It has allowed even the Opposition to feel comfortable in this Parliament, outside of this Parliament, and say whatever they want to say. But that is perhaps something that they still have not appreciated, and it will probably take one or two more terms in Opposition before they start appreciating it. The honourable Leader of the Opposition described this Budget as a panic budget. Let me say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not a panic budget by this Government, it is not a panic budget for the people, it is not a panic budget for economists, banks, investors, people in the islands, people who are receiving social welfare, workers, unions, teachers and civil servants. Every corner and every sector of our country has said, that this is a very good budget.

That is the panic. That is the reason. The panic is not from us or the people. The panic is from the Opposition. Let me explain why an Opposition at any time gets into a panic mode. There are some good reasons why an Opposition gets into a panic mode after a good budget.

One, they are worried about the Government's successes over the last two and a half years. They are worried about the appreciation that the people are giving. One good reason why the Opposition panics and go berserk is because the Government policies are successful.

Two, why an Opposition gets into a panic mode is when there is a leadership crisis. Honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources Filimoni Vosarogo articulated that very well. The honourable Leader of the Opposition does not even know if tomorrow one of them stands up and says, "now I am independent, I am not with you." So, there is a leadership crisis.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I listened to them very, very carefully, quietly, and I hope they will listen.

The other reason why they describe this as a panic budget because for the first time in Fiji's parliamentary history, the Opposition has crumbled. Normally, governments have problems. Their leaders have abandoned them.

I want to thank all those people, all my colleagues in Government who are on the other side, who had the wisdom, vision, and the best interest of the country, who decided to join Government. We welcome them. That is another reason why they are panicking. What I call, the remnants of the failed FijiFirst party are panicking now. They are panicking now because this Budget, lays down the foundation for a free, stable, prosperous Fiji. I will explain that later.

The other reason why they panicked Mr. Speaker, Sir, is because they themselves are fighting amongst each other. I know. The budget is a direct success which is causing pain and panic to the remnants of the one Opposition party or failed Opposition party. Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I talk about, as honourable Minister for Lands described, the big chorus about borrowing, about budget deficit, about Biman Prasad saying this in Opposition, let me tell them this, everything that I said in the Opposition, we are holding it, we are following it, we may not have achieved everything yet, but we will get there, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me give some explanation behind the three budgets, to set the scene because there is a lot of generalisation, misinformation, wrong statistics. This is the first time, Mr Speaker, Sir, eight years in Opposition when I compare, and the colleagues who were with us in the Opposition. As I said earlier the level of contribution, the level of debate, the contradictions. On one end, they are talking about huge borrowing, deficit and on the other hand say, no, no you are not giving enough here, you should do this, you should do that. But let me just lay out the thinking behind the last two budgets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this budget. I will give you the figures and you will see where the lies are coming from.

When we came into government at the end of 2022, we inherited a debt of over 90 percent of GDP. Which was on a path to a fiscal disaster. Our first priority was to fix the fiscal situation. We had to ensure that the Government is well funded and we return to a path of fiscal sustainability. We undertook some immediate decisive tax reforms, increasing the VAT rate from 9 percent to 15 percent but maintaining and increasing the number of zero-rated VAT items to 22.

We increased corporate tax, close some of the tax loopholes, strengthen tax compliance and increase the departure tax. We also ensure that our vulnerable are protected by raising Social Welfare across the board by 15 percent and 25 percent for those over the age of 70 years. We are again increasing social welfare across the board by 3 percent in this budget. So, in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in two and half years we would have increased the social welfare allowance by 18 percent to 28 percent. We ensured increased funding is provided to health, infrastructure, education and other key sectors. We provided Back to School Support, increased the price of sugar and other agricultural produce. We wrote TELs debt of over \$650 million to over 53,000 families and students and replaced with a full scholarship scheme with the largest number of students now getting merit-based scholarship.

We have focused on income measures like raising minimum wage to \$5.00 an hour. We increased the salaries of the civil servants in the last budget and then again in this budget. Heading over \$115 million into the pockets of civil servants and again within a year as of 1st August 2024 and as of 1st August, 2025 civil servants would have received a salary increase of between 10 percent to 23 percent. That is the highest, as the honourable Minister for Employment said, highest ever increase to the civil servants in the history of this country.

In this Budget, we have reduced the VAT rate to 12.5 percent and announced duty reductions and other measures to ease the cost-of-living measures. And as I said, Mr. Speaker, because people have understood what we did in the last two budgets, it took them a while because there was so much lying

that went out from the Opposition, and they still continue with that, we received a hugely positive response.

Let me talk about higher deficit and borrowings, which is the only thing that they had from the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They have alluded to this higher 6 percent deficit. As we have said this, and we said this even before the budget, that this is deliberate and necessary. Given the uncertain global economic environment, higher deficit and expenditure has been adopted, simply to mitigate against this possible external shock. And both honourable Usamate and honourable Virendra Lal, they contradicted themselves. On one hand, they are saying, he was quoting IMF growth forecast, global economic slowdown and on the other hand, saying, why are you having a high spending budget? Why are we having a higher deficit? That is precisely the point that I was making in the Budget Speech. That our attempt in this Budget is to make sure that our domestic readiness is there. Our domestic policies. If we get hit by a global economic slowdown as predicted, as indicated by international organisations we would be....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will come to that. You have no idea what you are talking about.

This is a deliberate attempt to have a slightly higher deficit so that we can cushion any direct negative impact through this transmission mechanism and they talked about it. Tourism slowing down. Remittances are slowing down. This boost in the Budget and in key targeted sectors is going to help raise people's income, raise consumption, raise investment and create a sustainable economic growth, jobs that will sustain us. That is the economic logic. They know that, Mr. Speaker. Whoever was writing honourable Virendra Lal speech, you know, understood that, but he did not understand what he was saying. So, he was saying on one hand this is deficit, borrowing and then he was talking about the IMF global projection.

The increase in expenditure revenue support is targeted towards, as I said Mr. Speaker, to ease the cost of living that we have talked about and the number of provisions that have been highlighted by the honourable Ministers already. So despite the higher deficit, the debt-to-GDP ratio is still projected to be below 80 percent, 79.8 percent of GDP by July 2026. This is 10 percent points below the 90 percent of the debt-to-GDP ratio at the time when we came into Government. And this higher deficit, Mr. Speaker, say was only possible because we rebuilt our fiscal space in the last two budgets. They went to town with the increase in the rationalisation of the budget. They were even saying why we increased the company tax from 20 percent to 25 percent. We rationalised the three rates of wealth, 0, 9 and 15, because there were a lot of leakage, a lot of compliance, people were being charged 15 percent and Government was paid 9 percent, we rationalized it and they were complaining about that.

So, we actually had deficits well below budgeted levels at an average of 3 percent in the last two budgets, much lower than the three budgets before we came into Government. So, in 2023/ 2024 budget, Mr. Speaker, the deficit was contained at 3.4 percent compared to the budgeted 4.8 percent. In the current year, it is revised to 3.6 percent below the earlier projection of 4.5 percent. Even if we get the projected budgeted deficit of 6 percent, the average deficit in the last three years will still be 4.3 percent. That is what they should look at. That is what we did in the last two budgets, and that is what we are doing in this Budget, Mr. Speaker. Even though we are taking more debt, we are bringing down the cost of debt as well. So the external debt is being excessed at extremely concessional terms like 40-year maturity, including 10-year grace period, low interest rate of below 1 percent. Even in the domestic market, our cost of borrowing has kept at record levels. Total weighted average borrowing cost is around 5 percent.

As of June 2025, Mr. Speaker, Sir, concessional external loans amount to approximately \$1.4 billion, representing nearly 38 percent of the total external debt portfolio. While the level of debt may

rise in nominal terms, the cost of borrowing has dropped significantly, reducing long-term fiscal pressures and creating more space for productive investment.

Any good economist, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will tell you that this. This is very prudent. We are extremely grateful to our development partners such as the IDB, World Bank, IDA, JICA, and Government of Australia for providing such facilities to the Government of Fiji, and who continue to demonstrate trust and confidence in Fiji's economic governance by extending such facilities. There was this big lie about debt in the last three years compared to what the previous government had. Debt increase under the Coalition Government versus previous government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Premila Kumar presented a very, very convoluted analysis of the debt increase under the Coalition Government, and they cannot even get the figures correct. She claimed that debt would increase by \$3 billion by the end of 2025-2026 financial year. The honourable Usamate said \$2.6 billion. The Coalition Government inherited a debt of \$9.5 billion in December 2022. As of end of July 2025, debt is projected to increase to \$10.8 billion, so that is an increase of \$1.3 billion. With this year's projected deficit, debt is projected to increase to \$11.7 billion at the end of July 2026. This is a total projected increase of \$2.2 billion over three budgets.

So honourable Kumar is saying \$3 billion. It is just \$2.2 billion. Honourable Usamate is saying \$2.6 billion. Even a class 4 math student will say you cannot round off \$2.2 billion to \$2.6 billion or \$3 billion. It has to be \$2 billion. So it is \$2.2 billion, Mr. Speaker, Sir. However, under the previous government, debt increased from \$2.8 billion in 2006 to \$9.5 billion in 2022. This is an increase of \$6.7 billion during the term. This is the highest build-up and it is not just COVID-19.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not just COVID-19, it was building up by any government in the history of Fiji. The previous government added over two times the amount of debt accumulated by all governments since Fiji's independence until 2026. Let me talk about revenue. They made a big deal of revenue. Let me give them some real statistics. I would like to dispel this misinformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Opposition. Those kinds of claims are not only unfounded, but actually ignore the Government's proven record of fiscal transparency and credibility. Allow me to share the facts on the strong revenue performance under this Government compared to our forecast, and thus reflecting the credibility of our forecast, honourable Leader of the Opposition. We have always been realistic.

For 2023-2024 Financial Year, tax revenues reach 99.6 percent of tax revenue budget target. With actual collections totalling to \$3.1 billion. Against the forecasted of \$3.11 billion. A marginal shortfall of only \$10.8 million or a mere 0.4 percent, honourable Usamate. For non-tax revenue, we collected \$549 million compared to the projected \$593.1 million. A gap of \$43 million or 7.3 percent, still well within the reasonable margin. Therefore, we achieved 98.5 percent of our total revenue target, collecting \$3.64 billion against a forecast of \$3.7 billion, a major variance of just 1.5 percent.

In the current financial year, 2024-2025, we are on track to exceed our budget revenue target. We now are expected to collect approximately \$3.94 billion, \$19.9 million or 0.5 percent higher than the original projection in terms of total revenue, tax plus non-tax. Tax collections are projected to be \$100 million above the forecast. So, at the end of June 2025, 94 percent of the target had already been collected and we still have July, demonstrating both momentum and a clear indication of the credibility and the accuracy of the revenue projections and the effectiveness of our collection system. This is a record, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that speaks for itself. We have been collecting revenue just on target.

