

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 9TH MARCH, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 9TH MARCH, 2026

The Parliament met at 9.31 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, the honourable Minister for Policing, honourable J. Saukuru and honourable P.K. Bala.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sittings of Parliament held on Thursday , 4th December, 2025 and Monday, 16th February, 2026, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I take this opportunity to warmly welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of your homes or your offices. Thank you for your continued support and interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Honourable Members, please, join me first in welcoming Mr. Viliame Leqa. Mr. Leqa is the Chairman of the Yatu Lau Company, the trading arm of the Lau Provincial Council, and we are honoured by your presence and greatly value the leadership and service you continue to provide to your province and to the nation.

Honourable Members, please, also join me in welcoming the British High Commissioner to Fiji, His Excellency Mr. Kanbar Hossein-Bor. Your Excellency, we are grateful for your assistance during our recent visit to London and appreciate your presence with us here today.

Please, honourable Members, also join me in welcoming the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Indonesia, His Excellency Mr. Dupito Simamora. Your Excellency, we are grateful for your continued commitment to strengthening the partnership between our two countries, and we appreciate your presence with us today.

Commonwealth Day Acknowledgement

Honourable Members, as we gather, we also take a moment to commemorate Commonwealth Day, a day that reminds us of the shared values, aspirations and bonds that unite the Commonwealth family. It is an opportunity to reflect on our collective commitment to cooperation, peace and sustainable progress and to reaffirm the principles that guide us towards a more inclusive and resilient future.

Reinstatement of Parliamentary Business

For the information of honourable Members, there are, currently, 78 Annual Reports and two Treaties pending with the Standing Committees and six Committee Reports pending debate. In pursuant to the unanimous decision of the Business Committee at its meeting on Friday, 13th February, 2026, these pending parliamentary business are hereby reinstated to allow the Standing Committees to continue their work from where they left off prior to Prorogation in December 2025.

Back to Office Reports

Honourable Members, please note that the Back to Office Reports for the following visits are available in the Library for Members' perusal and reference:

- (1) the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC), which was held in New Delhi, India, and led by the Deputy Speaker, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua; and
- (2) the recent visit to the UK Parliament by my delegation.

Visit to the UK Parliament (Westminster)

Honourable Members, in the intervening period since His Excellency's Address on the opening of the Fourth Session of the present Parliament, I visited the UK Parliament on the invitation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, UK Branch, with the assistance of UNDP between 23rd and 27th February. I was accompanied by the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade (honourable Sakiasi Ditoka), Assistant Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport (honourable Naisa Tuinaceva) and representing the other side of the House, honourable Premila Kumar and honourable Faiyaz Koya. The Secretary-General to Parliament and two of her senior staff provided the supporting role for the delegation.

The Study Visit Programme was designed to facilitate discussion, peer-to-peer learning on networking on priority areas for both the UK and our Fijian Members of Parliament, especially in effective Committee scrutiny and evidence gathering, public engagement, women's political participation and representation, and the new technologies including AI within Parliament to enhance processes, increase efficiency and solve problems.

In between the daily sessions, the delegation enjoyed a guided tour of the Parliament, the Palace of Westminster, often referred to as the Mother of Parliament, and sat in on a noisy, sometimes vociferous Prime Minister's Question Time, before we exchanged pleasantries of world and Fiji rugby, over a cup of tea with the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Right Honourable Sir Lindsay Hoyle (MP).

One of the highlights of our visit was our meeting over lunch with eight of our Fijian Chevening Scholars who are completing their postgraduate studies at the end of this year in various areas of academic discipline, of which Fiji's development needs of the future, I have no doubt, will

bank on.

I think, all our honourable Members of Parliament, who formed our delegation, came away very impressed and inspired with the workings of the UK Parliament, and it is my hope that their increased knowledge of practice and effective strategies for the functioning of Parliament, they will pass on to you, their colleagues and honourable Member of Parliament of our Parliament. As mentioned earlier, the back-to-office report is now available in the Library to all our honourable Members.

Finally, I wish to place on record my profound gratitude to the High Commissioner of Fiji, to the Court of St James, His Excellency Mr. Jovilisi Vulailai Suveinakama and Mrs. Suveinakama, and through him and his hardworking dedicated staff, and to the Fijian British Army volunteers who spent their leave and leisure time helping coordinate our movements and driving us around, so that we are never late to any of our meetings during the rush hour of the London morning traffic, *vinaka vakalevu vua na Vanua na Gone Turaga na Roko Baleni*.

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

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

That Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address in opening this session of Parliament.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Assistant Ministers, Your Excellencies and ladies and gentlemen in the gallery, *ni sa bula vinaka*. I extend a warm greeting to our traditional chiefs, religious and community leaders at home and abroad, who are following these proceedings through Parliament channel and other electronic platforms. I thank you for your continued interest and engagement in the leadership of our nation.

I also acknowledge the traditional leaders and custodians of the land of Suva, *Nadonumai, vei kemuni na Turaga na Tui* Suva and the chiefs past, present and emerging, and offer our respects and gratitude for their custodianship of this land, since it became the seat of our then colonial and now national capital since 1882.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to commend the motion that is before Parliament now, and that is to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address delivered at the opening of this session of Parliament on Monday, 16th February, 2026. The Address reflects not only the programmes of Government, but also the aspirations of our people, for unity, stability, prosperity, and above all, a mature democracy.

As he has said, and I quote:

“This address reflects the aspirations of our people and the collective responsibility of the Arms of Government to serve the national interest and work towards continued wellbeing for our fellow citizens.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us that unity, long-term planning, and shared responsibility must guide our nation's journey. Unity is not merely the absence of disagreement. It

is about the greater good. It is trust, loyalty, solidarity, and respect. It is the discipline to protect our diversity as strength, choosing common purpose over self-interest, co-operation over individualism, deciding to help the weak even when you have the means to go on your own.

Democracy is not sustained by elections alone. It is sustained by the belief that in freedom, in the integrity of the person, the best of humanity is unleashed. Democracy is sustained by leadership that listens, institutions that are grounded in accountability, laws that uphold dignity, policies that are morally, ethically and legally right. It is reflected in fairness, impartiality in the application of law, for accountability, for nurturing and sustaining trust.

We talk about many things that are encapsulated in our aspirations for quality standard of living, chief of which are welfare, economy and security. These are key areas, and yes, they are very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But we need to look for what is vital to the existence of Fiji's decency as a nation and its principled place in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot and must not lose sight of democracy. We need to cherish and value it. It is in this system of government that our existence as a nation and as a people rests. The rights and dignity of our people, the freedom to choose, to express ourselves and move about are only possible in the environment of democracy.

To the indigenous Fijians and Rotumans, their rights to their status and resources, the way they want to evolve their traditional systems, structures and cultures are possible within that democracy. To every community and person, democracy upholds their rights and upholds their integrity. Democracy thrives where governance is accountable. That is the standard we set for ourselves, a standard we must uphold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision articulated by His Excellency is firmly embedded in our National Development Plan 2025 – 2029, aligned to Vision 2050, and guided by the theme: "Empowering the People of Fiji through Unity."

The Plan provides a clear national roadmap shaped through consultations across all divisions including Rotuma. It recognises the realities we face – climate vulnerability, global economic uncertainty (we are feeling that right now) and domestic pressures. Our responses require unity of purpose.

The Plan is anchored on three strategic pillars:

- (1) Economic Resilience – to drive sustainable growth, productivity, job creation and shock-readiness.
- (2) People Empowerment – to ensure developments translates into better services, stronger human capital, safer communities and expanded opportunity.
- (3) Good Governance – to uphold transparency, integrity, accountability and public trust.

Government is equally mindful that sustaining our national development ambitions a step-change in our economic performance. While Fiji has maintained a steady growth trajectory, our strategic objective is mobilising Fiji to move from a low-income nation to a high-income nation status, by lifting the national growth target to 6 percent annual growth by 2050, from the 3.4 percent we are at.

Achieving this higher growth pathway will provide a renewed impetus to our development plans, expand employment opportunities and strengthen the fiscal space needed to invest in infrastructure, social services and climate resilience. To realise this ambition, Government will

pursue a coordinated strategy focussed on productivity-led growth, targeted investment in key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and the digital economy, improved ease of doing business and stronger public-private partnerships.

Equally important will be investments in human capital, innovation and modern infrastructure that enable our people and enterprises to compete in an increasingly dynamic global economy. Through disciplined policy implementation and whole of Government coordination, we are confident that Fiji can accelerate growth in a way that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, delivering tangible benefits to all our citizens. These targets and objectives were discussed very seriously with the three World Bank Group Regional Vice Presidents who visited us last week.

It is not simply a development framework. It is also the democratic framework for progress because sustainable development requires public confidence, institutional credibility and collective efforts. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are moving in the right direction, but we need to do more. All of our work from here forward is towards that goal. Together we can.

Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge the recent visit by the United States Deputy Secretary of State, which marked an important milestone in the strengthening of partnership between Fiji and the United States. The visit reaffirmed our shared commitment to advancing cooperation in economic development, democratic governance and regional stability, while providing an opportunity for both Governments to deepen dialogue on practical initiatives that deliver tangible outcomes for our people and for the wider Pacific region.

Fiji acknowledges with appreciation the support of the United States through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which presents a significant opportunity to strengthen Fiji-United States relations in a very real and tangible way. The Government has earmarked the MCC grant for transformational investments and mega projects aimed at strengthening Fiji's economic structure over the long term, including infrastructure and strategic development priorities that will enhance productivity, resilience and inclusive growth. During the Deputy Secretary's visit, both Governments also signed a Memorandum of Understanding to advance this initiative and establish a clear framework for cooperation in implementing the programme.

In the same vein, in line with the recommendations from the World Bank that I mentioned before, the Government is progressing reforms to improve the ease of doing business in Fiji to boost Foreign Direct Investment and support private sector growth. These efforts, together with strengthened international partnership and targeted development investments, will help advance our national ambition to accelerate economic growth, strengthen resilience and create greater opportunities for all Fijians as we pursue a higher and more sustainable growth trajectory.

The agencies involved in the business approval process will, as a matter of priority and urgency, streamline this process to remove bottlenecks and duplication, and/or put in place necessary components of the system to facilitate seamless and efficient clearance of business registration and startups.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the centre of this national reform and democratic renewal agenda stands the Office of the Prime Minister. The Office is the strategic nerve centre of Government - responsible for strengthening policy development, ensuring coherence across ministries and aligning national implementation with the priorities articulated in the National Development Plan and Vision 2050.

The Office plays a central role in improving the quality of public policy through policy analysis, regulatory review, performance monitoring, and whole-of-government coordination mechanisms. It ensures that government decisions are evidence-based, fiscally responsible and

socially inclusive, and developmentally sustainable.

The Office provides cross-sectoral oversight of national reforms, integrates Cabinet processes, monitors strategic projects, and ensures that ministries work in synergy. In a modern democracy, fragmentation weakens governance - coordination is everything.

The Office also carries a unifying national responsibility to promote inclusive and sustainable development as a catalyst for growth, unity, and better governance across our multi-ethnic society. Fiji's strength lies in its diversity – our *iTaukei* and Rotuman communities, including our Melanesian kinship ties, our *Vasu iTaukei* and the Banaban communities of Rabi and Kioa, Indo-Fijians, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, and everyone, Fijians and visitors that call Fiji home. Good governance in Fiji must be responsive to this rich composition. It must ensure that development is equitable, culturally respectful, and nationally unifying.

Through strengthened policy integration and inclusive planning frameworks, the Office of the Prime Minister will continue to advance governance systems that recognize identity, protect rights, and promote shared prosperity - ensuring the communities feel valued.

Inclusive sustainable development is not only a social objective; it is an economic strategy. Stability, investor confidence, and long-term growth are built upon unity, fairness, and public trust. These are important also in view of our place in the region. We have a responsibility to our Pacific family. Our stewardship role is critical for regional unity and cohesion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all Government policies and programmes will be anchored on five core principles:

- (1) Inclusion - ensuring that no community is left behind;
- (2) Diversity - recognising Fiji's multicultural identity as a national strength;
- (3) Gender Mainstreaming - embedding equity and opportunity across all sectors;
- (4) Good Governance - transparency, accountability and rule of law; and
- (5) Improved Service Delivery - measurable impact in the lives of our people.

These are operational standards that will guide planning, budgeting, implementation and evaluation across ministries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a democracy is only as effective as the institutions that serve it. That is why the reform of the Civil Service is central to Government's agenda. As previously announced, the Civil Service is undergoing a comprehensive Functional Review. This review assesses:

- (a) capability across people, processes and systems;
- (b) the rationalisation of mandates and structures; and
- (c) efficiency, coordination and performance gaps.