Let me just give some contrast, because it is important, because a lot of the criticism was, 'oh, you are not going to collect the revenue that you are projecting.' Let me just give some contrast. Under

the previous administration, 2018-2019 Budget, the revenue forecast was \$4.2 billion in the budget, but only \$3.2 billion was collected.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A shortfall of \$1.05 billion or a massive 25 percent under collection. Tax revenues under-delivered by \$600 million, 17 percent and non-tax revenues fall short of \$460 million. There was no COVID-19 in 2018-2019. For 2018-2019...

HON. P.K. BALA.- We had *Tropical Cyclone Winston*.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... it was not the only year the previous government fell short of achieving its - that was in 2016! Between 2014 to 2018-2019, the previous government missed its revenue targets by an average of 14 percent per year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieving only 86 percent of what was projected. This stands in stark contrast.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Very poor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What we are saying is, all our development partners, our financiers, multilateral banks know that this is a Government that has its economic projection right. We are not inflating and this is the evidence. I would like to reiterate that our revenue projections are not built on some kind of wishful thinking, but on realistic assessments, sound policy decisions, and robust economic foundation.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, total government revenue is projected at \$3.95 billion, comprising \$3.37 billion in tax revenue and \$573.2 million in non-tax revenue. This represents a modest increase of \$10.8 million compared to the revised forecast of 2024-2025. So, we have been very realistic. So while tax revenue is forecast to slightly decline by \$46.7 million or 1.4 percent compared to the revised 2024-2025 estimate, this is a direct result of deliberate targeted policy decisions to ease the cost of living, particularly the reduction in VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent effective from 1st August, 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, had we retained the existing VAT and tax structure, the tax revenues would have increased by an estimated \$180 million to \$200 million and this is solely due to economic growth. This clearly demonstrates that the decline is not due to weak economic performance, but rather due to conscious pro-policy reforms. I would like to highlight the direct income taxes that are projected to increase by \$72.8 million led by higher Corporate Taxes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the statistics that completely dispels the exaggeration, generalisation and the lies about our fiscal sustainability and fiscal responsibility. That is why we are saying that this budget, when you analyse our debt-to-GDP ratio, revenue forecast, revenue collection, record, and economic growth, this Budget is fiscally responsible.

With respect to indirect taxes, particularly VAT, we have undertaken detailed economic modelling exercises to assess the likely impact of the rate reduction. And, what we have found, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given Fiji's high marginal propensity to consume between 85 percent to 90 percent. The honourable Prime Minister talked about the amount of income that our *iTaukei* community receives, and he gave a very good assessment, and I thought that it was a very timely assessment. It shows the level of the high propensity to consume.

So, the anticipated increase in disposable income, resulting from lower VAT, increase in Civil Service salaries, minimum wage, and hikes from \$4 to \$5, will boost consumption and support revenue

performance. Additionally, remittance inflows are projected to reach a record of \$1.4 billion in 2025, further strengthening our household spending power.

While the tax revenue may dip slightly, this will be offset by an increase in non-tax revenues, which are again projected to rise. In a nutshell, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the revenue is expected to increase by \$10.8 million. Once again, this figure reflects prudent fiscal management and responsible policy decisions. Had we not implemented tax reductions, as I had said earlier, the total revenue would have increased by approximately \$240 million to \$260 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that these statistics will put to rest the flawed arguments and the generalisations that we heard from the Opposition with respect to the deficit.

The other big issue that they had made out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was about VAT increase in the 2023-2024 Budget. All of them, for the last two years, have parroted that narrative and I know they have been doing that. Anything to do with increase in price, is because the Government raised the VAT to 15 percent.

Let me give you the history of VAT a little bit. The honourable Usamate talked about integrity. So, he can look at himself...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- In the mirror!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...in the mirror and tell the people of this country whether what he says is...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- True or not!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...true or not, and is of integrity or not. When we talk about VAT, it is important to talk about this history because it is economics. You can understand why we did what we did in the first budget. So the VAT rate from 2008 to 2010 was 12.5 percent. Inflation year-end inflation was 6.6 percent in 2008, 6.8 percent in 2009, and 3.6 percent in 2010. They forgot that honourable Usamate joined the military government in February 2012, and again, I am not sure whether that will put him into the group of people with integrity or those who believe in transparency and good governance, but he joined the Military Government and at that time, the VAT rate from 2011- 2015, was 15 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir. No zero VAT on any basic food item. This was a period and plus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had a devaluation of 20 percent in 2009. And he was there, sitting in the Cabinet!

When you have a devaluation, Mr. Speaker Sir, our import costs goes up and we had 6 percent, 6.8 percent inflation rate. And yet, the honourable Member was sitting in the Cabinet with a 15 percent VAT, with no social protection in the way that we have now. Very poor!

Then, when we came into Opposition and my colleagues were there, we pushed for, because we knew the inflation rate was very high at that time, people were suffering! And we said, VAT rate must come down, and that you must have zero and it was the National Federation Party that provided the 21 list of items that need to be zero rated.

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And in 2016...

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- Copycat! Microwave! Microwave!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...they microwaved that, they did not even take the order of the list. Order of the list was the same.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In 2017, they had 9 percent VAT but they brought what they call Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) 10 percent and Service Turnover Tax (STT) of 6 percent. So, in effect, some people were paying 25 percent Tax! And they are talking about, how to support businesses, improve, that is what they had, Mr. Speaker. So, 2019 and this was a failed economic agenda. 2019, before 2018 election, they did all kinds of things. 2019, we had negative growth, Mr. Speaker Sir, Government actually had run out of money!

They were, as I said earlier, I showed what they were collecting in 2018 and 2019 - \$1.2 billion shortfall in revenue, Government had cash-flow problems and we had a negative growth in 2009, so when COVID hit us in 2020, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had the fourth largest contraction of all the economies in the world! This is an example of what we had.

So, and the reason why I am saying this, because they keep saying that I am talking about the past. I sat in Opposition for eight years and for eight years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had, from Ratu Mara Government to SVT Government, to Laisenia Qarase Government, that this was the only Government that ever did anything for this country. We were actually fed up hearing that. We are not as bad as, what I am saying is, I am just reminding the honourable Members on the other side, just be humble, just relax and just see what you people had, when you were in Government. So, when you attack us, please have some understanding of what we have.

In 2022 when we came into Government, as I said earlier, we decided to change that. We maintain zero, in 2021 we added prescribed medicine, and we increased the VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent. But, at the same time, we increased social welfare, we provided additional funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this to the honourable Members. I think they have to be very honest when they go out to the people that we inherited one of the most dilapidated state of health, education, infrastructure in this country.

I was shocked, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I saw Kadavu Hospital. I was shocked! You look at health centres around the country from Taveuni to Dreketi, to Wainikoro to Korovou, to every health centre. You look at the priority of the previous government and we have been landed with that when people complain about CWM hospital today, I know honourable Pio Tikoduadua brought a picture of broken windows and toilets and showed it on the screen here! And we are fixing that now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I have laid down in the budget and we are doing that now.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you look at the inflation rate, they are saying, and the honourable Usamate was at least honest on that. The inflation rate in 2023 was 5.1 percent. Last year, end of the year inflation rate was 1.4 percent. This year it is projected to be about 1.1 percent, and that shows that our policies actually work. Honourable Alvick Maharaj, this honourable Member, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has a habit of just shooting his *Facebook* posts. On his *Facebook*, he said “Butter price went up, it is entirely on the shoulders of the government. Butter price went up because the government did something.” Let me just give this very good example of why the Opposition must not...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...lie because we must not mislead our people.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We must be honest. Integrity, as honourable Usamate talks about in politics, these are people who are affected by prices, and when you go out there and you lie to them, you lie to your social media post that somehow the government is increasing the price of butter because it wants to hurt you. Is this what you say? Is that what a responsible Member of Parliament should do? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No! It is wrong to do that and I will tell you why. For the benefit of this House, for the benefit of the Fijian people. Fiji Dairy Limited is a small-scale processor that imports almost all its raw materials in the form of semi-finished butter. And we know the story of Rewa Dairy, and I do not want to get into that.

They simply add salt. So they get these slabs, add salt, package it and sell as Rewa Butter! And we know that if the price of these slabs of butter goes up in New Zealand, the freight cost even if it remains the same, like any other stuff that we import, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Even if you have zero VAT! Zero duty! The price goes up! That is not very hard for our honourable colleagues on the other side to understand.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is simple.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is simple. We need to understand this, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If I just explain this chart and I can table it in Parliament for them to...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Have a read.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am coming to you.

You look at the price of butter from 2011 to 2025. Some of the biggest increase, 21.93 percent, 500 grams of butter went from \$7.34 to \$8.95, which is 21 percent increase in 2011.

So, 15 percent VAT, \$15.93 for 500 grams butter, 14.2 percent increase from the previous increase. This will come down to \$15.58 on 1st of August, because the VAT rate is going down. So honourable Maharaj, butter price going up and down is not caused by Government.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I did not say it was caused by the Government.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Tomorrow you will say, "subsidise ghee, chicken. Tomorrow you will go and say to subsidise that. You know, you are a businessman. You import medicine. You can't lie to the people through being an honourable Member of Parliament. You are an honourable Assistant Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead with the honourable Opposition Members, not to go and lie.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Okay, enough with the lecture!

HON. PROF. B.C PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me refer to the points made by honourable Bala. This honourable Member had two weeks to go through the budget and all he could come up with was a lollypop.

(Laughter)

All he could do in two weeks' time was come back with a lollypop to speak against the Budget. I know that some of them have suddenly got a taste of lollypop and candy. This is how they describe the budget. Is that reflective of a honourable Member of Parliament who has the interest of the people. He talked about guaranteeing sugar price. He knows very well that during their time, the only time they paid \$85 was for the 2017 season in 2018 because the cane payment is made the year after. So the 2017 cane payment in 2018, they paid \$85 because they knew that they were going to lose that election. So, they gave \$85 but after that, they short changed the farmers by about \$14 million. That is what they did. It is this Government that gave \$91 and \$105.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- *Vinaka.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again all the honourable Member is trying to do, I know what he is trying to do when he goes around and says, "Where is the money? Where's the budget? He is already telling the farmers; they already know the guaranteed price and that is what he comes and says in Parliament.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is what the people are saying.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As an honourable Member, part of our responsibility is to also tell the truth to our people.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- People will complain. They used to do that when we were in Opposition. They still complain to us. They complained about other Ministries. Our job is to correct them.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- More, more!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Rinesh Sharma.

His little jives about me at a personal level whether I am a good professor or a good politician, I know Mr. Speaker, politics, academia the transition one makes, it is important. Good politics does not necessarily lead to mean good economics, good policy but having been in politics for 10 years now and having been in academia for many years, I have come to the conclusion that good policy can also be good politics. I think that is what is panicking the Opposition because not only this budget has good policy, it has turned out to be good politics because people are very happy about this budget. The social welfare recipients are happy. The workers are happy. The principals are happy. The head teachers are happy. The businessmen are happy. The investors are happy. The banks are happy. The mother with three children going to school in Namosi is very happy. People going to health centres they are happy but the policy that we put in this budget, higher deficit, bigger spending is good policy which turns out to be good politics for the government but bad politics for the Opposition and that is what is causing the panic.