The objective is clear - to build a professional, agile and future-ready public service. This structural transformation is designed to strengthen governance and scale up performance. The review is undertaken through a phased approach, involving the:

- (1) Office of the Prime Minister;
- (2) Ministry of Finance;
- (3) Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics;
- (4) Ministry of Civil Service; and
- (5) Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

The inclusion of Rural Development reflects Government's intention to introduce a modern rural development system responsive to communities, economically enabling, that adapts to changing climate and market realities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, accountability is the backbone of good governance. By 30th September, 2026, all Permanent Secretaries will be subject to stringent performance evaluation. Each Permanent Secretary will sign a Performance Agreement.

Evaluation will ensure alignment with national priorities, measurable outcomes, transparent review processes, and improved service delivery. This framework will ensure:

- alignment with national priorities;
- clear performance expectations;
- measurable outcomes; and
- transparent review processes.

This is about raising standards and ensuring that public resources translate into tangible results for the citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's greatest assets are our people. With a youthful labour force comprising nearly 70 percent young Fijians, we hold enormous demographic potential. Yet youth unemployment, outward migration of skilled workers and productivity challenges require decisive action. Government has therefore commenced formulation of a 5-Year National Strategic Human Resource Plan. This forward-looking framework will align human capital development with national priorities and labour market realities.

It will emphasise workforce planning, data-driven forecasting, collaboration between Government, industry and training institutions and measurable performance indicators. It will be inclusive, gender-responsive, climate-aware, and grounded in good governance principles. Human capital development is the most strategic investment in our democracy and long-term prosperity. A skilled, adaptable and future-ready workforce strengthens economic competitiveness, social cohesion and national resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to build a modern public service, we must also modernize the way we work. By the end of this year, flexible working hours will be formally introduced across the Civil Service, improving productivity and work-life balance; and Strategic Workforce Plans will be developed for the Civil Service as a whole. These Workforce Plans will ensure the right skills are in place to meet national priorities – today and in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, technology is reshaping governance globally. His Excellency's reference to Artificial Intelligence (AI) reflects the seriousness of this transformation. We must exercise caution – but we must also be prepared to harness innovation responsibly. By September of this year, the Fiji Learning Institute for Public Service (FLIPS) will introduce AI-focused training programmed to enhance data driven decision-making, efficiency and service delivery. AI will support – not replace – AI will support human judgement and ethical leadership. A modern democracy must be digitally capable, while firmly grounded in constitutional values.

The Government is translating policy into action. The Nadi Flood Alleviation Project represents our most significant climate adaptation investment. Through river upgrades, drainage systems and integrated watershed management, we are protecting homes, businesses and critical infrastructure. This is a shift from reactive disaster response to proactive resilience-building – safeguarding national confidence and economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic resilience and democratic governance are mutually reinforcing. Government will continue fiscal prudence, strengthen revenue integrity and ensure value for money. Growth must be inclusive across sugar reform, agriculture, fisheries, tourism diversification, manufacturing, digital transformation and governance of public enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although I have assumed the Cabinet role of Minister responsible for Youth and Sports, I will allow honourable Saukuru and honourable Bia to address this august House on matters dear to them, which they have been working diligently for in the past three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is much work ahead, but the Government is moving forward and is in the right direction - strategically, deliberately and guided by principles. We are uplifting democracy not only through laws, but through systems, capable institutions, accountable leadership, empowered citizens, and inclusive development.

We are strengthening governance, not only through oversight, but through performance. We are strengthening unity, not only through words, but through inclusive policy choices that protect diversity, promote fairness and expand opportunities.

As we look to the years ahead, let us recommit ourselves to service above self, unity above division, nation above politics and democracy above expediency.

On behalf of the Government, I thank His Excellency the President for his Address, and all the honourable Members for having participated in the policies and debate of these policies over the last three years. May we all have an enjoyable week of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I call upon our next speaker, I would like to take a moment to remind everyone of the importance of maintaining decorum and order in this esteemed Parliament, pursuant to Standing Orders 58 and 70.

Our shared responsibility is to maintain the dignity and integrity of our Parliamentary proceedings. I encourage all honourable Members to engage in respectful and constructive debate in full adherence to the rules and protocols that guide our deliberations. I kindly remind honourable Members to refrain from any disruptive behaviour, including unsolicited interjections, and to allow fellow honourable Members the courtesy of speaking without interruption. It is essential that we conduct ourselves with the highest standards of professionalism and respect.

While I fully appreciate that a measure of Parliamentary banter can sometimes keep the atmosphere lively – as no doubt the honourable Member's recent visit to the UK Parliament witnessed – it is important that we strike an appropriate balance between humour and decorum. Our goal is to ensure that proceedings remain orderly, dignified and focus on the issues before us. By working together in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation, we can ensure that our debates are productive and that our decisions reflect the best interests of the people we serve.

With regards to speaking times, please, note that individual contributions are limited to 20 minutes pursuant to Standing Order 68. The first bell will sound at 18 minutes, followed by the final bell at 20 minutes.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament, Excellencies and members of the public in the gallery today and those tuning in virtually, ladies and gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all.

I am honoured to stand again in this august House today to deliver my response to His Excellency's most gracious Address delivered on 16th February, 2026, on the occasion of the opening of the 2026 Session of Parliament of our beloved Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Leader of the Opposition, I intend to frame my response around what our country truly needs at this critical juncture in its history and the direction we must take to secure a stronger future for the next generation. We are now in the fourth and final session of this parliamentary term.

His Excellency's Address to the Fijian people was both encouraging and deeply thought-provoking, and it rightly invites us to reflect on where we stand as a nation and where we must go from here. These are words of wisdom, which I would like to ponder on for a bit. Whilst I may not have the historical lens to go as far back as Cession, I would like to reflect on a number of issues from our recent past that are cutting deep in the everyday life of our citizens.

His Excellency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rightly raised concerns about the level of poverty in Fiji. As of 2025, our poverty rate hovered around 24 percent. It is estimated that a little over 36 percent of the rural population lives in poverty, with a total of over 28 percent of our children living in multi-dimensional poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst Government is addressing poverty through social protection programmes, measures must be taken to reduce these rates through empowerment strategies and sustained economic growth. This is case of "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." The surge in the prices of goods, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has triggered a severe cost of living crisis which is disproportionately affecting many households, especially those in the low-income brackets. Wages have not kept pace with the rising costs of living, leading to increased financial pressure, debt and reduced purchasing power for many families in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prices of basic necessities including food, utilities and transportation, among other things, have increased sharply in the last few years. Many households are therefore struggling as income levels have not risen in line with the cost of goods creating substantial hardships for families, with reports of some skipping meals, and living in overcrowded spaces just to get by.

While some relief measures have been implemented by Government, most argue that they are insufficient and are calling for more targeted measures to bring further relief to our communities and to protect our most vulnerable population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the geo-political tensions will have a significant and widespread impact on the costs of living by acting as a major source of global inflation. Current development in the Middle East will raise the cost of living through supply-chain shocks which drive commodity prices upwards. Australia, as of last Friday, are already feeling a sharp surge in the fuel prices, with anticipation that commodity prices will increase in the near future, if the conflict in the Middle East persists. We should be expecting its ripple effects shortly. The question I wish to raise is, how prepared are we, as a government, and is there consideration for the setting up of a special committee to look into this issue?

On the job front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the market is becoming unpredictable. Technological change and artificial intelligence is reshaping labour market, as rightfully highlighted by His Excellency in his Address. Globally, technology is rendering jobs obsolete, and young people are finding it tough to secure good-paying jobs. In addition, more employers prefer to offer short-term contracts rather than permanent positions.

With our low levels of wages, it is not a wonder that our young men and women are seeking employment opportunities elsewhere, a trend that is expected to remain and will continue to deplete our already small workforce now and into the near future. We need now to look at innovative measures to tackle this issue. Of course, the answer is in creating jobs, good paying jobs, as rightfully highlighted by His Excellency. The challenge we have is, “how do we get there”? We will all agree, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the drug finds on our shores lately, and the apparent abuse of drugs within our communities, are serious causes for concern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, drug abuse is a critical global issue with far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the individual dealer and the user, deeply impacting families, communities and national economies. Dependence on drugs leads to breakdown of societal fabrics, increased crime rates and causes immense financial burdens on healthcare and law enforcement apparatus. Worse still, drug use erodes trust and emotional bonds often leading to the breakdown of family units.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of HIV/AIDS in Fiji as an offshoot of the prevalence of drug use affecting many of our youths should be a matter of national concern. The spread of HIV/AIDS in Fiji, which according to some sources is the fastest growing in the world today, is something we should not be proud of. It is an epidemic. In 2024 alone, a total of 1,583 new cases of HIV/AIDS were reported. This was over three times higher than 2023. In just the first half of 2025, a total of 1,226 new cases were reported. The surge is largely driven by unsafe needle sharing drug practices, including blue-toothing.

On a related matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while HIV/AIDS is growing, Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) remain the leading cause of death in Fiji, responsible for approximately 80 percent of deaths in our country. A survey carried out in 2025 revealed that 98.5 percent of adults in Fiji have at least one major NCD risk such as high blood pressure, obesity, unhealthy diets, tobacco use, et cetera. For far too long, this issue has been neglected. It is time that this issue is given the required attention so that its impact on our population can be contained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot just sit back and see the future of our youth being destroyed by drugs and HIV/AIDS, and our population supposedly in the productive stage of life being taken away by NCD. Government offers intervention measures with the support of our international partners. A lot of the intervention programmes in place are remedial in nature. We need to think hard about preventative measures that seeks to nip the matter in the bud.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the manner with which the late Police Constable Peniasi Racagi (my condolences to his family) was murdered, demonstrated an unprecedented level of boldness by criminal elements within our communities. Growing up, the police uniform and those worn by other disciplined forces was an emblem of authority. The alleged attack of the late Police Constable in uniform and while in active duty, displayed arrogance and the level of disrespect for the law and authority that should not be tolerated. We will only hope that this is not an indication of what our future holds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer is not in arming our security forces, nor is it in increasing their numbers. The answer may lie in reshaping and rebuilding our communities to value respect, and the rule of law, beginning with our school systems and our social groupings. I am reflecting on these issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because these are issues that matter most to people, and which must be addressed first and foremost if we are to aspire for a future that brings peace, hope and prosperity to the nation, and our people.

Secondly, and just as important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is our responsibility as Members of the Opposition and for me personally, as the Leader of the Opposition, I am raising these issues in line

with our critical and inquisitorial role to hold the Government accountable. With so much happening domestically and internationally, we the Opposition will primarily focus on the functions that Parliament demands of us - checking the Government's policies and actions. We will hear more from the Members on this side as we continue with the deliberations.

This is not about political mileage nor is it about point scoring. We will raise issues and ask questions that need to be asked. It would have helped if the Opposition were accorded special briefings on policies and actions taken on matters that affect our people, as those I have raised above. Better still, as I had raised at the same occasion last year, the setting up of a Parliamentary Select Committee to monitor the performance of Government on critical matters, especially those raised by His Excellency should be the way to go.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be Fijians and political commentators who will think that by asking questions, the Opposition is trying to embarrass the Government. In fact, that is exactly the way it should be. The Opposition will be failing in its duty if it does not do so. The Opposition keeping government on its toes is a design feature of our parliamentary system, which is based on the Westminster system upon which our parliamentary arrangements are based. Embracing this feature is a hallmark of the Opposition to ensure that alternative proposals and the voice of the minority is raised to improve Government policies and strategies.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reflect on a number of other key issues raised by His Excellency in his Address. As a nation, according to His Excellency, we are challenged to review not only how far we have come, but also how we ensure that development is fair, inclusive and sustainable for all our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a statement that called for reflection by all our leaders, including all honourable Members of this august House. For the sake of fairness, we are all reminded that we are here in this august House as servants of the people of Fiji, not only your community, not your province and nor your constituency.

Mr. Speaker, we must further remind ourselves that the public offices we hold is not an extension of personal identity or political loyalty - it is a solemn trust. When entrusted with responsibility, we must rise above factional considerations and act in the broader interest of the nation.

Development projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must, therefore, be initiated by the people and driven by demand, and must follow a vigorous scrutinisation process to ensure that the intended beneficiaries gain fully from such projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2009, the Government had developed an Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF) that was intended to enhance the coordination and integration of rural development efforts across Fiji. Fairness and equity were aspirations of the Framework. Unfortunately, adherence to the Framework was negatively impacted by policy and administrative changes within Government, which watered down its impact.

I am particularly happy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Government, through the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, has now initiated a review of that Framework to become a key Government policy with key objectives to promote sustainable growth and resilience in rural and maritime communities, while addressing the unique needs and priorities of rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with proper implementation and monitoring, this new instrument should be the catalyst that brings fairness in distribution and sustainability to our development programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the review of the Constitution, His Excellency has stated that our Constitution is a living document which must evolve with time. No Constitution can remain static in a changing society. It must, from time to time, respond to evolving realities, national aspirations and contemporary challenges. That is a principle recognised in constitutional democracies across the Commonwealth and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that regard, it must be clear that any amendment to the Constitution must strictly comply with the expressed requirements of the law. The Constitution itself prescribes the manner in which it may be altered. Those procedural safeguards are not obstacles. They are protections specifically designed to preserve constitutional supremacy and prevent arbitrary change.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is rather ironic that when things are not going right with Government, there is a tendency to lay the blame on the Constitution. We had the 1970 Constitution, yet with the 1987 debacle. The 1997 Constitution ticked all the boxes, yet we had the events of 2000 and 2006, respectively.

The 2013 Constitution was engineered to end the *coup* culture in Fiji, but there are now issues emerging against it. So, where is the problem? Is it the substance of the Constitution? Is it the people? Is it politics? Is it leadership? We need to get to the root of this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also correctly reminded us that we must support the development of our youth. That statement carries with it a profound responsibility.

As parliamentarians, our decisions must be forward-looking and youth conscious. We must ensure that the laws we enact and the policies we pursue create meaningful opportunities for young people to learn, to innovate, to work and to flourish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the character of our nation will ultimately be defined by how we prepare our young people for leadership and responsible citizenship. Whilst we may be able to devise the best policies for our youth, we must also give serious thought to matters that negate their development.

We had raised the issue of illegal drugs, but so little has been discussed about the impact of socially accepted drugs, yaqona in particular, and their effect on our youth and our population in general.

Just as with illegal drugs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a serious effort should be made to control the abuse of, and overconsumption of yaqona. It is a silent killer within our communities and a major contributor to low productivity and increased poverty levels in society. As with illegal drugs, this requires a whole-of-nation approach including the Government, the *Lotu*, the religious organisations and the *Vanua*, if this issue is to be contained.

Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also draws its strength from its diversity as a multicultural nation, but we have learnt from our past that diversity alone does not result in peaceful coexistence - fairness, equity and mutual understanding do. While many continue to struggle with our identity as Fijians, the importance of living harmoniously in a multicultural and multi-religious society is not lost on many. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point of contention is whether one's membership of a racial or religious grouping is more important than being a Fijian or vice versa.

I feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, true harmonious coexistence will become a reality when we all consider being Fijian as something much larger than one's cultural or religious rootedness, transcending race and other forms of identification. This is where our real strength lies, and one that

will cultivate a sense of patriotism and a sense of belonging. This is where accelerated growth and progress, as a nation, will stem from.

It is encouraging Mr. Speaker, Sir, that His Excellency has now brought to the fore the concept of progress that a long time has been allowed to remain dormant, that is, effective leadership for growth is strongest when traditional authority and Government operate in partnership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inclusion of traditional leaders in national development, being closest to the people, can act as conduits for Government programmes, ensuring that development initiatives are culturally sensitive, relevant and sustainable. Their involvement can be crucial in conflict resolution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because traditional leadership is based on customary, ancestral and religious authority, it carries a form of legitimacy that modern Governments lack. This synergy will help increase compliance with laws and policies relating to cultural and historical preservation. The Government must take heed of this concept.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is anticipated that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will play a vital role in promoting understanding, healing and unity in Fiji. We should be clear, Sir, that it was not only those who participated in our political upheavals were impacted by their ramifications - the whole of Fiji was. It is critical, therefore, that the outcome of the deliberations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is communicated to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had raised this before and I will raise it again, that for Fiji to really benefit from this process of reconciliation, Government must consider establishing a comprehensive, ongoing and well-resourced civic education system at different levels of the community to raise awareness on democracy and governance, multi-culturalism, peace building and law and order, among other things, to drive home the outcomes of the reconciliation process. This must be mainstreamed to become a normal part of our education system and our community awareness programmes.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would have hoped that this being the last of our four year Parliamentary session, we would utilise this session to take stock of what we have achieved as a "Parliament", to determine what was good (*e vinaka*) and what was useful (*e yaga*), and to prepare this House for better deliberations and outcomes in the next four-year period of Parliament.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and Members of the House for your attention, and may God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I suspend this morning's proceedings, I am informed that the 10,000 Toes Campaign Team, a voluntary public health NGO, is here and is located at Level 2, today and tomorrow to conduct health screenings for all our honourable Members. They will, as I have said, be in Parliament today and tomorrow from 8.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., and I encourage all honourable Members to visit the team at Level 2.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, viewers tuning in live on Parliament's *Facebook* page, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa yadra vinaka*. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we gather, *na Vanua Vakaturaga o Nadonumai vua na Turaga na Tui Suva*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has been running for three years and two months now. I had served for 18 months as a Member of Parliament and Assistant Minister, and now serving for one year, eight months as a Cabinet Minister. As I look back, I can testify to God's faithfulness, and I am reminded time and time again of His word in Proverbs 19.21 - that we may have many plans in our hearts, but it is His purpose that always prevails. For that, I acknowledge God's wisdom, guidance and His love that has never forsaken nor left me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to extend greetings to the people of Ra. *Ni sa yadra vinaka lavo kai, 'ako kai, lovava kai. Au vayadra i yani ena nomuni vei delaniyavu va`uraga, ena loma ni `ikina cokova`a o Saivou, Rakiraki, Nalawa kei Nakoro`ubu*.

I would like to thank my family and extended family for their endless support and prayerful hearts. To my husband and my beautiful children, thank you for journeying with me and for bearing with me, what an experience it has been for us. I would also like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his continued foresight, his wisdom and his vision for a united Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise this morning to respond to the visionary Address delivered by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, and to reaffirm this Government's steadfast commitment to advancing Fiji's fisheries and forestry sectors within the broader national development framework of a whole-of-government approach. His Excellency, the President's emphasis on policy coherence, institutional coordination and integrated service delivery, reflects a governance model that recognises that no sector operates in isolation.

The sustainable management of our oceans, forests, and natural capital requires precisely this integrated architecture, where environment, economy, land, climate resilience, trade and social inclusion are aligned under a unified national agenda. In this regard, the ministries responsible for fisheries and forestry are not stand-alone actors. We are central pillars in delivering food security, export earnings, climate mitigation, rural livelihoods and biodiversity conservation for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fisheries sector is committed to aligning its efforts with a vision articulated by His Excellency, the President, to root in unity responsible governance, sustainable resource management and inclusive economic transformation. Fiji's ocean resources are not merely economic assets. They are the foundations of our food security, rural livelihoods, cultural identity and national development and aspirations. As a large ocean State, we carry both - privilege and responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President underscored the importance of adopting a whole-of-government approach to sustainable development.

The Ministry of Fisheries' roles and responsibilities support and complement the work of other line Government agencies on achieving sustainable economic growth, ensuring environmental sustainability, eliminating poverty, promoting inclusivity, and ensuring the social and cultural wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency reaffirms Fiji's commitment to regional leadership and international advocacy for the long-term sustainability of our fisheries resources.

The Ministry of Fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, remains committed to enhancing the Fisheries legislative framework. Over the past two years, the Ministry has achieved significance milestone, including the enactment of the Aquaculture Act 2024, an Act that regulates and promotes sustainable aquaculture practices, ensures environmental protection, supports livelihood and food security, and contributes to economic growth.

The Fisheries Amendment Act 2025 looks at modernising the enforcement and compliance framework of the Fisheries Act by introducing a fixed penalty notice as a first-time deterrent against non-compliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our objective this year is clear - to remain steadfast in our commitment to completing the review and enactment of the Inshore Fisheries Management Bill, a Bill that modernises the enforcement and updates regulations to reflect the modern fishing practices and technology, and the review of the Offshore Fisheries Management Act 2012 and its subsequent regulations of 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of the escalating incidents of illicit activities within our Exclusive Economic Zone and inshore areas, the Ministry will heighten its monitoring and control surveillance to counter illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices. A significant milestone was achieved in April 2025, with the launch of the National Fisheries Surveillance and Operations Centre at the Offshore Fisheries Station in Walu Bay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of our development partners, our primary focus is to increase the value retention of tuna caught in our waters to be processed locally, and to create employment opportunities and a stronger economy. The successful convening of the 9th Pacific Tuna Forum in Nadi in October last year, reaffirmed Fiji's commitment to sustainable fisheries and ocean management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the inshore area, efforts are ongoing to support our Licensed Fishers access to ice supplies across our 24 stations. With the two new stations scheduled for establishment this year, one in Cawaro, Udu Point in Macuata and Koro in Lomaiviti, alongside preparatory work in Matakunea in Cakaudrove.

The Ministry continues to support the Fishers Cooperatives through the provision of start-up capital, including boats and engines, as well as solar-powered freezers and full technical training on fishing diversification to explore untapped fisheries resources such as deported snappers, diamond squid and deported crab.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Aquaculture Development Plan guides our commitment to transforming Fiji's Aquaculture Sector into a profitable, sustainable and environmentally friendly activity. Work is currently underway focussing on giant clams, giant tiger prawns, white legged shrimp, giant freshwater prawns and tilapia, which offer opportunities to grow at an industrial level, given the potential for rapid developments.

Our aim, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to reduce reliance on imports and scale the domestic market to meet the local demand. We are moving beyond raw exports, improving feed formulation, investing in value-added industries and building feasibility systems that guarantee ethical production and consumer trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, efforts focused not only on production, but also on improving our hatchery and our aquaculture facilities. The Makogai Mariculture Research Centre, in Lomaiviti, is undergoing rehabilitation and functional improvements with support from the Korean Government, and completion is targeted for 2028.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries' core role is to ensure the sustainable management of fish stocks and associated marine ecosystems within our waters. Science-based decisions guide the approach to Fisheries Resources Management, and this is evident in the adoption of the South Pacific Albacore Management Procedure at the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission meeting in December 2025 in Manila, Philippines - a monumental achievement for Fiji as this protects our domestic long line industries and secures a long term viability of Fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is progressing Fiji's commitment to conserve and sustainably manage 30 percent of our marine areas by 2030. Our approach strikes a balance grounded in both, scientific rigour and practical considerations, with a "30x 30 commitment" serving to reinforce and strengthen established fisheries management practices.

The gazetting of the Tavarua Island Marine Reserve last year promotes marine biodiversity, conservation and marine ecotourism, thereby contributing to our 30 x 30 commitment. The focus this year is on finalising and launching key species management plans to guide our licensed fishers, communities, managers, enforcement officers and policymakers in the conservation and management of specific key species. Our commitment embodies intergenerational stewardship, ensuring that future generations inherit healthy, productive and resilient oceans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural and maritime communities are integral to national development. With coastal fisheries supporting thousands of households across Fiji, women play a critical role in post-harvest processing and market supply chains. Our youth are increasingly entering aquaculture and value-added enterprises.

The Ministry is prioritising community-based resource management, expansion of aquaculture initiatives, support for women-led enterprises and skills development for our young Fijians. Inclusion is not a slogan; it is a development imperative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change remains the defining challenge of our time. Rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification and extreme weather events directly impact fish stocks and coastal ecosystems. The Fisheries Sector is committed to strengthening adaptation efforts, supporting ecosystem restoration and working with development partners to access climate finance that protects our communities and marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Forestry Sector, forestry remains fundamental to ecological integrity, rural homes and climate commitments. Approximately 60 percent of Fiji's land area remains under forest cover. Our forest service carbon sinks, biodiversity reservoirs, watershed protectors and economic assets.