Mr. Speaker, I am just wanting to make sure that I correct some of the misinformation that was provided. Honourable Rinesh Sharma talked about 40,000 people leaving. I do not know where he gets those figures. Maybe ChatGTP but I think ChatGTP is smarter than some people think it is. If you look at the migration, and this is something that I had corrected honourable Members in this Parliament, let us not mislead our people. I will give you some statistics.

In 2010, 19,000 people left for migration, employment and education. In 2011, 24,000 people. Jump to 2016, 26,000. In 2017, 27,000. In 2018, 26,000. In 2019, 28,000, then COVID, two years, we

had eight and five. Again, that jumped to 28,000 in 2022. There was a massive labour market restructuring around the world post-COVID, Australia and New Zealand needed. Australia provided 40 hours of work visa. Our civil servants, people who had good jobs resigned to go and study because they could work for 40 hours.

In 2023, it went up to 29,000 and 2024, it actually went down to 22,433. This is the migration statistics. And what he said was, “oh, people are leaving because they do not like the government.”

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Is that a responsible statement from an honourable Member of Parliament who fancies himself to be a representative of the people, fancies himself to a future Minister? Is that the kind of information that you want to tell the people? No, Mr Speaker. No, we should not.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Point of Order - Standing Order 62(4)(a), it is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use offensive words against Parliament or another member.

MR. SPEAKER.- Right, carry on.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, before my speech, it was on the second day of the Budget, I referred to an article by a media, 14th July, 2025, and it stated that between 2022 to 2024, over 40,000 Fijians leaving our shores and it puts a pressure on Fiji's workforce. I had referred to a media article, I did not stir this up from Chat GPT or from thin air and stop undermining my speeches as if it is not backed up by facts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance should apologise.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Sharma, I think I had previously made known, I think it was in respect of honourable Jone Usamate's Point of Order, when you do make reference or quote from another source, especially in social media, you ascertain the veracity of that information before you table it or speak of it or quote it in on the floor of this House. On the same vein, I am saying that if in fact it is proven not true and you have quoted from your source, (social media), then there is no validity in your objecting to him saying that because he knows it is wrong., that is why he is referring to your source. It refers also to another Point of Order which is coming on Friday, which was raised earlier in respect of your other matters that you brought in from social media. We will carry on now.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have been saying, and thank you for making that clarification. It is the responsibility of honourable Members when they come into this august House to check their facts because when you say that, in this day and age, Mr. Speaker, as soon as you say something in this Parliament, it goes out into the social media and people can have all kinds of opinions and views about it. That is why it is important for us to choose our facts, our words very carefully. Just to support that argument about and the figures show that the number of people living has actually slowed down because there is also a realisation that it is not milk and honey on the other side. When you look at the cost of living, tax rate, social support, medical costs, people are beginning to understand that, and we are also seeing a much better trend.

In the last two years, we have increased formal sector employment by about 5,000 jobs; average wage increase of over 12 percent in the same period. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is helping not only the income potential of our people, but it is also giving a signal. When they compare the cost of living overseas, Australia and New Zealand in particular, they actually find that Fiji - the savings rate, tax rate, plus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have not raised the income or reduced the income threshold. Everyone who earns below \$30,000 and those who earn above \$30,000 also benefit that tax-free status for up to \$30,000.

Honourable Koya raised this issue about SMEs. We have increased the budget for SMEs from \$120 million to \$160 million. As a Government, we took that decision very carefully right early in our

tenure. The honourable Minister for Lands mentioned the Budget increase for the Ministry of Agriculture, and as I said in my Budget speech about the late Minister for Agriculture, honourable Vatimi Rayalu, he was a go-getter. He achieved so many things in two and a half years, and in fact, the agriculture sector in many ways is booming.

Vanua Levu as a whole, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is booming, and part of the reason why agriculture is picking up, and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica highlighted some of the commercial agriculture projects, investments that are already in the pipeline, some have started, some will start in the future and that is the way to go. So, we are actually looking at how we can diversify these, and basically the structure of the economy is also changing. We are working on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The issue about the 3 percent salary rise, 5 percent social welfare, many of the honourable Members completely ignored that the salary rise that we gave last Budget, within a year, as I said, we have given between 10 percent to 23 percent salary rise to civil servants. Same with social welfare. In two years, we have increased social welfare by about 18 percent to 28 percent.

Honourable Rinesh Sharma raised questions about the Back-to-School support. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a tendency for some of the honourable Members on the other side to bring to Parliament issues that people raise. I know when you put out a policy, for example, you say, we are going to increase the allowance. There will always be people who will say this is not enough. For some, that would be correct. It may not be enough. There will always be issues about scholarship, about bonds, about hardships. But to come in this House and imply that the Back-to-School support is not working, is again, a very, very twisted logic and generalisation.

We were not thinking about elections. Some of them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, said this Budget is an election budget. When we came into government, the honourable Prime Minister, before the school opened in January, after we got in Government on 24th December announced this Back-to-School support because he realised that people were still transitioning from COVID-19, lack of jobs, income, and they needed support for Back-to-School support. You go and talk to the people out there. If 5 percent of the people misuse that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why we you want to penalise 95 percent of them? Go and talk to the mothers, go and talk to the parents around the country. They are so pleased with this particular policy of this Coalition Government, because you see the glee on the faces of children with new bags, with new uniform, with new sandals going to school on the first day. That is an incentive, and I have seen children doing that.

Again, they lie, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they say this is a FijiFirst policy. There was never a Back-to-School support. There was a COVID-19 measure in 2020 and 2021, but it was not Back-to-School support. This is a signature policy of the Coalition Government, which was announced by the honourable Prime Minister. More than 200,000 students every year, Mr. Speake, Sir, get \$200 each, and more than 200,000 students will get that in January 2026 when they go to school.

Honourable Virendra Lal, the honourable Minister for Health has worked very hard. He went to India. India is the world's pharmacy now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 40 percent of drugs that goes to the United States of America, for example, goes from India, Australia and New Zealand. He is a honourable Member, he goes to Indian High Commission functions and says how great India is, but then comes here and questions the Pharmacopoeia Agreement that we took pains to actually get it signed with the Indian Government. We want to make sure that we sign another agreement to get medicine government to government agreement to get medicine from India. We are on the verge of signing the MOU with the Indian Government for the construction of the 100 bed Super Speciality Hospital and that is going to be done. He also took some personal jive at me and said, "oh, people are not going to vote for you next time in the election." This is coming from a man who despite holding the coat tail of his revered leader, failed to make it to Parliament twice in 2018 and 2022. He is only here because two Members honourable Vijendra Prakash at that time and honourable Rosy Akbar resigned from Parliament. I want to tell him

because that was a very insulting comment. I did not come into politics to look after myself. I left more than what I am getting now as a Minister in terms of salary 10 years ago.

HON. V. LAL.- Point of Order! I came into Parliament and followed the parliamentary process to be in Parliament. What the honourable Minister for Finance is saying, I followed the parliamentary process to be here.

MR. SPEAKER.- Standing Order 60 on relevance; is that what you are referring to?

HON. V. LAL.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- But it covers your general commentary on the Budget, does it not?

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is something personal which he is raising.

MR. SPEAKER.- Well, that is different. If you are saying that something is personal, you go to another section.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just simply want to make it clear that I am in Parliament and the parliamentary process has been reliably followed, and that is why I am here in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I think we can take that, honourable Minister for Finance, that in fact he is here of his own right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I said exactly that, what you were saying. All I said was, his comment was that “he will not get the votes this time when he goes into election”. He was referring to me. All I said was, I have fought three elections and I won straight into Parliament. He fought two elections, did not make it to Parliament in the first round until someone else vacated the seat. That is what I said. I did not question his...

MR. SPEAKER.- I take his point, though, honourable Minister for Finance. He has made the point that he is in Parliament, right? I think we leave it at that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me also say again that I did not come into Parliament to look after myself. I left a job that was paying me more than what I am getting now 10 years ago. I thought that was below the belt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude. This is a Budget that has been crafted very carefully. The analysis we have done in terms of where we are as a country. I have taken some of the points raised by the honourable Members of the Opposition. I want to assure them and our people that we are focused on building our infrastructure, roads, water supply, health and education. On education, this criticism of us giving funding to school principals, Polytech, Head Teachers Association, School Management Association, in fact, the partnership that existed between the management, the teachers, the parents, was completely broken.

Many of the dilapidation that we see around the country with respect to school physical infrastructure, you look at school quarters in the rural areas in maritime areas. Even the civil servants, I was shocked at the condition in which some of our civil servants were operating in Kadavu. I was really, really shocked. For the schools it is even worse because in the past school management used to raise funds, the annual bazaars were something that we always look forward to and many of the infrastructure improvements like WASH facilities, staff quarters, et cetera were looked after by the management, 98 percent of the schools in this country are privately owned by religious organisations, community groups.

What we have done in this budget is to provide funding to the school Management Association to ensure that they strengthen their capacity, their management and, as the honourable Minister for Education said very clearly allocation of the grant to any of these bodies or institutions, whether they are technical institutes, whether they are universities, it is not something that is there for them to take it tomorrow. There are proper policies, procedures, requirements, audit reports, the Higher Education Commission for higher education institutions. These are processes that the Ministry of Education would follow, but what it is going to do, is bring all these people together and allow school managements to take the responsibility to ensure that they are able to improve the infrastructure, build additional classrooms.

As I said earlier in this Parliament, we had the Australian government do an audit for the schools in Suva. The report was launched by the honourable Prime Minister and it shows how bad the staff-student ratio is. I am told that 20 percent of class 7 students in one school, and if you extrapolate that to say that might be the case in every other school, where the ratio is the same, 20 percent of the students in Class 7 cannot read. That is why we feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we need to build more classrooms. We need to build more facilities. We need to ensure that staff student ratio is better.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this to our people. As the honourable Prime Minister said when we came into Government and as I have said earlier that under his leadership-we have changed a lot of things in this country. There is freedom, stability, opportunity for us to build this country further in terms of our infrastructure, our facilities, our economy, in terms of looking after our people. And that visions that we have enunciated very clearly in our National Development Plan, Vision 2050 of making this country a high income country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is achievable. It can be done and we are not saying that we will be in Government all our life. That vision that we have set in the 2050 plan is a plan for Fiji. It is a plan for our country regardless of who is in Government, who is in Opposition and with that in mind, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget and future budgets will be framed.