The sector contributes substantially to export revenue of over \$80 million annually through timber, chips, value-added wood products and non-timber forest products, while supporting land-owning units across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, his Excellency spoke of sustainable development grounded in good governance and inclusivity. The Forest Strategy directly operationalises these principles through the sustainable management of environmental stewardship. This is where the Ministry priorities are responsible for harvesting systems, reforestation and forest landscape restoration, biodiversity

conservation and watershed protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, landscape restoration initiatives align with national mitigation and adaptation goals, contributing to emission reduction commitments while enhancing ecosystem resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to promote long rotation plantation forestry and enforce compliance standards to prevent overharvesting and land degradation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a core tenet of forestry governance is that landowners remain central beneficiaries of sectoral progress. Customary land ownership structures are respected and strengthened through transparent royalty mechanisms, lease stumpage payments, improved contract governance and technical extension services. This ensures that forestry development translates into tangible improvements in livelihoods while safeguarding traditional land rights. His Excellency's emphasis on inclusive growth finds practical expression in this landowner-first policy framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major milestone in strengthening the governance framework of the Forestry Sector was the passing of the Forestry Act 2025, enacted by Parliament on 1st December, 2025. This landmark legislation modernises the legal architecture governing forest management in Fiji and replaces outdated regulatory provisions with a framework that reflects contemporary environmental, commercial and compliance standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Forestry Act 2025 delivers several key advancements:

- (a) It strengthens compliance and enforcement mechanisms, including clearer monitoring powers and improved penalties to deter illegal harvesting and non-compliance.
- (b) It streamlines and allows for transparent licensing procedures, clarifying operational requirements for harvesting, transport, processing and export.
- (c) It enhances sustainability safeguards, embedding responsible forest management, replanting obligations and biodiversity protection into statutory requirements.
- (d) It improves governance and accountability structures, reinforcing oversight and public confidence in concession allocation processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these reforms provide regulatory certainty for investors while safeguarding landowner rights and environmental integrity. The objective is not deregulation, but smarter and more effective regulation, ensuring that economic growth and environmental stewardship move in parallel.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mahogany Bill 2025 has been tabled for its first reading in Parliament. This Bill seeks to strengthen the governance, transparency and long-term commercial viability of Fiji's mahogany industry - one of the country's most significant forest assets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the anticipated benefits of the Mahogany Bill 2025 include -

- greater clarity in institutional roles and responsibilities;
- strengthened landowner participation and benefit-sharing mechanisms;
- improved corporate governance standards;
- enhanced investor confidence through clear operational and reporting frameworks; and
- better alignment of mahogany resource management with sustainable development priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the Forestry Act 2025 and the proposed Mahogany Bill 2025 signal the Government's commitment to building a modern, transparent and investor-ready forestry sector,

one that balances profitability with sustainability and ensures that landowners remain central beneficiaries of sectoral growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to advance value addition, market expansion and non-timber forest product development. Some of these advancements include downstream processing and secondary manufacturing, engineered wood product development and market diversification.

Value addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthens domestic supply chains, generates higher-skilled employment, increases foreign exchange earnings and retains a greater share of resource value within Fiji. This direction, Sir, is fully aligned with the national industrialisation agenda referenced in His Excellency's Address, which calls for economic transformation through innovation, processing and enterprise development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in parallel with timber value addition, the Ministry is advancing the development of non-timber forest products as an important diversification strategy. This includes forest-based products such as medicinal plants, essential oils, resins, honey, handicraft materials, bamboo and other natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, non-timber forest products represent a significant opportunity to broaden income streams for rural and maritime communities, increase participation of women and youth in forest-based enterprises, promote sustainable forest use without large-scale harvesting, and strengthen community resilience and livelihood diversification.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has progressed to work on the National Timber Forest Product Strategic Framework to formalise value chains, improve quality standards, enhance market access and provide technical training to producers. By integrating the non-timber forest products into national forestry planning, we are moving toward a more holistic forest economy, one that recognises forests as a multidimensional ecosystem capable of generating inclusive and sustainable economic returns. This integrated approach ensures that forestry development supports economic growth, environmental conservation and community empowerment simultaneously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in direct response to His Excellency the President's call for equitable opportunity, the Forestry Sector is expanding participation among women and youth through a number of key initiatives, including nursery development programmes, replanting initiatives, community-based cottage industries, and technical training for women and youth. Our data shows that technical training for women and youth has increased significantly over the years, particularly in nursery establishment and management, as well as in chainsaw and portable sawmill operators.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of seedling suppliers from community nurseries led by women has also grown steadily. Over the past three years, women-led nurseries have accounted for an average of 46 percent of total seedling suppliers.

Similarly, within our replanting initiatives, an average of 37 percent of beneficiaries receiving community planting incentives over the past three years were women. These initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not only expand opportunities for women and youth but also diversify income streams in rural communities and strengthen intergenerational sustainability in the Forestry Sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today marks the commencement of the 2026 National Women in Agriculture Symposium, in which the forestry and fisheries sectors are proud participants. The Symposium brings together women entrepreneurs from across agriculture, forestry and fisheries to recognise their achievements, share ideas, build networks and connect with potential investors. This

initiative reflects our continued commitment to empowering women and recognising their vital contributions to the growth and sustainability of Fiji's primary industries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge two important occasions that we recently observed. Firstly, on 8th March, the world commemorated International Women's Day – a day dedicated to recognise the invaluable contributions of women in our families, communities and across all sectors in our nation. I extend my sincere appreciation and warmest wishes to all the women of Fiji for their resilience, leadership and the many roles they play in shaping the future of our country. From our mothers and daughters to our professionals, farmers, entrepreneurs and community leaders, your dedication continues to inspire progress and strengthen our society.

Secondly, as we marked Father's Day yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Methodist Church calendar, I also would like to extend heartfelt wishes to all fathers and father figures throughout Fiji. Fathers play a critical role in guiding, supporting and nurturing our families and communities. Your commitments, sacrifices and leadership within the home and society contribute greatly to the wellbeing and development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recognition of these two occasions reminds us of the importance of strong families, mutual respect and shared responsibility in building a more inclusive and prosperous Fiji. To all women and fathers of our beloved nation, I convey my sincere gratitude and best wishes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address was a call for unity, reform and responsible stewardship. The Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Forestry stand ready to contribute decisively to that national agenda through strong governance, inclusive growth, sustainable management and collaborative development. We remain committed to protecting our marine and forest resources, while transforming them into drivers of resilient and equitable economic growth for all Fijians. *Vinaka vakalevu* and may God bless us all.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the opening of this session of Parliament. The speech we heard was hopeful. He spoke about unity, inclusion, integrity, good governance, decent work, poverty reduction, democracy and respect for the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are values every Fijian believes in. These are the things our people want to see reflected in their daily lives, but the problem is the widening gap between these fine words and the reality on the ground.

Our people hear the Government talk about inclusive growth, yet they struggle every day with the rising cost of living. They hear talk of integrity and good governance, yet what they see are scandals, secrecy and double standards. And they hear talk of respect for the rule of law, yet time and again they see that laws bent, tested and weakened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President outlined the Government's priorities and the legislative programme that this Parliament is expected to deliver. In other words, it sets benchmarks against which the performance of the Government must be judged. However, what we are witnessing today is a clear disconnect between what is announced in this House and what is actually delivered. Let me give some very simple examples.

In the 2023 Address, His Excellency the President announced that the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Bill and Cooperatives Bill would be brought forward to strengthen small businesses and community enterprises. Three years later, those Bills are nowhere to be seen.

His Excellency the President also spoke about electing advisory councillors – not appointing, but electing advisory councillors to strengthen local representation, that too has not happened.

Last year, we were told that the Code of Conduct Bill 2025 and the Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill 2025 would be progressed. They were even referred to the Standing Committee. People believed that finally, we were going to see real progress in accountability, but what happened? Both Bills were sent back to the Office of the Solicitor-General for amendments and since then, they have simply disappeared. So, the question must be asked, why? What is in these Bills that makes this Government so uncomfortable? Is it because a proper Code of Conduct would expose conflicts of interest? Is it because an Accountability and Transparency Commission would finally impose real consequences for abuse of office, or is it because some honourable Members sitting across the aisle may suddenly discover that they are no longer qualified to sit in this very Parliament if those laws come into force?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when a government repeatedly fails to deliver the very legislative agenda announced by His Excellency, the President, then how can it be trusted to deliver anything else? What we are increasingly seeing is a Government that is not listening, not to the people, not even to the commitments it makes through His Excellency, the President's Speech.

The duty of Parliament is not to praise promises. Our duty is to scrutinise performance, to question failures, and to hold the Government accountable for what it says it will do. When we measure this Government's performance against the expectations set out in His Excellency, the President's Address, a very disturbing gap is seen. The solution is actually very simple. When the Government prepares His Excellency, the President's Speech, it should include commitments that it can deliver. Do not present a wish list to the nation.

His Excellency the President, reminded us that parliamentary debate is the lifeblood of democracy, and that it must be grounded in evidence, reasons and practical solutions. I emphasise, grounded in evidence, reasons and practical solutions, and that is exactly what I intend to do today.

On poverty and cost of living, in his Address, His Excellency the President acknowledged that about one quarter of our people live below the poverty line, and another quarter live just above it, constantly struggling to make ends meet. This is not just the statistics. It is the daily reality for thousands of families across our country. Every market vendor, every shop assistant, garment worker, domestic worker, and even parents know that the cost of living is becoming harder to manage. However, after more than three years in office, the Coalition Government has made the cost-of-living situation worse.

In August 2023, the Government increased VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent. This impact was immediate. The price of almost everything went up. Then, in the 2025-2026 Budget, the Government reduced VAT to 12.5 percent and presented it as a relief for the people. However, by then, the damage was already done. Businesses had increased their prices, and many of those prices have remained high, so families are still paying more for the same goods and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, figures from the Bureau of Statistics show that over 12 months until February 2026, prices have increased for many everyday food items, bread and cereals, meat, fish, vegetables, even tea, coffee and soft drinks. The cost of everyday services has also increased. Hairdressing and other personal items have all risen by 2 percent to 2.5 percent. This is from the Bureau of Statistics, so clearly, the reduction of VAT from 15 percent to 12.5 percent has not provided the relief people were hoping for.

This is the same Government that came to power promising to reduce the cost of living. Instead, we have seen higher taxes, higher Government fees and charges, and now even the possibility of higher electricity tariffs. All of these add pressure on families who are already on a shoestring budget.

We often hear the argument that the Bainimarama-led Government also raised VAT to 15 percent. That is true, but the circumstances were completely different. At that time, the country was not recovering from a devastating global pandemic. Businesses and airports had not been shut down, tourism had not collapsed, people had not lost jobs in numbers and exhausted their savings just trying to survive. In fact, to help the economy recover from COVID-19, the Bainimarama-led Government reduced VAT to 9 percent, duties were removed on thousands of products, and 21 essential items were made VAT-free to help reduce the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker Sir, timing matters, and I thought honourable Prasad would understand that. Economic conditions also matter. Raising VAT to 15 percent at a time when families were still recovering financially made life even harder for many households.

His Excellency the President reminded us that progress cannot be measured by growth figures alone, and that is absolutely correct. When groceries become more expensive, when household bills keep rising, and when families struggle to keep ends meet, talk of inclusive growth means very little.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the former Minister for Finance, honourable Prasad boasted about a boost in revenue in the last three years. He was gloating on and on about how the Government has surpassed revenue but, in fact, they have robbed the poor by increasing VAT and Government fees and charges. That is how they collected revenue.

Ordinary Fijians are asking a very simple question: if revenue is rising, where is that money going? Families are not seeing real relief or major development, despite billions being borrowed and record revenue collected. So, the question is simple, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is this Government spending less on development projects than the FijiFirst Government, which maintained a 60–40 or 70–30 balance between operations and capital expenditure before COVID.

On debt and fiscal discipline, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also spoke about the importance of prudent fiscal management and reducing debt vulnerabilities. When the Government increased VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, the nation was told that this was necessary to stabilise Government finances and to pay debt. But what has happened since then?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, this Coalition Government's operating expenditure alone is larger than the entire national budget of the FijiFirst Government in the 2022–2023 financial year, and that is shocking. Yet, borrowing continues at a rapid pace - not to build major infrastructure or respond to crises, but mainly to fund day-to-day Government spending. That is not building the economy - that is simply maintaining a very expensive Government in Fiji's history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our debt obligations have grown significantly. The 2025–2026 Budget shows that the Government now needs about \$1.488 billion for debt financing. To put this into perspective, total debt servicing in 2022–2023 was about \$743 million. Today, the financing requirement has doubled. In other words, the burden of debt is growing, not shrinking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, do you know that the total debt under this Coalition Government, including the write off of TELS Loan by July 2026 would be around \$2.7 billion? Fiji's debt level is getting into very dangerous territory. The previous government borrowed around \$6.4 billion over 16 years while dealing with more than 14 cyclones and a once-in-a-century pandemic. This Government,

without facing those kinds of national emergencies, is on track to add more than \$3 billion to the national debt in just one term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Government is serious about controlling expenditure, then it must begin by looking at its own spending habits. One practical step is to reduce the number of Ministers and Assistant Ministers. That alone would cut down on travel costs, government vehicles, support staff and other administrative expenses.

There must also be greater discipline in how public funds are used for official travel and meetings. Why did honourable Prasad, as a former Minister of Finance and leader of National Federation Party, not introduce simple measures, which he talked about in his manifesto, which is car-pooling and hosting meetings and workshops in halls of schools and religious bodies? Most importantly, follow the rule of law, appoint people on merit and carry out proper due diligence to avoid costly tribunals, commissions of inquiry and investigations that waste taxpayers' money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government's own National Development Plan, led by the former Minister of Finance, honourable Prasad, had a growth target of 5 percent. The growth over the last two years has been 3.5 percent and for the next three years, the projections show growth below 3 percent. So, how does this Government expect to achieve 5 percent growth when the economy is moving in the opposite direction?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, targets are easy to write on paper, but without the right policies, the right leadership and the right environment for investment, those targets remain nothing more than pie in the sky.