That is the vision the Coalition Government has and I want to take this opportunity to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership, his trust and confidence in me as Minister for Finance, my two Deputy Prime Ministers, colleagues, all my Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament on the Government side. I also want to thank all the honourable Opposition Members for their contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to take this opportunity very quickly to thank my Permanent Secretary. He is not only a very fine and intelligent economist, but he is a very fine and great leader for the Ministry of Finance and I want to take this opportunity to thank him sincerely.

Budget Division

Nemia Dawai (Head), Letila Tuiyalani, Mere Cakaunitabua, Kiman Mala, Tevita Tuibau, Kelera Ravono, Melissa Kwan, Peceli Vitukawalu, Miriama Ketedromo, Sandip Kumar, Namrata Singh, Tari Bebeia, Pranita Raj, Ema Rokowaqa, Pranil Kumar, Josefa Tokalaivuna, Rishika Ram, Joana Marama, Sainiana Tamani, Shayal Nath, Maraia Koroi, Saini Vocolala, Merewalesi Driu, Anischal Sami, Makrao Faktaufon, Avneel Chand, Vasenai Vatiraveli, Jotame Yabakivitu, Joti Devi, Anare Kolikata.

Fiscal Policy Division

Munesh Deo who is the Head of Fiscal Division; Sundhia Ben, Elenoa Vueti, Asenaca Lewaravu, Ansar, Vinay Singh, Coral Gavidu, Shalen Kumar, Devika Sen, Alzaid Gul, Priyena Singh, Sylvia Kumar, Uluilakeba Naisua, Ashutosh Sharma, Krisha Billimoria, Alvin Kumar, Salaivalu Bola.

Treasury Division

Achin Chand(Head), Sisilia Nalaide, David Filswilco, Asenaca Mae.

Other Divisions

Mohammed Jabid, Poonam Singh, Ashika Prakash, Jese Nabalarua, and Nimish Deo.

FRCS

Udit Singh (CEO), Savindra Nath, Selina Kumar, Momina Beg, Varanisesse Gavidi, Selai Katonibau, Kelerayani Dawai, Sharmila Sharma, Rahul Goundar, Anasa Matanikete, Christene, Vinita Prasad.

Office of the Solicitor-General

Also I take this opportunity to thank the Attorney-General's Office, in particular the Solicitor-General, Ropate Green, Maria Cobona, Glenys Andrews, Epeloi Sau, Jennis Manueli, and Joana Drita.

With those names, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and I commend the Budget to the honourable Members and to the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Professor Biman Prasad, the Deputy Prime and Minister for Finance, for his reply and response. Before we move to the next phase of the second reading of the Bill, I wish to make a general statement on the incident at Samabula Temple.

Everyone have said their piece on the incident and it would be remiss of myself on behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji not to add its voice of condemnation to those that have already been expressed by Members of this house and elsewhere of the desecration of the temple. Parliament of the Republic of Fiji roundly condemns the incident an atrocious act of sheer vandalism that hurts particularly members or sections of our society and serves no purpose or end. It does no good too in the words of the former prime minister, Ratu Kamisese Mara, late *Tui Nayau*, *Tui Lau* and *Sau ni vanua ko Lau* and he said and I quote: “the togetherness of our society, a community of people of different races culture and of religious belief.

We hope and pray that the incident will not fracture the frame that has carefully been woven and crafted by our former leaders. Honourable Members, pursuant to the Standing Order 99(3), the 2025-2026 Appropriation Bill 2025, Bill No. 10 of 2025 has been read a second time and without any question being put, the Bill and the estimates now stand referred to the Committee of Supply.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the Parliament will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider each Head in the budget estimates. It is envisaged that this process will be completed on Thursday evening, after which the Committee of Supply will then vote on the schedules and clauses of the 2025-2026 Appropriation Bill. For the information of honourable Members, we will attempt to complete debate and vote on Head 1 to 22 before we adjourn tonight.

For the information of all honourable Members, please take note that for the Committee stage, I will sit at the table with the Secretary-General and Members will refer to me as “Mr. Chairman”. The mace will be placed on the lower bracket, signifying that the Parliament is in Committee.

Honourable Members, please take further note that the Secretary-General will announce each Head separately, Members may then speak on that Head and you may speak more than once on each Head. Please take note also that in some of the Heads, there will be several Programmes and Activities

listed. I remind honourable Members that we will deal with these progressively and we will not regress to the programmes and activities that have been earlier discussed.

Honourable Members, you may also move amendments to the Estimates under the respective Heads. If a Member moves an amendment, I will call for a seconder and then debate will ensue. At the end of the debates, the mover will then have a right to reply and this will be followed by the vote on the amendment. All the votes on the amendments and the heads will be through acclamation. That has been approved by the Business Committee.

For further information of honourable Members, amendments are limited to those permitted under Standing Order 100(2) and these are an increase or decrease, removal of the item or subhead from the Head that is being debated.

When there are no further amendments in debate, we will proceed to the vote on the Head and then we will continue to the next Head. Honourable Members, please take note that the amendment slips and copies of Standing Order 100 have been placed on your tables to assist you during the Committee of Supply stage.

At this stage, honourable Members, we will suspend the proceedings for half an hour for a cup of tea and then we will resume with our proceedings thereafter.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.48 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.28 p.m.

In Committee

Head 1 – Office of the President

Programme 1, Activity 1: General Administration:

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, if I can just ask a general question to the honourable Minister for Finance because it will apply to most of the Heads. He did announce about the “R” that will be now transferred to the Ministry. The general question that we were discussing is, what will happen in terms of the procurement process, the tendering process, the levels of authority? The normal that comes with it. We would like to ask that question before, if you can please bear with us.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, thank you honourable Leader of the Opposition, that is a very good question. As I said in my speech, this will be a trial for a year. All the procurement processes will have to be followed. The Tender Committee will still determine the final procurement on tender. From the Ministry of Finance, our Budget Team, will keep a close tab on the use of those amounts normally allocated under ‘R.’ There will be no relaxation on any of the procedures or policies because the Permanent Secretaries are the Chief Financial Officers as well. The buck will stop with them and they will have to ensure that all the procurement processes, including the tendering processes, are followed carefully.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, if I may just ask a follow-on question. This is very important before we go into the process. The authorisation level for the Permanent Secretaries, is that going to change or not? Because my belief is it used to be \$50,000, and anything above that goes to the major Tender Board. Will we still maintain the major Tender Board or we will have what we used to have before? Divisional Tender Boards, Agency Tender Boards?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, not at this stage. The reason, honourable Leader of the Opposition, we did this, one was to promote faster implementation and it will also give more time to the Ministry of Finance to actually monitor the implementation on the ground and help with execution, so that is the idea. However, we will be reviewing that within six months and then after a year. The current level remains.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, it is a pleasure to...

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.-Mr. Chairman, Sir, on Head 1, Programme 1-1(3), on His Excellency's overseas travel, we see an increase of \$200,000 from what was allocated last year. If we can just have an explanation on the increase.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you. If you see the travel is \$149,000 down to \$146,000, that is a decrease due to VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent. Subsistence, again, you see a decrease, that is a reduction in VAT. Telecommunications, an increase is aligned to expenditure. The question on overseas travel is for His Excellency. The increase of \$160,000 there is aligned to expenditure trend and the reduction in VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent. So both taken together is a slight increase.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Prime Minister, do you wish to speak on that?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- No, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you. Right, are there any further comments?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- For the information of honourable Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Chairman, it is also to ensure because the cost of travelling have also increased and His Excellency, the President, as Commander-in-Chief, also visits Fijian peacekeepers abroad. So we have factored some of this travel in this Budget as well. Thank you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I would want to move to SEG 8, unless honourable Usamate...

HON. J. USAMATE.- SEG 8 too, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, in relation to this, we have noticed last year we had roughly the same amount of \$1 million for the construction of the Executive office.. So, I am just thinking this \$1 million per year, is this something that is planned to finish this year? Or is it going to be a \$1 million every year for that SEG 8. For construction.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, out of the \$1.5 million in the 2024-2025 Budget, a total sum of \$500 was wired out to cater for other operational expenses. Hence, of the revised provision of \$1 million, \$420,000 was utilised for this project. If you look at the reduction there, that is the reason.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.-On the progress of the Administration Block, because I understand this is the double-story building and if I am correct, it is a heritage building, so I am not too familiar of where this new Administration Block is going to be constructed and what is the progress, Mr. Chairman?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is actually done by PWD and the construction is planned to be completed this year. Some of the projects that has already been completed, for example, the State House washroom, engine room, back gate, ground zero, quarter 16, quarters 10A and 10B, Falekau Common Room and Quarter 3, Tavakubu Perimeter Access and Golf Green backfilling. All these have been completed.

The restoration of the Administration Block, Mr. Chairman, these are very old, they were constructed in 1928 and 1903 respectively. Over the years, the effects of wear and tear have contributed to a very dilapidated state of some of the structural components of the building. So, PWD has worked this out and construction will be completed this year. It is a heritage building, you are right and that means it has to be carefully constructed or redone, with a lot of care and good construction work.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 1 – Office of the President.

Question put.

Head 1 agreed to.

Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister

Programme 1, Activity 1: General Administration

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(1). There is an increase of around \$345,000 on Personal Emoluments. I understand that the Ministry of Department of Information is now separated from the Office of the Prime Minister. Likewise, the Veteran Affairs as well, is under the Ministry of Defence now. I just wanted clarification from the honourable Prime Minister about the

increase in the allocation, which was around \$2.44 million to \$2.390 million, an increase of about \$345,000 on SEG 1.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Prime Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- These are additional funds for the creation of new positions, senior secretary for the Assistant Minister and shortfall in the PE vote when compared to payroll of \$21,000. Of course, the 3 percent salary increase of \$62,000. The total funds, the salaries of 45 filled positions, including the salary of the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Assistant Minister, and there are 13 vacant positions under this activity and 32 filled positions.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- My other question, Mr. Chairman. I noted that in last year's allocation under SEG 7 was the funding for the secretariate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I just wanted to know where that funding is now, if there is any funding to support the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was under Programme 1-1(7) last year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is under Independent Commissions. We have made it separate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, question on the SEG 6:Aftercare Fund. Has it gone to Ministry of Home Affairs?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That has gone to the Ministry of Defence.

HON. S. T. KOROILAVESAU.- Programme 1, Activity 2.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have not moved to Activity 2 yet, honourable Koroilavesau. We will get there, no problem.

Programme 1, Activity 1 agreed to.

Programme 1, Activity 2:

HON. S. T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted clarification on Programme 1-2(6) which has decreased by \$113 million. Can I have an explanation of that because if we look at the General Expenditure on SEG 6 on the main, it also indicated a reduction under that Operating of Grants and Transfers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That reduction also is in VAT for Grants, but also reflects the completion of the project. For councils, it is just the reduction in the VAT. They will get the same VAT amounts.