On private sector-led growth, there is more talk than action. Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency described the private sector as the engine of economic growth. We all agree that a strong private sector creates jobs, encourages investment and drives economic development. Instead of giving the private sector room to grow, the Government continued to expand its own role, borrowing heavily, and relying more on taxation. You cannot build a private sector-led economy while taxing, regulating and crowding out the very sector you claim to support.

Since coming into office, this Government has increased the financial burden on businesses, especially micro, small and medium enterprises, squeezing profits and reducing their ability to invest, expand or hire more workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025 Reserve Bank of Fiji Business Outlook Survey shows that investor confidence has declined. Businesses cite high operational costs, uncertain economic conditions, poor infrastructure and competition as top constraints with uncertain economic conditions.

Now, to the leading issue, the net business outlook dipped to 30.4 percent and 32 percent, reflecting subdued 2025 conditions amid tax hikes and global risks. We are already seeing the consequences. Businesses are delaying expansion. Some are holding back on hiring. We continue to hear about \$1.6 billion of projects in the pipeline, but very little on the ground.

On the rule of law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, His Excellency reminded this House that democracy must be sustained through dialogue, compromise and respect for the rule of law. He also emphasised that any constitutional review must be guided by democratic, constitutionalism, good governance and respect for the law.

These are noble principles. They are the pillars upon which any functioning democracy must stand but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the real measure of respect for the rule of law is not found in well-crafted

speeches - it is found in the conduct of those who exercise power, and when we look carefully at the actions of this Government over the past three years, the picture that emerges is troubling.

We saw the dismissal of the Commissioner of Fiji's Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), a decision that the High Court later ruled was made without constitutional authority by the Prime Minister. That judgment should have been a moment of reflection for the Government, and I ask, who advised the honourable Prime Minister?

Then came the Commission of Inquiry initiated by the honourable Prime Minister himself. Millions of dollars of public funds were spent, yet the country is left asking a very simple question, what exactly has been achieved? What we have today is an expensive report, an institution left bruised and weakened and no clear sense of accountability to the people who ultimately paid for it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also witnessed an attempt by the honourable Prime Minister to assume control of the Fiji National University without first changing the law that governs it. Again, I ask, who advised the honourable Prime Minister? Only after strong criticism from the public and the stakeholders was this move quietly reversed. When such incidents keep occurring, they cannot be dismissed as mere administrative mistakes. They begin to reveal a pattern that raises serious doubt about this Government's commitment to the rule of law and the wrong incompetent advice given to the Prime Minister time and time again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, take the handling of Commission of Inquiry report itself. After all the attention it received and the resources invested in it, the only visible consequences were the removal of Ms. Barbara Malimali and the departure of the Prime Minister's own hand-picked Attorney General, Mr. Graham Leung. Beyond that, the public has been left largely in the dark. There has been little explanation, little transparency, and little accountability for the millions of dollars that were spent and total secrecy on whether there will be compensation paid out using taxpayers' money.

Even before that, serious concerns should have been raised about the appointment process. As Chair of the Constitutional Offices Commission, the honourable Prime Minister recommended the appointment of Barbara Malimali as Chair of the Electoral Commission without proper due diligence. Again, who advised the honourable Prime Minister? A process that should have raised serious concerns about her suitability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister has also publicly stated his intention to abolish FICAC altogether, despite the clear constitutional requirement that such a step would require a change in the Constitution and our commitment under the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). This development raises fundamental questions about this Government's respect for the independence of our institution and, once again, where is that competent advice coming from? The situation becomes even more troubling when we look at how JSC appointed Mr. John Rabuku as Acting Director of Public Prosecution, who had previously been sanctioned for professional misconduct. A tribunal later ruled that he should never have been appointed. Yet after being removed as Acting DPP, he was then appointed Deputy DPP. Where is this competent, nonsensical advice coming from?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public cannot help but ask, what standards are we applying when it comes to leadership of a most important legal, independent institution? Are we strengthening the rule of law, or are we slowly drifting towards the rules of individuals?

At the center of all, this is a governing style that appears increasingly concentrated within the Office of the Prime Minister, absorbing every crisis but it does not strengthen governance. It weakens institutions, erodes accountability and undermines public confidence. If we are serious about

protecting our democracy, then respect for the rule of law cannot be selective. It must be constant, principled and applied equally, especially to those who hold the highest office of power. Only then will the speech delivered by His Excellency truly carry meaning for the people of Fiji.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker. Sir, His Excellency the President has offered a noble vision, but vision without delivery becomes illusion. Fijians do not judge governments by speeches. They judge governments by their grocery bill, their electricity bill, their hospital experience, the job prospects and the ability to survive. By those measures, this Government is falling short. And now to the people of Fiji, judge this Government not by what it says in this Chamber, but by what it has actually done and failed to do for you in your villages, settlements and towns.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, Members of this august House, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula re* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Opening Address delivered by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji. I sincerely commend His Excellency's visionary Address outlining fair, inclusive and sustainable national priorities for 2026. As Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry, I support His Excellency's vision and implementation of the key policies and legislative that strengthens a resilient and sustainable agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the founder of the Katalyst Foundation, Mr. Robert Cromb. The Katalyst Foundation is focused on delivering long term sponsorship programmes to support the needful communities in the remote, underprivileged regions in Vanua Levu. This foundation had assisted many people, including the children in the province of Bua. They have supported and empowered communities by giving them the necessities needed in the area of education, health, social services, public welfare, employment and training. They have been sponsoring students at the Navuso Agricultural Training Institute who will be our future farmers. Once again, thank you very much, Mr. Cromb, and I hope that you and your foundation will continue to commit and provide much needed assistance to the vulnerable communities in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Coalition Government assumed office, the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry has made significant strides in translating His Excellency's vision into tangible outcomes. At the core of our implementation efforts are the Ministry's operational Divisions including Animal Health and Production, Crop Extension, Crop Research, Waterways, Land Resource Planning and Development, and now the Sugar Industry. Over the past three years, these Divisions have continued to work collaboratively and tirelessly in achieving priorities outlined by His Excellency.

The Animal Health and Production Division have successfully implemented a number of programmes for breed improvement by implementing biotechnology, harvesting and the transfer of embryos. We have -

- established a breeding station for semen collection and processing for artificial insemination;
- conducted 356 artificial inseminations on 82 farms using locally improved beef semen;
- developed four new beef breeds genetic conservation through cross-breeding programmes in sheep and goats; and
- distributed 878 genetically improved queen bees for 85 farmers.

On animal nutrition, the Ministry has established 50 hectares of juncao grass as fodder for livestock, established six semi-intensive dairy farms and developed feed conservation and improved techniques. Research is undertaken on Black Soldier Flies farming as a high-protein feed source for

livestock and waste management.

On infrastructure, the Ministry had established 58 new dairy farms, 122 dairy sheds were upgraded, 30 dairy farms were assisted with water reticulation and provided 19 milking machines to dairy farmers, 94 beef farmers were assisted with fencing kits, 109 stockyards were constructed for beef farmers, assisted 20 sheep farmers with shed materials and 106 farmers with fencing kits, construction of 43 piggery sheds and also 37 poultry sheds were established.

The construction of 104 biogas digester units were installed in piggeries and dairy farms for waste management, energy collection and fertiliser production. Establishment and operationalized a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) laboratory and 13 honey processing units were also installed.

For Disease Surveillance and Control, this is an ongoing programme including field and laboratory tests. A total of 77,732 tests for TB and Brucellosis were carried out.

The Crop Extension Division have achieved the following:

- Distribution of planting material included distributed backyard garden seeds and climate-resilient commodities to 8,000 farmers and households.
- Established five nurseries for seedling production and distribution of more than 2 million fruit trees and vegetable seedlings in collaboration with British American Tobacco.
- Supported farmers with Capital Funded Initiatives, benefiting 3,500 farmers through farm equipment, land preparation, planting materials, and agro-inputs and farm equipment.

For Farm Mechanization, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we provided 25 excavators, 90 tractors and 27 combined rice harvesters and small machinery for farming co-operatives, individuals and schools. The Ministry also provided innovative technologies like protected structures, irrigation kits, yaqona pounding machines and value-added equipment, benefiting 310 farmers.

On Farm Road, the Ministry constructed and upgraded 86 farm roads spanning over 485 kilometres and providing access to more than 5,000 hectares of farmland, benefiting 8,580 farmers.

The Crop Research Division has successfully carried out the following:

- (1) On Research and Genetic Improvement -
 - (a) Establishing orchards of tissue-cultured bananas and propagating 1,000 banana suckers for farmers.
 - (b) Releasing taro leaf blight-resistant variety.
 - (c) Producing 378,000 crops and fruit tree seedlings and 85,000 kilogrammes of vegetable seeds for distribution to farmers and households.
 - (d) Introducing five new cassava varieties and one yam variety from Nigeria.
 - (e) Releasing of the new Pacific *kumala* variety.
 - (f) Establishing agro-ecology sites by implementing three trials on saline-tolerant rice varieties to identify climate-resistant options and conducting poly-culture research trial integrating of tilapia fish into rice farming system.
- (2) On Disease Surveillance and Control, the Ministry has introduced two African Tulip bio-control agents from New Zealand and testing drone technology for pesticide application in commercial rice production.

- (3) On Analytical and Diagnostic Services, the Ministry has also improved its adaptive technology by developing five value-added products, now processing the soils and land management by producing and distributing 103 tonnes of organic compost, supplying 50,000 litres of bacterium culture to farmers.

On Infrastructure Improvement, the commissioning of the Centre for Agriculture Technology Transfer in Nausori with a commercial tissue culture laboratory for mass banana seedling propagation and other demonstrations.

The Waterways Division had successfully completed foreshore erosion protection on the construction of coastal and waterways protection work across six vulnerable coastal communities nationwide and implementing nature-based solutions.

On Riverbank Protection, constructed land drainage and flood protection infrastructure across eight villages in four Divisions. Invested in watershed management within the Ba River catchment and major emergency dredging and maintenance works at the Ba River mouth.

These projects are delivering transformational benefits to our communities by:

- (1) protecting lives and homes from flooding and coastal erosion;
- (2) strengthening food security through improved land and water management;
- (3) preserving valuable agriculture land from saltwater intrusion and flood damage; and
- (4) stimulating rural economies through local employment and infrastructure development and building climate resilience for vulnerable island and inland communities.

For the Land Resource Planning and Development Division, the Land Use Section had successfully developed and published Fiji's Land Use Cover Map, in collaboration with USP and Climate AI Project. It established Sustainable Land Management (SLM) and six Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) demonstration plots. It established 28 home gardens and school gardens using innovative box farming, mini-protective shades, and trellised fencing. It also established Soil Loss Data Preliminary trial needed to review the national loss data. It distributed 2,035 *calliandra* seedlings to naturally improve land health. They also have 15,000 *vetiver* seedlings still in their nursery at the Koronivia Research Station.

On the Sugar Industry's Reform Mechanisation and Diversification, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Prime Minister for the decision to merge the Ministry of Sugar Industry and the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. This merger will strengthen the sugar industry in increasing income to sugarcane farmers.

Through collaboration with industry stakeholders, the Ministry will focus on improved governance, transparency, efficiency from planting to milling. The Coalition Government in the last three years was able to:

- (1) upgrade almost 250 kilometres of cane access roads;
- (2) assisted 857 farmers with lease renewals;
- (3) provided extensive grants and subsidies for fertiliser, weedicides, mechanisation, and cane cartage support;
- (4) procured 12 cane planters, 16 fertiliser applicators, and a specialised hilly terrain harvester; and
- (5) reduced the financial burden through parametric insurance, micro-bundled insurance, savings through loans with reduced interest rate and voluntary savings in Fiji National Provident Fund, and the Unit Trust of Fiji.

The Ministry is exploring options for quality labourers, customised harvesters, efficiency in milling, and providing incentives based on quality performance. The Ministry is launching a long-term structural reform of the sugar industry, including recommendations from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and working with the European Union for further feasibility study of the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry has huge potential and opportunities to increase farmers' income. This will be done by pooling resources to integrate activities such as research and development, technology transfer, extension and advisory services and to develop policies and programmes. This will be done by pooling resources to integrate activities such as research and development, technology transfer, extension and advisory services, and to develop policies and programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as outlined in the Presidential Address, the Government's focus remains on:

- Mechanisation to reduce labour constraints;
- Incentivising farmers to increase productivity;
- Structural reforms for long-term sustainability;
- Exploring renewable energy generation from bi-products; and
- Diversification into ethanol and refined sugar production.

We recognise that improving cane production is the immediate priority. Without a stable and reliable supply of quality cane, downstream value addition is difficult. We will work closely with farmers, millers, landowners, and industry stakeholders to restore confidence, boost productivity, modernise operations, and exploring new processing technologies as part of the Government's long-term commitment to revitalising the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also conducted capacity building across all sectors, for the farmers and the staffs, building on their knowledge, skills, and expertise. In addition, the Ministry is also in the process of reviewing 30 legislations and introducing the Kava Bill to improve governance and to guide our future work.

His Excellency rightly emphasised that progress cannot be measured by growth alone. In agriculture, growth must translate into increased household incomes, reduced rural hardship, stronger food systems and greater participation of women and youth. We will, therefore, continue to advance

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- climate-smart farming practices;
- improve irrigation and water management systems;
- modernize farming techniques;
- strengthen extension services and farmer training; and
- enhance market access and value addition.

Special emphasis will be placed on empowering farmers in the interior, rural, and maritime communities, with the inclusion of women and youth.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the vision outlined by His Excellency is one of unity in diversity, sustainability, resilience and integrity in governance. The Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways, and Sugar Industry embraces this call.

- We will pursue reform with discipline.

- We will prioritise productivity with sustainability.
- We will modernise without abandoning our farmers.
- We will ensure that development reaches our interior, rural, and maritime communities.

Agriculture, waterways management, and sugar industry reforms are not isolated sectors. They are foundational to:

- Poverty eradication;
- Economic diversification;
- Climate resilience;
- Food security; and
- National unity.

The transformation of agriculture and the revitalisation of the sugar industry are not optional, they are essential to building a fairer, stronger and more resilient Fiji.

With those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency for his Address and reaffirm my Ministry's full commitment to delivering on the priorities outlined for the nation.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Government, honourable Opposition Members and members of the public in the gallery, and all those joining in through the virtual platform - warm greetings to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the gracious Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the Opening of Parliament and to share some observations from my recent experience in the Ministry of Youth and Sports. At the outset, I would like to thank His Excellency for setting out the national priorities that guide the work of this honourable House and for reminding us of our shared responsibility to continue building a stronger, more inclusive and resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports approached this responsibility with humility and gratitude. Over the past few months, we had the opportunity to engage closely with the Ministry, its officers, youth groups, sporting organisations and communities across the country. I would like to take this opportunity to share some of the experiences I have observed during this period and highlight some of the recent progress that the Ministry has been pursuing in supporting the development of our young people and strengthening sports across Fiji.

I would like to express our Ministry's continued commitment to advancing the development of our young people and growth of sports in Fiji. At the same time, the Ministry would also like to acknowledge the work and contribution of the outgoing Minister for Youth and Sports. During his tenure, he provided leadership to the Ministry and supported several initiatives aimed at strengthening youth empowerment and sports development across the country. On behalf of the Ministry, I wish to thank him for his service and commitment to the young people and athletes of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenge to look after the welfare of our youth continues to increase, given the various social issues they are confronted with everyday. The Ministry is always reminded of this, and they do so with a clear understanding that the responsibility before us is not simply to maintain programmes but to ensure that the work of empowering young people and strengthening sports development continues with focus and momentum.

The Ministry is committed to working closely with the honourable Prime Minister, the Permanent Secretary and the dedicated officers of the Ministry to ensure that priorities outlined in His Excellency's Address translates into practical opportunities for young people and athletes across our nation.

Before speaking further on the work of the Ministry, allow me to extend our nation's encouragement and support to the Fiji National Rugby Sevens team, both the men's and women's teams, for their recent performance at the Vancouver Sevens.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- These athletes continue to carry the pride and hopes of our nation every time they step onto the international stage. Their discipline, teamwork and commitment inspire our young people across Fiji, and we wish them every success as they continue to compete against some of the best teams in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just on Saturday, the Ministry convened the National Sports Conference, bringing together stakeholders from across the sports sector, including the Fiji Sports Council, Fiji National Sports Commission, national sporting federations, coaches, administrators and community representatives. The Conference provided an important platform to reflect on the direction of sports development in Fiji, and to strengthen co-ordination among organisations responsible for the nurturing of our athletes.

One of the key messages that emerged from the Conference was the importance of stronger collaboration across the sports ecosystem. Fiji continues to produce exceptional athletes, but sustaining this success requires effective coordination between sporting bodies, Government agencies and development partners. Strengthening this partnership will allow us to better support athletes from grassroots participation through to international competition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important milestone that took place at the Conference was the official launching of the Drug-Free Sports Fiji logo. This marks an important step in promoting integrity, fairness and accountability within Fiji's sporting system. The establishment of Drug-Free Sports Fiji demonstrate our national commitment to protecting the wellbeing of athletes and ensuring that Fiji sporting achievements are built on discipline, respect for the rule of competition and adherence to the international anti-doping standards.

The Ministry also continues to support the development of sports infrastructure in communities that have historically had limited access to facilities. In this regard, commencing this month is the development of a multi-purpose hard court facility in Rotuma, together with plans for the establishment of a community sports ground as part of ongoing sports development efforts in the island. For communities such as Rotuma, sports facilities play a vital role in encouraging youth participation, promoting healthy lifestyles, strengthening social cohesion and creating opportunities for young athletes to develop their talents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to sports participation, one of the key challenges facing many young people today is the transition from training into meaningful employment. To help address this challenge, the Ministry has been working in partnership with the Social Innovation Fiji, an organisation that focuses on connecting young people with employment opportunities locally.

Through this partnership, young people are supported in preparing for the workforce while employers gain access to motivated young individuals who are eager to contribute productively to the economy. This initiative recognises that many young people possess the talent and determination

needed to succeed but lack the connections required to access employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important partnership currently being strengthened is with the Pacific Australia Skills Programme. Through this collaboration, the programme is supporting the development of counselling training programmes for youth officers across the region. These programmes aim to equip youth officers with specialised skills that will allow them to better support young people who may be facing social, emotional, or personal challenges.

Importantly, these counselling programmes are being developed with the intention of achieving formal accreditation. Once accredited, the programmes will also be introduced within our Youth Training Centers so that interested young people can undertake counselling-related training and potentially pursue careers in youth support services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past few months, the Ministry have had the opportunity to visit several communities including the Lau Group, Ovalau and Kadavu. These visits have provided valuable insights into the realities faced by young people in rural and maritime regions. One of the most encouraging observations from these visits was the strong sense of determination and initiative among young people in these communities. Many youths are already actively engaged in activities such as farming, fishing and small-scale enterprises. These regions also possess significant natural resources, particularly in relation to land and fisheries. With the right support, training, and market access, these resources have the potential to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities for many young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, these visits reinforced an important lesson - youth development cannot succeed through the efforts of one ministry alone. Effective youth empowerment requires coordination across multiple sectors including agriculture, fisheries, education, labour, infrastructure and community development.

I wish to, therefore, thank Government for the initiatives already being implemented to support our young people. At the same time, there remains an opportunity to strengthen coordination among ministries and stakeholders working within the youth development space so that resources and programmes can be delivered more effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking ahead, Fiji is also preparing for its participation in Expo 2027 in Belgrade, Serbia which will commence in April 2027. Fiji's participation will highlight the connection between play, music and sports, areas that strongly reflect Fiji's identity, culture, and international recognition. The Ministry of Youth and Sports has been designated as the lead agency coordinating Fiji's preparations for this global event. Expo 2027 presents an opportunity for Fiji to showcase the creativity, talent, and resilience of our young people while also strengthening international partnerships in sports development, cultural exchange, and youth entrepreneurship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to remind all honorable Members that meaningful change often takes time. Youth development and sports advancement require patience, sustained effort, and strong partnerships. While progress may not always be immediately visible, the work that is being undertaken today will continue to create opportunities for young people in the years ahead. Our young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow, but they are also active contributors to the progress of our nation today. When we invest in their skills, well-being and opportunities, we strengthen the future of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again thank His Excellency the President for his Address and for setting out a vision that calls for unity, resilience and inclusive national development. I also acknowledge the dedication of the Ministry staff and the many stakeholders and organisations that

continue to support youth development and sports advancement across our country. Together, through continued collaboration and commitment, we can ensure that our young people are empowered to reach their full potential and that sports continue to unite and inspire our nation.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, please allow me to remind this august House on a statement that is shared by His Excellency in his Address and I quote:

“Political rhetoric and personal attacks may generate momentary attention, but they erode public trust and distract from the real challenges facing our people. History will judge this Parliament not by the sharpness of debate, but by the wisdom of its outcomes.”

The tone we set as honourable Members in this House will shape not only public confidence of today, but the health of our democracy tomorrow. May God bless our young people, may God bless our athletes, and may God continue to bless our beloved Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Talking about Sevens Rugby, I am still in the dark as to the results of the Vancouver Sevens because Ashwin, my long-time chauffeuring taxi driver, did not turn up for work this morning. I found later that his car was taken to the garage for repairs, so I may have the full brunt of the report tomorrow morning.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, our guests sitting in the gallery and watching through livestream, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen; I rise in response to the Address delivered by His Excellency the President of Fiji, in acknowledgement, support and most importantly, with a commitment to act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has set a decisive course for our nation. He called for unity in Fiji's diverse society. He called for economic growth that can withstand shocks and improve livelihood. He called for disciplined investments in infrastructure, for development that reaches every province and every community. He called for legislation that strengthens governance, and above all, he called for delivery - real progress, not promises.

Today, I lay the framework through which the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation seeks to transform this vision into action. A framework that is focused, practical and results driven. A framework that ensures our plans touch every corner of our nation. A framework that delivers on the promise of progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism and civil aviation are sectors that, for many of our people, are a source of opportunity, providing accessibility, connectivity and uplifting the lives of thousands of families. It drives investments in infrastructure, utility and businesses. In an increasingly uncertain global environment, Fiji continues to stand as a nation of stability, safety and goodwill.

Our country has long been recognised as a welcoming and peaceful destination. And this reputation is an asset we must continue to protect. It is therefore important that we consistently share Fiji's story with the world - that ours is a place where visitors are received in peace, where we must continue to protect. It is, therefore, important that we consistently share Fiji's story with the world, that ours is a place where visitors are received in peace, where communities are secure, and where the spirit of hospitality remains strong. In this regard, initiatives that promote the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace, reinforce the values that define us as a nation and strengthen confidence in Fiji as a trusted destination for travellers and partners alike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as both sectors expand, they must do so with structure and purpose. The next stage of Fiji's aviation and tourism journey is about aligning what we build, where we build, and how communities participate in their development. It is making sure that our infrastructure, environment, and people move forward together. A central theme of His Excellency's Address was inclusive and economic transformation.

Our approach to this transformation is guided by four powerful pillars of development – access, accommodation, attractions and amenities. In tourism, we regard it as the four 'As', as follows:

- (1) Access is our gateway. It is our airports, shipping links, roads, and even our digital networks. People must have equal access to opportunities that benefit our nation.
- (2) Accommodation reflects confidence - hotels, eco-lodges, homestays and resorts. These are places where jobs are created for our people and skills are built.
- (3) Attractions are what we offer - our people, oceans, land, heritage, and above all, culture. These treasures must be protected and respected.
- (4) Amenities is a system that keeps everything running – water, power, sanitation, health services and safety. We may not always appreciate these things, but when affected, we feel the impact immediately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these four 'A's can only progress with people, which is why actors are equally important and must be the fifth pillar. These are the people who make aviation and tourism happen. Our communities, airline operators, hoteliers, guides, and artisans. We are nothing without our people. When these pillars work in harmony, aviation and tourism become drivers of genuine national growth. This will be achieved through our National Sustainable Tourism Framework and Civil Aviation Master Plan.

Mr. Speaker, as we respond to the direction set out by His Excellency the President, it is important to place our work in Vanua Levu within the national vision. The House is familiar with the ambitions of the Na Vualiku Project. At its core, it is a strategic response to decades of underinvestment that have limited the North's full economic potential. With support from the World Bank, we will achieve airport upgrades, utility strengthening, environmental protection, and enterprise development. With runway upgrades already underway at Labasa Airport, we are now seeing the most significant step forward in improving access to Vanua Levu. The improvement directly addresses the connectivity challenges that have held us back for years.

As capacity increases, so does confidence; confidence from investors, from airlines considering new routes, and from local businesses who can now plan for growth with far greater certainty. Improved access is not just an infrastructure achievement; it is a catalyst for opportunity across the North. Na Vualiku is intentionally designed to ensure that communities are not spectators, they are participants. That is why the Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Community-Based Tourism initiative is a core component of the programme. It builds the capacity for our people by preparing them to play an active and confident role in the tourism economy.