HON. P. K. BALA.- Programme 1-2. Before I go into SEG, I want some clarification. As earlier explained by the honourable Minister for Finance in terms of this new implementation. What I gather, will the different ministries have their own Tender Committee within, or the existing Tender Committee will be in place?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, the only difference honourable Bala, is the Requisition. You have this "R" where Permanent Secretaries have to make a Requisition request to the Ministry of Finance. And sometimes, although we have the famous, what Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica calls "demand system", "sound system", this is just to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and the speed at which things can be approved.

The tender process is like this. The ministries have the Technical Evaluation Committee. They do all the work. The tender is called, they provide the Technical Evaluation Committee Report to the Tender Committee. The Tender Committee looks at all that, ask questions, can reject the recommendation, can say that this recommendation is not acceptable. So, all that process will remain. There will be no change in that one.

HON. P. K. BALA.- Going back to SEG 10 - Development Grant is quite general. If you can explain that allocation?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Which one?

HON. P. K. BALA.- SEG 10.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That has always been an ongoing programme and the objective of the programme is that, you know, people always go to the Prime Minister's Office and they approach. All Prime Ministers in the past, had these Development Grants and to facilitate an implementation of project, that will contribute to the social and economic needs of the people, usually community projects, community requests and improving the, so it could be from education to agriculture, to any kind of community grants.

HON. P. K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, so can I put it to you that for any community project, whether urban, rural, or maritime can be submitted to Prime Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Absolutely, yes. It is at the discretion of the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. P. K. BALA.- Okay, I will come.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NATH.- A supplementary question to honourable Semi Koroilavesau on the reduction of \$113 million. The honourable Minister said it is the completion of project. That means that given that Rotuma Island Council was given \$195,652, Rabi Island Council got \$195,652, et cetera. Can he explain what project has been completed on that \$113 million?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think the honourable Member is really confused. You know, I explained earlier that it is a Council project.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, I have the right to know, so can I request the honourable Member to....

MR. CHAIRMAN.- One moment, we are on Programme 1-2(10). Which SEG are you talking about?

HON. V. NATH.- I am talking about SEG 6 which honourable Koroilavesau had asked, and then it was a supplementary question, but I think you overlooked that request. The honourable Minister did explain, that it is the completion of project. A simple question is which project was completed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We already said that there was a market that was completed. Market in Rotuma!

HON. V. NATH.- It is noted.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I know that honourable Bala went straight into SEG 10. I was going to ask one question too on SEG 6. This is just about the Rabi Town Council elections, honourable Prime Minister, I know that it has been pending for a long while. Is there any decision concerning the election for Rabi Council?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There is no allocation for elections, but I think the grant is for the function of the Council.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is not included – election, my understanding of it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And obviously they can decide if they want to have the elections, so the funding is there.

HON. J. USAMATE.- All want the elections. Whenever you go around to any of these communities around Fiji, they are all asking for the elections. That is why there is this question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, but we do not interfere in what Rabi Island Council does and decides, and if they want to have election, it is up to them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the question and the elections are not being allowed. Maybe the honourable Assistant Minister can explain, they all want the elections to take place.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Yes, Mr. Chairman, we had some interaction with the Rabi Island Council and they are making efforts to have an election as soon as possible. So it will be held in the new financial year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I will go through SEG by SEG, once we pass the SEG, you do not go back to the SEG.

Programme 1, Activity 2 agreed to.

Programme 2, Activity 1: General Administration

SEG 7

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is also covered in the explanatory notes for the Office of the Prime Minister about Special Benefits. It says in addition of the Office of the Prime Minister and ministers, parliamentary retirement allowance for former Members of Parliament, including former Presidents and Prime Ministers, there is a special allocation in the 2025-2026 Budget to meet the other benefits which the former Prime and Presidents are entitled to. That is what is appearing in SEG 7- Former Prime Ministers and Presidents' Benefits (\$191,250). What is this covering apart from what has already there?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are beneficiaries who are entitled for this payment - Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Mr. Frank Bainimarama and the late Mr. Laisenia Qarase's wife and the former President, Jioji Konrote. The benefits consists of the medical, telecommunication, fuel, utility bills and hiring of household staff. That is the allocation and it is in the Cabinet Office.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you Mr, Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- On Programmes 3 and 4, Members kindly note that they will be dealt with under Head 11.

Parliament will now vote on Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister.

Question put.

Head 2 agreed to.

Head 3 – Office of the Attorney General

Programme 1, Activity 1 – General Administration

SEG 5

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I just a question and an explanation with respect to SEG 5. The heading is Legal Expert Expenses in the sum of \$281, 250. Could the honourable Minister please explain what legal expert expenses entails?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I think the title speaks for itself, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The reason why I am asking the question, is it specifically for one or it covers the whole area of anything that requires legal expert?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- For everything.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Planned reforms.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In this Financial Year. One of the other reasons why I ask if because the sum is actually \$281,250, so is that something that is already earmarked in terms of amount because it is a specific amount. It does not say \$600,000.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is \$287,000 but VAT reduction, that is why it is \$281,250.

SEG 7

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting (\$562,500), just a little explanation on that. I know it is for the meeting but specifically.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, this is the first meeting to be ever held in Fiji. That is for the entire expenses for the meeting. The on-going meeting has been from the beginning of this year. The meeting will be held in February next year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 3 – Office of the Attorney-General.

Question put.

Head 3 agreed to.

Head 4 - Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

Programme1, Activity 1- General Administration

SEG 5

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is a new allocation there for Minor Works that was not in last years budget. Can we just have an explanation on what is it for?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, this is a new expenditure item to cater for minor renovation works for the following:

- Maintenance of Level 2 Conference Room;
- Repair and maintenance for AC units for Minister, Assistant Minister, PSF and Administration;
- Renovation of the Assistant Minister's Conference Room; and
- Maintenance of the Conference Room chairs for Level 10, the Minister's Office, which is where we have all our meetings.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, if I can just ask on the aid-in-kind what exactly is that about for Custom Administration.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, can the honourable Minister for Finance on what is this?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We passed SEG 5. That is the point I had made, honourable Member. Once we pass it, we cannot go back. Because of the confusion that is caused by honourable Usamate going right over to aid-in-kind, I will allow your question on SEG 5.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Can honourable Minister clarify what is this PABX (Telephone) System worth \$11,250 because we have telecommunication cost on top as well?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the annual maintenance cost paid to Telecom Fiji Limited for the Ministry of Finance Telephone System - switchboard. PABX is the switch system.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Why is it not covered on top with Telecommunications?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is just a separate item, it makes it very clear in terms of the allocation. The clearer the allocation, the better it is.

SEG 6

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, this is just for the benefit of clarity to the Minister for Finance. I can see here that the allocation for FRCS is \$53 million. Do they submit a requisition for that amount or that amount is just given and then the Annual Report then details the expenses that they accumulate over a year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is through requisition like for all other grants. It is not given in one lump sum, it is given quarterly. And for them too, the no "R" applies.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Usamate, you were going to ask your question on aid-in-kind?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I just wanted to know a bit more about what that aid-in-kind is.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Which one?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Master Trainer Programme Allocation.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is focused on management and post-clearing audit, third country training. Really the output from that would be to establish a trainer pool in the field of RMNPC in the Customs Administration and that is for the Pacific Island countries. Also to develop materials including training programmes and training guidance in the field of RMNPC reflecting the situation of Pacific Island countries.

Programme 1 Activity 2 - Treasury

SEG 5

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is an Annual Maintenance Fee - Meridian (\$36,955). Last year it was \$1.4 million. Last year it was \$1.4 million. Last year it was also maintenance fee? Is it talking about the same thing?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, no funding is allocated for this year because the new FMIS is now on live, basically it is in operation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- FMIS is in SEG 9, this is in SEG 5.

SEG 9

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Honourable Minister, the maintenance and logistics of the actual FMIS Software (\$3,913,044). Is that just for this year or will that be an ongoing cost?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, this is to fund the ongoing payment on milestone achieved in accordance to Section 3(2) of the Agreement, decrease in expenditure is aligned to the current expenditure trend and also takes into account the reduction in VAT. This is final payment, and it is not an ongoing expenditure.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is this the final payment?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the final payment.

Programme 1, Activity 3 – Budget Division

SEG 3

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, the travel has increased by \$125,000 from last year. Can I just have an explanation of that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, this is additional funds provided to meet the travelling expenses for 42 staff of the Division. Mr. Chairman, FRCS has a number of different units– from Border Control to Customs and a lot of training is required. A lot of training sometimes is also required, that is why there is an increase in the funding there.

HON. J. USAMATE.- For staff of the Ministry, not FRCS?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, staff of the Ministry.

HON. J. USAMATE.- They go and train the FRCS people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They engage in training of other ministries, but also we need to put them on the ground. For example, the Taskforce that we have appointed. As part of the National Development Plan, and as part of the implementation book that we have developed with the different ministries, the Strategic Planning Unit will combine with other divisions within the Ministry and will monitor these things very, very closely. That is why there is an increase in the Budget.

It is important because we realise that budget monitoring is very important. Sometimes we end up with over-expenditure, under-expenditure, projects are not completed - so budget monitoring is very important. We want the head of budget to travel a little bit because sometimes, when they do not go out, they do not see the impact of some of these non-implementation, late implementation and effectiveness of implementation.

SEG 5

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, if the honourable Minister can clarify what are these Purchase - Office Equipment (\$33,750), because I actually see in Activities 2 and 4 is basically the same amount appearing everywhere. Are all these departments buying the same thing or are these different office equipment?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think they are for different locations and different equipment. So for this one, it is to cater for minor office equipment such as tables, chairs and workstations and all departments have different budgets.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman on the Training (\$112,500) has increased by \$62,000. Could I just have a short explanation of that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Good question, honourable Usamate. This is really for staff to attend local and overseas training for capacity building. It does two things:

- (1) It exposes them to training, new innovation, etc.
- (2) It is an incentive for them to upgrade their skills and train themselves .

Sometimes a lot of this is funded by donors partially, some fully. We need some funding. If it is partially funded, then this will cater for that.

SEG 8

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, the upgrade and enhancement - office building. Last year, it was around \$200,000. This is another \$225,000. Is this project-based or is it a regular allocation? If so, what was the \$200,000 used for last year?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In 2024-2025 Budget, the tender for the refurbishment of Level 9 office, not in the Attorney-General's Office but Level 9 in our office was advertised in the daily papers in April 2025 and closed on 16th April. The Tender Evaluation Committee convened on 1st of May to evaluate the five bids submitted by the contractors. The technician is currently finalising the evaluation which will be submitted to the Fiji Procurement Office. That work is scheduled for July 2025 and that is why we have included the payment of tender advertisement.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I had the same question as honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am just saying July 2025 is the last financial year. Are you talking about the last Budget?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am saying that this has to be billeted for this year because it was not completed.

SEG 9

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister for Finance, this is a new expenditure item. I just wanted to ask that \$1,760,870, will this be an ongoing expenditure or it is just a one-time item expenditure?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There will be an annual service fee and other cost including the WHD and VRC. The contingency sum is allocated to cater for the exchange rate fluctuation at the time of the payment of invoices and other refresher training required for budget. This has been a big issue. We are still doing the Budget manually and what we want to do is to make sure like the FMIS system that we are able to do the Budget, through a new electronic system that will make it more efficient and effective. For example, this Budget book, you have to go through it manually, carefully look at dollars and cents and then ensure that there is no error. At the moment the FMIS system kicks in after the Budget is approved. This is about preparing budget on the system. It makes it easier, as soon as the Budget is approved, it is already there in the system. Currently, it is kind of Excel-based which means that people have to do this manually check.

HON. F.S. KOYA. – Honourable Minister, it basically says implementation of new budget system and you have just explained what it is. So, it is in addition to the initial maintenance and logistics ones of about \$3.9 million?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is a separate exercise or part of the same exercise?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think that is a good question. I want to say it is part of the same system so that we add this additional budget implementation system. You have the FMIS, you have these other systems but we do not have a budget implementation system. This will allow it to be merged with other systems, so that it does not remain a manual system separately.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- My supplementary question to that, Mr. Chairman, is, in that case, if it is the implementation of the new budget system, regarding input, et cetera, will this be ongoing in that amount or does it lessen?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, there will be an annual service fee, like any other software system.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, in terms of the implementation of this new budget system, last year was \$2.7 million and this one is \$1.7, so that is \$4.4 million. In terms of the implementation, it will be \$4.4 million altogether. Then over and above that, there will be a maintenance fee in progressive years.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Annual Service Fee.

Programme 1, Activity 4: Internal Audit and Good GovernanceSEG 7:

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, this is a new allocation, can we just have a brief explanation of it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the software used by the Internal Audit Department of the Ministry. The software, TeamMate is a comprehensive audit management system designed to help auditors and audit department leadership and manage all aspects of the audit process. The software was actually developed by the New Zealand Government, for which the Fiji Government is now obligated to pay the annual maintenance fees, So that is the allocation for that.

Programme 1, Activity 5: Procurement OfficeSEG 4

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on the Repair and Maintenance – Office Equipment it is \$187,875 this year. Last year it was only \$17,000. This is quite a huge jump from \$17,000 to \$187,875.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This would be a one-off. It is an increasing expenditure allocation to support the extension of the conference room and other repair works for the Department based on the priority basis, such as the repair of warehouse in Walu Bay. We have a warehouse in Walu Bay and Fiji Procurement Office conference room as well. The Department intends to extend the current conference room for Government Tender Board meetings and some additional conference chairs and other facilities.

SEG 5

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Purchase of Fiji Flags (\$56,250). This is new also. Is this purchase for Fiji flags for whole of Government or just for the Ministry?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I would imagine that it is for the whole of Government. The Fiji Procurement Office supplies flags. It used to be a trading account item before TMA, but now it is handled by FPO, and is now funded under Head 4 for whole of Government.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, on the same note, with regards to the purchase of Fiji flags, I just wanted to clarify, are these flags also available for sale to the general public? If it is, where can members actually buy this one from? These are official flags, which are basically not available in the shops and other places.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it is for sale too. You can purchase

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- From where?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Level 4. I cannot tell you the price now, but....

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, in relation to the Annual Board Fees (\$88,043), last year the figure was \$62,500.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Which one?

HON. J. USAMATE.- SEG 5 - Annual Board Fees, currently it is \$88,000. Last year it was \$62,500. Does that mean that the rates have....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Last year it was \$71,071. This year is \$88,000. This is due to the increase in the board fees of members and board chairman for the Government Tender Board. Public enterprise now has a guideline for board fees, et cetera.

Programme 1, Activity 6: Fiscal Policy, Research and Analysis

SEG 4

HON. A.A MAHARAJ.- Incidentals (\$11,250), what are these going to cover?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You know what the incidental is *yaar*. This allocation funds those miscellaneous funds which is not budgeted for, for example, purchase of toilet papers, meetings and catering, et cetera. Honourable Maharaj can relax a little bit about that.

Programme 1, Activity 7: Government Fleet Management

SEG 7

HON. J. USAMATE.- Last year it was around \$50,000, there has been a reduction this year. That means that less vehicles to maintain or this is a software.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The reduction is aligned to the anticipated cost of software upgrade. So it will be an upgrade and the anticipated cost is lower than what was budgeted last year. The intention is to purchase the vehicle management system for the whole of Government, given that the existing vehicles management system that is controlled by ITC has not been used since 2018. So, we want to make sure and it is partly because Government ITC, and this is like since 2018 and basically they said it was due to staff turnover.

So, currently there is no online database and no vehicle software to manage both leased and State-owned vehicle. This vehicle software will be used to manage both leased and State-owned vehicles. It will allow the Government fleet management team to manage all whole of Government vehicles from entering vehicle information, to run to the ports, such as quarterly reports which are currently managed manually. This is this was quite unusual, I mean this is one of the things that you talked about for many years, but it was not done. So, the funding is provided to support the expansion of the vehicle management system into a more broad and interactive tool for the next financial year, so that everything is online and data is available. Right now it is all done manually.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Because last year, there was a budget of \$50,000, so I assume that the system was already in place from last year's budget. You are just expanding it because you also seem to suggest that there was no system in place, currently.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes the tender is already ordered, contract signed and so that expenditure is already there. Should be ready this financial year. Sorry.

HON. V. NATH.- Just want to correct the honourable Minister, he said that during our time there was no monitoring system.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, I did not say monitoring system. I just said that it was supposed to be online from 2018. It did not happen because of other issues such as staff as well as the software. So, that is what I was saying.

HON. V. NATH.- So, the problem with you honourable Minister, you do not listen. I did not finish my question. For example, the State-entities already had this facility, like Water Authority and EFL. Honourable Usamate just mentioned there was surplus money put aside in the last budget too.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- A quick question, honourable Minister, does this include a tracking system?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it will.

Programme 1, Activity 8: Strategic Planning Office

SEG 5

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is a new thing on SDG Expenses. Explain what that is? I did not see it in last year.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Usamate, you will know that there is a thing called Fiji's National Voluntary Review that represent obligation for the UN, so this is to cater for minor operational costs for hosting conferences, workshops and undertaking the Fiji National Voluntary Review.

SEG 7

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is an amount for Policy Advisors of \$280,000. It is very similar to the amount that was there last year. Is this largely for overseas advisors?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, we have two advisors and we want to keep them for another year. These are local advisors, both ex-academics.

HON. J. USAMATE.- And related to that, Sir, in that same SEG last year you had a national economic summit.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You do not have any funding here for this year? Is it going to be done or is it going to be funded from somewhere else? I am just asking perhaps it was in last year's.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If we have one it will be funded from somewhere else.

Programme 2 Activity 1 - General Administration

SEG 7

HON. J. USAMATE.- First of all, on the employment and unemployment survey that was done last year for around \$606,000. Just like to see if that is out now?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The survey is completed and started in September 2023 and has been successfully completed in October 2024. So, the sum of \$556,000 has been used to undertake the final phase of the survey. So, the reduction really means the survey is completed now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, that is the survey from last year, the employment.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I said, it started in September 2023 and was complete. As you know it takes almost a year to do that. So, it was completed in October 2024.

HON. J. USAMATE.- And the Household Population Census, when is that scheduled to be completed? We have \$739,000.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As you know, honourable Usamate, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey is conducted every five years. So, the last one was in 2019/2020. So, this year is five years. So, it was scheduled from March 2025 to March 2026.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 4 - Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Question put.

Head 4 agreed to.

Head 5 – Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Programme 1, Activity 1: General Administration

SEG 6

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, the Vanua Leadership Allowance. I believe this is apart from other allowance that is given to the *Turaga ni Koro* and all those things (\$777,600).

HON. I. VASU.- This one is for the *Turaga ni Yavusa* allowance. There are 648 *Turaga ni Yavusa* and they are paid \$100 per month.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, probably I have seen the reduction in *Turaga ni Koro* allowance. I hope it is justified because my recent visit to some places like Namosi and Namulomulo. I hope the Permanent Secretary and the honourable Minister also visited there. They complained the last five months their allowance have not been paid and I can still see the reduction here. So if the reductions are there, that means they were not paid last time.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No reduction there.

HON. V. NATH.- For last four to five months, they were not paid. Is that a decline?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Where do you see the reduction?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the issue here is they have to issue their performance report because they work in isolation and they have been selected by the community. To safeguard the funds, we need to receive the reports from them, then we can pay them. The delay is usually on their report.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Chairman, if we could clarify the current proceedings is for clarity of what is in the Budget in the SEGs, rather than the processes behind it, for example a clarification in terms of the processes for the approval of the payment of the allowances rather than clarification of that SEG in the Budget, which I think that is what we need to focus on now. Otherwise, we will be debating from what the purpose of this Committee of Supply.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just for information, I do not know where you see reduction. There is no reduction in the allocation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, just a clarification, if I heard rightly to my query, the response was that it is for *Turaga ni Koro* allowance.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I. VASU.- Which one?

HON. P.K. BALA.- The *vanua*.

HON. I. VASU.- The *vanua* is the *Turaga ni Yavusa*. He is asking the *Turaga ni Koro*.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Let me put this way. SEG 6 – there is an allowance for *Turaga ni Koro* of \$2.8 some million and there is another, which I had asked for the Vanua Leadership Allowance. Can you respond to this, please?

HON. I. VASU.- There can only be one *Turaga ni Koro* in one village. The *Turaga ni Yavusa*, there can be two or three in one village. When you go to a village, the *Turaga ni Koro* will take you to the *Turaga ni Yavusa* for all the Fijian protocols, et cetera. If you will be there for the whole day, the *Turaga ni Yavusa* will be there and the *Turaga ni Koro* will be looking after you, and they will coordinate everything that is done.

SEG 10:

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, with regards to SEGs 6 and 10 – there is a Capital Grant of \$1.05 million to CATD and they also have an Operating Grant of \$920,000.

I move that this allocation be increased by \$2 million to make it \$3.9 million.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I am not following you. Head 5?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Programme 1-1(6) and (10). There are two allocations given to CATD. One is a Capital Grant, and the other one is the Operating Grant. Operating Grant sits in SEG 6 and Capital Grant sits in SEG 10. So, altogether it is making up \$1.9 million. I am requesting for another additional \$2 million increase for CATD to make it \$3.9 million.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Is there a seconder?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I second the motion, Mr. Chairman.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, he can ask for increase in one. He cannot say increase there and add this here. He has to say to increase SEG 6 or which item?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Only on SEG 10.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The motion has been seconded.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- On SEG 10 only. That the grant be increased from what it is now to \$2 million more?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- So it will be \$3,051,630. There is a seconder. Now, can you explain the amendment?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I believe I covered this one during my speech as well, that this particular organisation was created for a reason, and a very good reason. They appeared before the Public Accounts Committee, and it is on record that they had requested for \$3.9 million. The reasoning that they gave was they want to increase their campuses in other divisions as well. They need to bring in lecturers who can train the students who are attending this particular institution.