In addition, the Ministry also administers the Pilot Tourism Micro and Small Enterprises Fund, which enables small operators to improve facilities and uplift the overall visitor experience. Our objective is to increase capacity, as well as deepen local ownership, raise standards, and ensure that prosperity circulates within communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reaching out to our maritime provinces is essential to achieving an inclusive growth. The Lau Tourism Scoping Mission that we undertook weeks ago revealed world-class natural and cultural assets – reminding us of the importance of careful planning. Lau's beauty is

pristine, and development must be done with respect.

Following the scoping mission, the Fiji Navy conducted hydrographic mapping in Fulaga. With accurate navigational charts, we can ensure safe maritime access while supporting environmental conservation. Our approach in Lau will remain community-led, low-impact and high-value. High value, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will see the development of overwater bungalow types of accommodation that are ideally suited for Lau. Conservation, heritage preservation, and local enterprise ownerships will guide every step.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aviation is key to Lau. Accessibility is the answer to Lau. Today, we have five airports in the Lau group - Tubou, Moala, Ono-i-Lau, Cicia and Vanuabalavu. All of these airports are not “allweather” except for Tubou and the focus will be to make them “all weather” so that they can take in the numbers on any given day. Today when it rains, some of these airports do not operate.

This balanced approach will also extend to Namosi, Rewa, and Lomaiviti - particularly Ovalau, with their rich heritage, ecological sites, and cultural depth. When we support local businesses, align infrastructure, and plan carefully, the five ‘As’ extend far beyond our traditional tourism approach. Inclusive and balanced tourism strengthens our communities, strengthens our identity, upholds our culture and nourishes our nation.

Mr. Speaker, aviation is a driver for tourism growth. One cannot exist without the other. The Civil Aviation Master Plan - Fiji's first integrated aviation roadmap - outlines the future of airport upgrades, airspace management, regulatory oversight, and safety systems. It ensures our aviation sector keeps pace with projected visitor growth. This underpins our Access pillar at a national level ensuring we build ahead of demand.

Mr. Speaker, as part of this forward-looking approach, the Ministry is also advancing preparatory work on a feasibility study for the development of airport infrastructure in the Yasawa region. Yasawa has huge potential for growth, and the project will soon invite expressions of interest to conduct the feasibility study.

Additionally, we are exploring the revamp of Gau Airport to accommodate larger aircrafts. Gau holds significant potential for tourism and broader economic activity, and a gateway for the development of the entire Lomaiviti Group. Strengthening air connectivity to Gau would enhance accessibility, stimulate local enterprise, and support more balanced provincial growth. Such investment will upgrade the airstrip and unlock a new corridor of opportunity for communities that have long been underserved.

Modern and inclusive aviation planning is a catalyst to connectivity; it is economic foresight. In partnership with our national airline, Fiji Airways, we will target markets that align with our sustainability and diversification goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improved aviation connectivity and a growing tourism economy must be supported by modern laws. While strengthening our regulatory framework, it is also important to address the issue concerning the growing aspirations of many young Fijians who wish to pursue careers in aviation, particularly as professional pilots.

Civil aviation is a highly skilled and respected profession that requires extensive training, discipline and significant financial commitment. In recent years, more families have chosen to privately finance pilot training for their children, often making considerable sacrifices through loans, mortgages of their homes or retirement savings. While this reflects a strong appeal of aviation as a

career, it is important that families clearly understand the realities of the aviation labour market, especially pilots.

Obtaining a Commercial Pilot Licence is an important achievement but it does not automatically guarantee employment. In a relatively small aviation market such as Fiji, newly qualified pilots must build substantial additional flying hours and experience before progressing towards the Airline Transport Pilot Licence required for airline operations. For this reason, parents must carefully research, there must be informed planning and a clear understanding of a full training pathway that are essential before committing to such significant investment.

I have had visitors to my office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of a family selling roti parcels to fund their child's training as a pilot; we are talking about close to \$100,000 by the end of the day. So I am pleading with parents to really understand the magnitude of the undertaking when they support their children to take up flying.

For 2026, about 101 candidates undertook the aptitude test with Fiji Airways, as part of the process with the Tertiary Schools Loan Scheme (TSLs) to give them scholarships. Around 101, there are 20 scholarships by TSLs and 20 have been chosen, but there is an indication of the level of interest. According to Fiji Airways, the quality of the candidates was quite high but they could only provide 20 scholarships each year and that is consistent with the reading of what the demand is in aviation.

For these young students, there are aspects in aviation they can take up - engineering and space management, et cetera. So, pilot is not the ball of aviation. There are other fields, as I said, highly qualified, in like medicine, health where they can consider as opposed to pilots and then prevailing on their parents to undertake this high cost of privately funding pilot training.

At the same time, the Government continues to strengthen the broader framework that governs the aviation sector. The revised Civil Aviation Bill now nearing completion will ensure a modernised and enhanced regulatory framework for civil aviation in Fiji, complying with international standards. Furthermore, Fiji's tourism legislation will establish a unified system for industry and destination standards and sustainability, strengthening the value of the Fijian brand.

Alongside this, the Commercial Use of Marine Areas (CUMA) Bill is in consultation. The Bill addresses a long-standing legal and governance gap – impacting the rights of customary owners, the integrity of our marine resource management and the certainty needed for sustainable commercial use of Fiji's valuable marine areas. These law reforms ensure stability and confidence for the future.

The theme for this year's Fiji Tourism Convention was, "Tourism Beyond Boundaries" reflects the direction set out in the Presidential Address. Beyond boundaries means reaching new provinces, supporting MSMEs, modernising our systems and lifting infrastructure across the country. The aviation and tourism industry has shown it is ready. The national vision is clear. Our framework brings all this together.

The Ministry enters the Parliamentary year with a clear plan:

- (a) Through the five 'As', we will deliver balanced growth;
- (b) Through Na Vualiku, we will unlock the North;
- (c) Through careful, community-led development in Lau and other aforementioned provinces, we will widen opportunities;
- (d) Through aviation modernisation, we will sustain our connectivity;
- (e) Through legislative reform, we will protect our global reputation and good governance; and

- (f) Through MSME support and community initiatives, we will empower our people.

Aviation and Tourism in Fiji is moving by momentum to expansion by design. When growth is structured and inclusive, it does more than increase arrivals and connectivity, it nourishes livelihoods, builds provinces, protects heritage and deepens resilience. That is our commitment, that is our direction and this is how we will act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me close by focusing on what is happening today globally. I spent the last few days in Berlin, Germany, with the Internationale Tourismus Borse (ITB) which is a huge travel summit. It was sad when certain people from across the globe could not make it to Berlin because of the turmoil in their part of the world.

I read with interest the comment made by the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, “let us go out and tell the whole world that Fiji is safe, that tourists can come to Fiji” – that is true. Sometimes I wonder why I was born in this small island nation in the Pacific, but when you look at the global turmoil and all that we see today, I say I am lucky that I was born in this part of the world which is safe. People will look for a safe place to visit, and that is a country that I love called Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend our proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.37 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to respond to the Address delivered by His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, at the Opening of the 2026-2027 Session of Parliament.

I begin by expressing gratitude for His Excellency's leadership and clear national direction outlined in his Address, which provides an important framework for this Government, particularly in advancing rural and maritime development and strengthening disaster risk management across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us that unity must translate into equitable development outcomes. This is particularly relevant when we consider that 44.1 percent of Fiji's population resides in the rural areas. That means, nearly half of our citizens live outside major urban centres in villages, settlements, outer islands and interior communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we speak about inclusive growth, national resilience and equitable opportunity, we speak about policies that must work for nearly half of our people. These statistics alone highlight why rural and maritime development cannot remain peripheral to national planning - it must be central.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, in his Address, outlined Government's legislative priorities and policy direction. In alignment with this, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management continues to prioritise policies that promote equitable and sustainable growth, resilience and inclusion.

We recognise that rural and maritime communities are often the backbone of our agriculture, and marine economies must be integrated into the national development strategy if Fiji is to achieve sustainable and inclusive progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President reaffirmed the sovereignty of our people and celebrated the diversity of our nation, emphasising unity as a shared purpose for rural and maritime communities. This unity must translate into equal access to opportunities, essential services, infrastructure and economic participation. Our policies are advancing this by ensuring community voices help shape decisions about their future, reinforcing the message that national development must include every Fijian, regardless of their location.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this spirit, I am delighted to inform this august House that the Ministry has adopted a co-creation approach to develop Fiji's first National Rural Development Policy (NRDP), following a series of eight national multi-stakeholder consultations across four Divisions and bilateral consultation.

The Ministry has been able to consult close to a thousand rural organisations, rural stakeholders including community representatives, civil society organisations, non-government and faith-based organisations, youth, women groups and Government agencies, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's reflection on the national journey and reminder that development must be fair and inclusive, emphasizes that the core of our Ministry's mandate, as noted by His Excellency the President, the Household Income and Expenditures Survey (HIES), highlights persistent hardship among low-income families, including many in the rural and maritime areas. To address that, the Ministry is advancing systematic policy reforms that remove barriers to opportunity and ensure that rural households are not left behind. This includes a deliberate focus on infrastructure,

infrastructure, access to market and a social support system tailored to isolated communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to His Excellency's call for inclusive and evidence-based policy, I am, once again, delighted to inform this august House about the work spearheaded by the Ministry in leading the development of Fiji's first-ever National Rural Development Policy as part of the Change Management Programme.

This Policy represents a historic shift in how rural and maritime development is planned and implemented. It has been shaped through extensive consultation with community leaders, district and provincial officials, civil society and development partners. The Policy will strengthen –

- rural livelihoods and reduce poverty;
- enhance connectivity through improved rural roads, bridges, jetties and maritime access;
- support climate-smart agriculture and fisheries;
- improve access to affordable finance and markets for rural enterprises
- and;
- integrate disaster risk management and community resilience planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this comprehensive framework ensures that rural and maritime development is not treated as an afterthought but integrated into a national development planning and priority setting, fulfilling the vision articulated by His Excellency for fair and inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the plan to review the Constitution as this is an opportunity to address the challenges that our Ministry encountered in implementing the Integrated Rural Development Framework. This review is timely for the Ministry as well, as we progress with the development of our National Rural Development Policy. It is imperative that the enabling framework, in the form of national legislation including the supreme law of the land, will support rather than be a hindrance to an integrated and coordinated planning platform for our rural people.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the plan to pursue the integrated review of the Native Land Administration and *iTaukei* institutions, as this will augur well and timely on the co-creation of the National Rural Development Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted the expansion of transport, energy and communication infrastructure over our national journey. In rural and maritime Fiji, infrastructure remains a key enabler of economic and social wellbeing.

Under the National Rural Development Policy and related programmes, the Ministry is –

- coordinating investments to construct and maintain rural access roads and bridges to reduce isolation;
- upgrade community jetties to support maritime transport and commerce;
- improve access to water, energy, and digital connectivity; and
- support community-led infrastructure projects that create local jobs.

These investments strengthen linkages between isolated communities and urban centres, facilitating access to healthcare, education, markets, and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency emphasised that unity must be concisely built through fair laws and inclusive policy. In rural and maritime development, this means embedding inclusion and gender equity throughout policy design and implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry supports targeted programmes to empower women, youth and vulnerable groups through skills training, entrepreneurship support and access to finance, recognising that community resilience is strengthened when all citizens can participate meaningfully in development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President's comments on the importance of evidence-based public discourse and responsible leadership are essential, especially as we approach an election year. The Ministry commits to contributing constructively to national dialogue, ensuring that communication and engagement with stakeholders in rural and maritime areas are grounded in facts, respect and shared purpose.

His Excellency the President noted global economic, environmental and geopolitical challenges that test the resilience of small island developing States, like Fiji. In response, our Ministry prioritises disaster risk reduction and climate resilience as integral parts of development planning. We are strengthening community awareness and preparedness, improving early warning systems and enhancing evacuation infrastructure across coastal and inland communities. These efforts align with His Excellency the President's emphasis on resilience and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we work closely with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to support vulnerable communities requiring adaptation measures, alongside implementing UNDP's Governance for Resilient Development in the Pacific Project on risk-informed development. Planned relocation of the community falls within our ambit.

Notably, works in Nabavatu in Macuata are progressing very well according to our schedule. The Ministry is also providing technical guidance to the villages of Narata in Nadroga and Vuninidrovu in Naitasiri, in undertaking partial relocation, with funding they have received from the Community Climate Adaptation Fund of the Global Centre for Climate Mobility.

His Excellency the President reiterated that rural, interior and maritime areas must be brought into the mainstream of national development planning. Rather than being treated as peripheral projects, the Ministry agrees wholeheartedly and has embedded this principle in the formulation of its National Rural Development Policy and related programmes. Our approach ensures that rural and maritime priorities are considered across sectors - economic, social, environmental and disaster management, and that decision-making reflects the lived realities of communities outside urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted agriculture and fisheries as central to economic transformation. This aligns with the Ministry's focus on supporting climate-smart agriculture, value-chain development, fisheries management and market facilitation for rural and maritime communities. These sectors are critical for food security, income generation and resilient livelihoods.