For a long time now, they have not been allocated the funds that they have been requesting for, and they are not able to expand their services to other provinces and divisions to educate our *iTaukei* youths. This is the gist of it, that I am taking the queue from the presentation that was done before the Public Accounts Committee, that we allocate the right amount of funds to this particular institution, so that they can come up with more campuses around Fiji to advocate and educate our youths who are basically the dropouts. I believe the courses that are offered here in these particular institutions are recognised by the Higher Education Committee as well. This is the reason I am requesting for this particular increase, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The amendment is open for debate, discussion.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, just to clarify, given the rules when you want to move an increase by \$2 million, you have to also indicate where you will reduce by \$2 million. I think the motion is flawed, given the mover of the motion needs to also confirm where to reduce in order to make that increase.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I am very happy to say that I am willing to answer a particular question. I will separate \$2 million from Pacific Polytech. They have an allocation of \$7 million.

(Laughter)

Please bring it down to \$5 million for now, because I will be sharing that \$5 million in other places as well. That \$5 million is still in my kitty, so, the \$2 million from Pacific Polytech to the Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is what you sought honourable Bulitavu?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, I am satisfied and now the debate can proceed.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, we already raised these issues with the Ministry of Finance, and they are aware, and have already discussed with the Director CATD Nadave, how they are going to look after the request for another additional Centre in the West.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, can I just add, I think honourable Maharaj is totally confused. He does not know the way in which funding is decided for higher education institutions. He says all courses are accredited and approved by the Higher Education Commission. When the Higher Education Commission looks at it, we have said that – the honourable Minister is right – they need to do some preparatory work. You cannot just come and say, “we are going to open campuses in 10 places,” when you have not done any preparatory work, and you have not had any plan.

So, we are going to work with them. You can see, there is an increase from \$370,000 to \$1.05 million, and it will cater for the construction of a new campus in Nadi. Sometimes, even if you give people \$1 million, they are not able to finish it in one year. We are saying this will cater for a campus in Nadi, increasing capacity in current campus, budget provided in the 2024-2025 Budget was for small projects. This is to cater for a campus in Nadi. So, do not rush. Hold your horse, and things will happen.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I think the precedence was set with the organisation where I am taking out the money from, that they actually came up with a proposal, and they were given \$1 million even before the Budget, and then \$1 million in the Budget, then \$5 million again, and \$7 million again. This is the precedent that has been set by the other side. What we are actually saying is, if someone is requesting for the particular money, please give it to them. It is for our students, it is for our youths, and it is for their better future.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

Programme 1, Activity 2: Development Research and Monitoring

SEG 10

HON. P. K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, on the Village Improvement Scheme, a very good scheme which was announced by the honourable Prime Minister, but when the Committee called the staff from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, they were asking for more funds, so that they can complete more villages, with the amount that was allocated the last time. I wish to know, with this \$2 million, how many villages will be covered because we have more than thousand villages.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, with these allocations, we are looking at about 176 villages will be covered throughout the 14 provinces and the next will be tendered out. We will ask for them, if they still want to request. So we have got enough out there. Some of them still have not fulfilled all the requirements, once they fulfil that, then they will be added to the numbers that we have.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, still on SEG 10 - Village Improvement Scheme, I believe this was part of the discussion last year as well, and I raised this concern, that we need to incorporate some settlements as well, if they request. I would just like to know with the Budget that was allocated last year, were any settlements covered under this particular programme?

HON. I. VASU.- I understand settlements is now covered under the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs He is providing all those.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think honourable Maharaj needs to understand the settlements structure, the requirements are very different. So, Village Improvement Scheme is a different special allocation. Within the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, there are a number of grants, in fact, as you will notice when we look at Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, the grant allocation has also increased, so a lot of the community development projects for settlement development projects that you want, because the settlement setting is very different, you know village setting is very different. So, that is why the Grant and the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, will cater for any settlement Common Public Good, like community halls, et cetera that they want to build, is provided there.

Programme 2, Activity 2: Vola Kawa Bula Unit

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister on the amount that is allocated here. Is this additional to an ongoing programme or is this amount allocated for the whole work that is required in the Northern Division? Survey of Mahogany Plantation, Northern Division \$510,000.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 2-2, honourable Koroilavesau. We are not there yet.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Sorry, I am fast, I am on fast forward, Mr. Chairman. I will await my turn.

(Laughter)

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are forgiven.

Programme 2, Activity 3: iTaukei Land Management

SEG 7

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, the question is basically on the amount of \$510,000. The amount did not appear on the previous 2024-2025 but now appears. Will this amount complete the work that is required for the survey or will it be an ongoing exercise that will require for further fundings in future budgets?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this programme is usually carried out by the Ministry of Lands. Just because of the delay in the surveying of the mahogany and the mahogany are getting matured so fast and we need to harvest. If we need to harvest, we need to survey the plantation first, then we will do it. The Ministry of Land is currently looking after Viti-Levu. We are looking after the Vanua Levu. Once we complete that, then that is the end of it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for his reply. I noticed that in last year's budget it was \$950,000 for this same exercise and this year is another \$510,000. Was that \$950,000 fully utilised? And just the balance is being covered here or is it the combined cost is \$1.4 million? I know this is very difficult work because surveying the boundaries of the landowners within the mahogany plantation is very remote areas, but if you add the two figures together, it is around \$1.4 million. Is that the total cost, or was there some work that was supposed to be done last year and was not done in the current budget and just be finished off in this new budget?

HON. I. VASU.- It is ongoing because they started off last year. They need to add additional manpower and equipment to support. This was the new additional operations for the survey team. So it will continue. That is a continued budget allocation for them until they finish.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The \$50,000 was that fully expended from this financial year before you added this five half a million this year?

HON. I. VASU.-I cannot answer that now.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I can answer that.\$750,000 was used.

HON. J. USAMATE.-So, this this will finish it off?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Honourable Minister, I understand about the other areas of Fiji being surveyed by the Ministry of Lands who have their own surveys to do it. With respect to the Northern Division and the survey of the mahogany plantations, is this being farmed out to private surveyors, or is it being done in house, within your ministry and have you enough surveyors to actually complete the job?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this is done in-house.

Programme 4, Activity 1: General Administration

SEG 7

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, just looking at the Melanesians Arts Festival. It is allocated \$1 million. I just wanted to ask the honourable Minister, is this allocation of \$1 million to host the Melanesian Arts Festival or is it just part of our contribution?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, we will be hosting the MACFEST next year, 2026 and this is in the preparations and plannings because we are hosting.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, under that SEG 7, one of the things that we did earlier this year or was it last year, was the Heritage Bill. Now there is a lot of talk about Levuka, I am very interested to know about the plans we have for Levuka. The implementation of the Levuka Management Plans last year, had a budget of \$50,000 and this year is \$33,000. Can you just explain what is covered there because when you go to Levuka, they always have a lot of things that they want covered and I am not too sure whether this amount of money will address all the things that you want to do in Levuka because it is our only World Heritage Site.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 7, Implementation of the Levuka Management Plan with an allocation of \$33,750 as compared to \$50,000 last year. Is that correct honourable Usamate?

HON. I. VASU.- The funding is to carry out small projects and initiatives to maintain and capitalise on the Levuka World Heritage listing. It will support the Levuka community in maintaining sites, training for the community, capitalise on tourism opportunities creating templates on various World Heritage buildings in Levuka, creating awareness in schools and amongst the community to protect these sites.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Right. Honourable Usamate, we are moving on. SEG 10?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- SEG 7, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- SEG 7, we go back honourable Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, with regards to Levuka, I believe there was funding that was supposed to come from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well, once we had domesticated the Convention on World Heritage site, there was some funding that was supposed to come from UNESCO That is not showing in the Budget estimate. Has that funding been provided in order to improve the buildings and infrastructure in Levuka? That would be Aid-in-Kind. There is nothing Aid in Kind from UNESCO.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I would like to ask the honourable Member if he could include it in the next session of Parliament so that I can provide the answer for him.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Sir, this is with respect to SEG 10. Are we on SEG 10?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, we are not there yet.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Okay, my question was relative to SEG 10.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, SEG 10 rehabilitation of Levuka Hall Heritage.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We are not there yet honourable Member. So now, we go on to SEG 10 and we will ask honourable Koya.

SEG 10

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. honourable Minister, SEG 10 is two-fold. One is with respect to the rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage structure which is \$978, 260. Which specific structure are we referring to considering that the whole of Levuka is a World Heritage site? Just which specific structure is it and then I will ask the second question with respect to the National Trust of Fiji.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, this covers for the continuation of restorations and strengthening of the Levuka Community Centre Complex by ensuring the World Heritage structure retains their historical integrity.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you honourable Minister. My follow up question is also, where it says, the rehabilitation of the National Trust of Fiji. Is that with respect to a building?

HON. I. VASU.- It is aimed to rehabilitate the following sites:

- (1) Garrick Reserve, Navua;
- (2) Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park;
- (3) Momi Battery Historical Park; and
- (4) Yadua Tabu Crested Iguana Sanctuary in Vanua Levu.

HON. F.S. KOYA. Thank you, Sir, maybe they need to put sites added to it so we know that it is for the sites.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Chairman, in regards to the assistance that was mentioned by the former Permanent Secretary that was supposed to be provided to the residents of Levuka. The rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage Structure \$978,260, according to the honourable Minister is for one particular building. But,during our submissions the Special Administrators and the community of Levuka also raised they are given very strict guidelines in regards to repair and maintenance of their private properties. I am just asking the honourable Minister, is there any sort of assistance to private home owners who can also build their houses under these strict conditions because the conditions are really bad. If there is any cyclone or anything all these houses will be blown away. There was some mention by the former Permanent Secretary about \$150 million and how they will be assisting these residents. Is there any funding available in this budget?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, can he repeat the question?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I do not know whether there was a question.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Chair, apart from all the grants and assistance in regards to the structure under the rehabilitation of the Levuka World Heritage Structure, with that funding \$978,260 during our community submissions even when we visited there is lot of concern raised by the communities of Levuka in regards to the strict guidelines given to them for the repair and maintenance of their private properties. The former Permanent Secretary within the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs confirmed to us that there was some funding that will be given to these private property owners, individuals for them to also

do the repair and maintenance of their private homes. The real condition they are in, what I am trying to say, if there is a cyclone all these houses will be blown away then government will have to give them more money. Is there any funding available?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, I think with the funding now they have to be looking at all the houses within the area. Now they are looking at fire assistance. Once they do the fire assistance first, then they will start assisting them in doing their buildings.

HON. V. PILLAY.- So, the funds are available, honourable Minister?

HON. I VASU.- We will help.

HON. J .USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, in the last year's budget there was a refurbishment of St. Stephen's building of \$1 million and again another \$1.1 million this year. This sounds like a very expensive house. I am wondering whether the work was not done last year or why is there \$1 million last year and another \$1 million this year, but since you are just talking about the one building.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, the renovations for St. Stephen's is quite an expensive exercise. They carried out the engineering assessment last year. From this funding they will complete the engineering assessment and they will commence with the renovation. This one is not enough.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I have an amendment to Activity 1, correct? From honourable Maharaj and I will ask him to explain himself.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I think even before moving the amendment it has been well and truly discussed between honourable Pillay and honourable Minister Vasu that we need to assist the house owners and the building owners in Levuka town in order to upgrade, because we did not have a Heritage Act for some time and they were not able to upgrade their buildings which has deteriorated over time. So, I am requesting an increment of \$1 million to assist all those building owners in Levuka, whose buildings are deteriorating because as honourable Minister has said, he is willing to actually help but there is no funding. I am just trying to allocate \$1 million funding under this particular SEG, so that once the request comes to the Ministry, the honourable Minister is able to assist them with regards to redevelopment of their buildings in Levuka. That is the gist of it.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Is there any seconder?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, clarity on the motion because when you come into Committee of Supply, your motion should be whatever Head, Programme, Activity, SEG, and then, if you want to increase or decrease, from where, you should be clear, I mean we cannot just entertain these kind of motions.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I apologise, he has made it clear here. Head 5-4-1(10) Rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage Structure (\$978,260) - to increase the allocation by another \$1 million.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Decrease from what?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We are now in the process of... there is a seconder? And, we have opened the amendment up for debate and that is, if you look at again Head 5 where we are, Programme 4, Activity 1, SEG 10 which is the last of the items on that activity. And that is the amount be increased by \$1 million.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I think one of the things that we noticed when we went there, what Standing Committee was it? Justice Committee? The Standing Committee for Justice, Law

and Human Rights, a lot of the issues, I mean, we should be very proud that we have a World Heritage Site in Fiji. I think there was a lot of concerns from Levuka about the ability to be able to preserve those sites. It is interesting because it is a lived-in site. People actually live on that site. I think if we can find ways in which to help the people that live there and maintain it, I think that will be very good.

Very few places in the world have a World Heritage Site, and we have one in which people live every day. So I really support this motion, if we can find a way to do it. I know money is tight, that is why I sort of agree with that, because when the Standing Committee went, they were just blasted about this particular issue.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, I do not support the motion, the increase, given the mover of the motion has not even mentioned where to reduce if it goes for this increase.

Secondly, the honourable Maharaj was part of the Justice, Law and Human Rights Standing Committee in the last term. But in this term of Parliament, the honourable Usamate would have known that when we were part of the Committee in Levuka, dealing with the Heritage Bill that has been enacted by Parliament. In that Heritage Bill, there is a special committee that comprises of the Levuka residents represented in that committee, who now, under UNESCO, through that funding that is provided under the World Heritage Act now. That committee will allow the residents of Levuka, who want to renovate their house according to World Heritage Standards, to make an application to that committee, who will vet that application, that will go through the Ministry of iTaukei and also the Department of Heritage.

It is called the Management Committee, and they are the ones that will look into that. So there is a pathway already there, so we do not need this motion, and the funds are there through the Act. I think what is budgeted here is sufficient, given this goes to a specific structure in Levuka. But for private residents, there is a pathway in the Act, and probably a regulation and policy will follow that when it comes to effective implementation.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Chairman, I fully support the motion. Our Standing Committee also has gone to Levuka and we have heard from the Special Administrators and also the residents. What honourable Bilitavu is saying in regards to the pathway, I do not know when we will reach that pathway. Whatever has been done in Levuka in the past or what is happening, for me, I think we need to give some priority to the residents of Levuka and whatever development needs to take place in Levuka. There is a lot of requirements been given to the residents to do the repair and maintenance and it is coming at a very high cost, which the residents are not able to afford. We need to have some funding so that apart from whatever the Government structures are being maintained, this residence also needs to be funded with some sort of assistance.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, just two cents advice on the motion that is before us. Let us be honest about it. Whoever goes to Levuka and when they meet the individual household owners, the very first thing they are saying, 'they need some sort of financial assistance so that they can upgrade their buildings.' The reason is because the Council has got a different set of scope because they have to retain the heritage. If we are not going to attend to these issues that they are facing, people will be leaving Levuka and coming this side. So, I strongly urge, I am not saying you give it right now, but there should be a plan. There should be some sort of allocation. Give them some degree of confidence that Government will assist them.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I wanted to contribute very quickly on Levuka and supporting this motion. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, were the last Committee that visited Levuka, the suggestion from most business people in Levuka is that they are worried that the movement of people from Levuka to Viti Levu is causing them to reduce their business operations. I believe honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs from the Government side

would agree with me. They asked if we could push for an exercise that will assist Levuka, so that the population in Levuka remains. Some of them have reduced their workers by about 50 percent. It is just because the population density is not there to support them as their customers.

Basically, if we cannot provide it in this Budget, I am asking Government to look at it in the next budgetary recycle.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, I think honourable Koroilavesau and honourable Bala made the right point. I do not think we can put this in this Budget, but this is an important issue. I think, in future, I would suggest, if Standing Committees go, out there, there should be some feedback input into the budgetary process. We could look at the number of incentives, for example, termite infested houses. We are providing additional incentives. We are saying, apart from the grant we are giving, if you are repairing your termite infested house, you get a better fund.

We could provide some incentives, extend those incentives for people in Levuka, but we will definitely consider that in the next budget. In the meantime, we will also do a proper assessment and understanding of the extent of what is involved, what sort of incentive would be effective. If Government needs to allocate a certain amount of funding to do that, we will do that. So, I suggest honourable Maharaj withdraws the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- In view of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance's intervention, are rest of the speakers I have here, you wish to proceed honourable Koya?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Yes, Mr. Chairman. It is a very important point that I think everyone needs to know, and quite a few of us have been involved in that particular area with respect to heritage. The most important point and the reason why there is an urgency in everyone's voice, is that, it is not just about fixing the heritage buildings, it is about us losing our world heritage status, with respect to Levuka, if we do not do something urgently.

It is not an issue that can be kicked off to the next budget. I would urge the honourable Minister for Finance to see if something can be done to accommodate that as quickly as possible because we are under the gun with respect to losing our status faster, sooner or rather than later, if we do not do something about Levuka.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, I also wanted to share the sentiment that we also visited Levuka. Speaking to the local residence there, they also expressed their desire to maintain their properties, but they were not in the financial capability to do so. I think this is a very right moment for us to vote for this motion.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, we have heard the honourable Minister for Finance, but if you recall, I just submitted my report for the visit to Levuka. I was in Levuka about three weeks ago. We need to acknowledge Mr. Ben Naidu for what he is doing in Levuka. Not only in Levuka, but in Lomaiviti. He is now taking the services to Koro and Gau, which is good. He is in a position to do that because he has the money.

Speaking to Josese as well, the former Special Administrator in Levuka, they are sharing the same sentiments. Also PAFCO is worried about this tariff issue, and that again is another key concern for the residents of Levuka. If Government can find some money somewhere just to cushion that uncertainty for now, it would be good. I just wanted to speak in support of the motion. It is a serious issue.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, there is also a Levuka Management Plan. With that Management Plan, they already engaged JICA to reassess. After *TC Winston*, the assessment was not

completed. Now they brought in JICA to come and assess, and their assessment recommends that the fire risk should be carried out first. This fund is for carrying out the fire risk for all the buildings before we can do the renovations. We hear the segments from Oppositions and we will look after that in the next budget.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank every honourable Member, except honourable Minister for Environment and Climate Change for opposing this particular important motion for the people of Lomaiviti. Unfortunately, he was also part of the Standing Committee on Justice Law and Human Rights, when people were pleading us to assist them.

I just want to bring to the notice of this Parliament that the place where Legal Aid Commission is, even they have been given the evacuation notice. The buildings are in such a bad condition over there. I welcome the recommendations from the honourable Prime Minister that they will actually look into this because it is an urgent matter that needs to be looked into. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance that he will source out money from somewhere.

I want to suggest, if there is some kind of tax incentive that we can give to the buildings, and please do not have the Cap. For example, those building might actually require \$20,000 to \$50,000 maintenance and if we put a Cap of \$250,000, they will not actually fall into that. If we can give some kind of tax incentive to the business owners who owns the buildings in Levuka, that will also encourage them to renovate their buildings.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I am assuming you are withdrawing your motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, Mr. Chairman, I withdraw the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will now proceed to vote on Head 5 - Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Question put.

Head 5 agreed to.

Head 6 - Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs

Programme 1, Activity 1: General Administration

SEG 5

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, can I just ask the honourable Minister to give us an update on the Search and Rescue Services and how it has been used? Plan for usage.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, the way that it works now is that the Search and Rescue operations are funded by the ministry, but conducted by the Fiji Navy. That is something that we do together with the new Mask becoming more efficient at that. We have allocated that fund obviously there are flexibility to draw from other places depending on how many search and rescue operations we have to do. But we have enough funds that will kick us off for the beginning of the next financial year. We do not know how many people will get stuck at sea or in the mountains.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Gets paid to the Navy when they carry out the operations?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is how we work it out, the Navy does it and they come and bill us. The cases vary every year depending on who gets stuck at sea.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, just a follow-on question to the honourable Minister, how about the aviation search, for example, the case in Labasa? Can you please explain to the House?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, we also have the ability to be able to acquire that kind of capability using this funds, Search and Rescue. At the moment we do not have a dedicated capability as you know, but there are service providers from the private sectors. If we need to do it, we ask them to do it with the police or whoever is the rescue agency that needs to go and do the rescue per se. If we are luck enough we have the Australian, the C27 and we use that on one occasion when they were here for their two weeks stint.

SEG 6

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is \$1 million increase for the Grant to Fiji Servicemen's Aftercare Fund. I think last year it was \$14.7 million. Is this reflection of more people coming in or change in the rates?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, it is not the change in the rates. There are additional members that we are accommodating we have got additional request to cater for medical assistance and the allowance for new members that have just joined.

Also, we are getting new staff at AO level to man the office within the four Divisions, Northern, Eastern, Western and Central Division.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, please kindly take note that Activity 2 will be dealt with under Head 12 since there are no further items under this Programme.

The Parliament will now vote on Head 6 – Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs.

Question put.

Head 6 agreed to.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, we have now concluded voting on Head 1 to Head 6. I think it is an appropriate time to adjourn the Committee of Supply until tomorrow and I will resume in Speaker's Chair in order to adjourn the House tonight.

The House resumed:

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we adjourn tonight, I offer my sincere apologies to this side of the House. Inadvertently, I did not bow on my way out to you. The purest of my heart, I did not mean to.

So, honourable Members, it has been a long day. I hope you will rest well. We will continue the exercise tomorrow morning and Parliament now stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.22 p.m.