I look forward to the outcome of the feasibility study for the new shipbuilding facility. This is an infrastructure that is important to our maritime travellers and communities. We continue to buy ships from abroad to service our islands. We must not forget that there are talented people in the country who are already involved in this industry. We have seen the increasing interest in our young people and from the Pacific region to be trained as qualified mariners and seafarers from the courses offered by the Fiji National University.

His Excellency the President spoke on the defining challenge of climate change. For our portfolios, these highlight the need to strengthen preparedness, response and recovery systems in rural and maritime areas. We are enhancing collaboration with subnational administrations and

community stakeholders to ensure that early action plans, evacuation facilities and community training are in place, ensuring that rural communities are equipped to stand and recover from disasters.

The Ministry convened the first National Disaster Risk Management Council meeting since the enactment of the National Disaster Risk Management Act 2024. The Council deliberated and approved the following disaster risk management initiatives:

- (1) National guideline for constructing and retrofitting evacuation centres. The guideline is to provide structural and humanitarian standards in evacuation centres, as these are critical facilities will ensure the protection of evacuees during a disaster.
- (2) The Council has approved the revised anticipatory action framework which will provide faster and more efficient response to disasters and help affected communities to better prepare for and recover from emergencies.
- (3) The Council has also approved the Project for Enhancing Multi-Hazard Early Warning Capabilities in Fiji, which will ensure that warnings are effectively disseminated and reaches the most far-flung and vulnerable of our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been fortunate over the last few years that the Good Lord has seen fit to spare our country from major disasters. With that being said, *Tropical Cyclone Urmil* has left the Western Division reeling from the impacts of heavy rainfall and flooding. The Ministry is working closely with stakeholders to ensure that affected communities are assisted with relief and their quick return to normalcy.

Last week, the team was at NDMO. We were moving around the evacuation centres in the Western Division, delivering non-food items and also food items will be delivered once the report by NDMO comes out.

I also thank the honourable Prime Minister, who also held a briefing with the officials in the Western Division, on the update of post-*TC Urmil*, of the flooding that happened in the Western Division.

Just before I move into my conclusion, Sir, I just want to respond to honourable Premila Kumar and some of her comments this morning. At her conclusion, Sir, the honourable Member said that the people in rural communities, in villages, in settlements, should judge this Government by its performance.

We are moving around the country - the Northern Division, Western Division and even in the Eastern Division, the support on the ground, supporting the Government, has been overwhelming, Sir. They are really happy with the developments that the Government is bringing to them - access roads, farm roads, solar freezers, et cetera, have helped our rural and maritime communities. They are really happy.

Last week, I was in Gau and they told me to relay their message to the honourable Prime Minister, that this Government should run for another three terms. They do not follow all the things that are coming out on social media posted by keyboard warriors. What they see is re-election, and that is on the ground. The assistance by the Ministry of Agriculture and all other ministries, boreholes by the Ministry of Lands that are the real impacts that people are feeling on the ground, and I don't know which part of the two groups the honourable Premila Kumar is joining.

Now, we have a registered political party, which is the People's First Party. It will be led by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Again, honourable Premila Kumar trying to use the credits or the achievements by the previous FijiFirst Government to ride along on probably their campaign.

The campaign is too far away. It is time for the Government to continue delivering the work that needs to be delivered, and people are thanking the Government on the service delivery that is coming to them on time. I hope that the Opposition will also join us, especially in some of the things of national interest.

I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition this morning who also acknowledged the process of the constitutional review. I thank the current Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for taking around the Referendum Bill and have been following some of the committee meetings. I thank the Opposition Members for allowing that pathway and supporting that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, His Excellency the President's Address represents a vision for a confident, inclusive and resilient Fiji. The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management stand fully committed to translating this vision into tangible outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to implement inclusive policies, strengthen community resilience, support sustained economic participation, and advocate for rural and maritime priorities to be integral elements of national development. By aligning our efforts with the aspirations articulated by His Excellency, we reaffirm our commitment to leave no Fijian behind - from the highlands to the coastlines, from rural villages and settlements to our outer islands. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Parliamentarians; good afternoon to you all. I rise to respond to the most gracious Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the opening of the 2026 session of Parliament.

I will refrain from commenting on honourable Premila Kumar's generalised commentaries in the morning on the economy or cost of living. That is for another day, but what struck me was her commentaries on the cost of living and referring to the Bureau of Statistics' February Consumer Price Index (CPI) as an example.

In 2019 the base all items increased from 100 to 111.7, and included in that is food, which increased from 100 to 121.8 basis points. So, please, have the statistics before you comment on the cost of living adjustment and do a thorough analysis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address has set out a clear and forward-looking vision for our nation, a vision anchored in stability, resilience and shared prosperity for all Fijians. It reminds us that while our nation has made important strides in recent years, the journey ahead will require unity, discipline and leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global environment today is far more complex and uncertain than it has been in decades. Around the world, we are witnessing rising geopolitical tensions and conflicts, including the Middle East and other regions. These developments have caused heightened uncertainty that risks global peace and security and has significant implications for global prosperity and wellbeing. Hence, for us policymakers, particularly in a small developing economy like Fiji, these shifts make economic and financial management far more challenging. The collective wisdom that we have in this Parliament and the resilience that our people have repeatedly demonstrated in times of crisis will help navigate these new challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's small and open economy is inevitably exposed to developments in the global economy over which we have little or no control. Changes in international markets, fluctuations in commodity prices, disruptions in trade routes, and volatility in global financial and economic conditions can have immediate and significant impacts on our economy.

Even with this global crisis, Fiji already faced a unique set of structural challenges as a Small Island Developing State. Our isolated location from the major global market is one. Our small population limits economies of scale. The dispersion of our islands increases the cost of infrastructure and service delivery. Productivity constraints and competitiveness continued to challenge us in many sectors of our economy.

At the same time, we remain highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. The severe economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 left Fiji with elevated levels of public debt and limited fiscal space. The emerging drugs and HIV crisis threaten the wellbeing and productivity of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the evolving global landscape only amplifies these existing challenges. The responsibility before us in this Parliament is, therefore, clear - we need to ensure that our policies support macroeconomic stability, strengthen resilience, support inclusive growth and safeguard the future prosperity of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Finance is closely monitoring the potential economic and fiscal implications of the current global crisis in Fiji. The situation is still unfolding, and there is a lot that we do not know. While we pray for the best, we need to be prepared for the worst.

Oil prices have increased significantly from around USD60 per barrel last year to approximately around USD90 per barrel today and may go up further. Projections indicate that if the conflict continues and global oil supply disruptions intensify, prices could rise further to triple digits. This will pose significant challenges for us, Fijian businesses, consumers and the broader economy.

We are particularly mindful of the potential impact on the tourism sector, and the national carrier, Fiji Airways, as rising fuel costs and weaker global demand could affect travel and tourism activity. Tourism remains a key driver of our economy, and any slowdown would have broader implications for growth, employment and foreign exchange earnings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, foreign reserves are the lifeline of our import-dependent economy. Fiji relies heavily on imported fuel, food, pharmaceuticals, machinery and raw materials. As we witnessed following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, global prices surged quickly, translated into high import bills and domestic cost pressures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we import around a billion dollars of fuel annually for domestic use, and every 10 percent increase in price, we will lose around \$100 million more in foreign reserves. Therefore, the recent fuel price surge can easily increase our fuel bill by an additional \$400 million to \$500 million if prices do not stabilise soon.

Similarly, in times of crisis, the US dollar, which is considered a safe-haven currency, usually strengthens, placing additional pressure on many emerging and small economies like us. Approximately \$3.6 billion, or 33 percent of our debt, is external debt, which over 80 percent is in US currency.

That said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier, it remains premature to draw definitive conclusions. Much will depend on how geopolitical tensions evolve and how inflation trends unfold, and how major

central banks and governments calibrate their policy in the months ahead.

Nevertheless, prudence demands preparedness. Even the anticipation of a global slowdown can influence investor confidence, tourism demand, commodity markets and capital flows. As a responsible Government, we will prepare for downside risk while continuing to support domestic growth, strengthen resilience and protect vulnerable households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian economy has demonstrated resilience in the recent past, following the fourth-largest contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our economy also noted one of the quickest recoveries, returning to pre-pandemic levels in three years, on the back of a strong recovery in tourism, increased fiscal stimulus, and improved business and consumer confidence. In 2025, we recorded a broad-based growth of around 3.4 percent.

As I have said before, our tourism sector remains a pillar of stability. Visitor arrivals reached a record of around 986,000 in 2025, surpassing the pre-pandemic level by approximately 92,000.

Domestic demand has also been resilient. A broad labour market, steady household income growth, targeted Government spending and strong remittance inflows have supported consumption and business activity.

Inward remittances rose by 1 percent to a record \$1.4 billion in 2025, providing vital support to our families and our communities. Investment activity gained momentum as well, particularly in construction, supported by increased project commencements and some easing in building material costs.

However, the Government must accelerate reforms through streamlined processes and improve the ease of doing business to unlock the pipeline of investment. Our financial system remains sound and supportive.

The banking sector has recorded improved profitability, declining non-performing loans and strong credit growth of 10.5 percent as of January 2026. Interest rates remain low at around 4.5 percent, reflecting the accommodative stance of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, with high liquidity of around \$1.9 billion as at the end of February. This environment continues to provide favourable financing conditions for businesses and households alike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the economic momentum, in the last six months following the 2025-2026 Budget, also reflected in robust revenue performance. Tax collection exceeded projections in the first six months. Between August and January 2026, total collections reached approximately \$1.8 billion, which is \$67.5 million above forecast, representing 52.9 percent of total budgeted tax revenue. This performance underscores improved compliance, stronger economic activity and enhanced revenue administration.

On the external front, pressures are beginning to surface. The trade deficit widened in 2025, driven by high imports and relatively modest export growth. Consequently, the current account deficit is projected to be around 9.8 percent of GDP. Despite these pressures, foreign reserves remained stable at \$3.6 billion at the end of February, to cover around 5.2 months of retained imports, providing a critical buffer against external shock and reaffirming our commitment to macroeconomic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our initial growth projections of 3.3 percent for 2026 and 2027 are now subject to notable downside risks, driven by the escalating global uncertainties and emerging pressures on our tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on our fiscal performance, Government's debt-to-GDP ratio has improved significantly from 91.8 percent in 2022 to around 78.9 percent in 2025, reflecting earlier consolidation and a stronger than expected recovery.

While past revenue overperformance and modest underspending created temporary fiscal space, these gains are insufficient to offset mounting pressures in the months ahead. We will continue to shift decisively towards restoring fiscal discipline, improving expenditure efficiency and accelerating private sector-led growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening reform momentum is not optional. It is essential that is, rebuilding fiscal buffers, safeguarding debt, sustainability and restoring confidence require urgent recalibration of our fiscal consolidation strategy.

The 2026-2027 Medium-Term Fiscal Strategy, we are proposing to bring the deficit back to sustainable levels and place debt on a clear downward trajectory, including increasing or maintaining the level of capital expenditures as compared to operational expenditures.

With limited scope for new taxes, our consolidation effort will focus on expenditure rationalisation, better targeting of subsidies and strict prioritisation of high-impact growth-enhancing investments. The strengthened fiscal controls and improved spending quality will be critical to preserving macroeconomic stability and protecting Fiji's long-term resilience.

This Government firmly believes that the private sector must be the engine of growth, and we are also aware of the real constraints that our businesses are facing. We are serious about private sector-led growth. Their challenges must be addressed decisively through regulatory clarity, improved service delivery, infrastructure upgrade and a stable, predictable policy environment that gives businesses the confidence to invest and expand. In this regard, we have progressed on our ease of doing business processes and hope to launch the same in April next month. Our commitment is still there to increase investments, including foreign direct investments from 15 percent to around 18 percent of GDP, apart from our State-owned enterprises.

Moving on to trade-related matters, I am pleased to share that Fiji has been completely removed from the European Union's blacklist, a list of non-cooperative jurisdictions of the EU where we were blacklisted since 2019. Our removal will deliver significant national benefits, including enhanced trade and investment flows, particularly with EU-linked counterparts, reduced compliance costs, and withholding tax rates for Fijian businesses operating internationally. It will also provide confidence amongst correspondent banks, development financing institutions, and international investors. It will also strengthen eligibility for bilateral and multilateral financial assistance, as well as technical cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the hardworking Officials from the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, the Ministry of Finance, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the Attorney-General and other stakeholders working in tandem to make this happen. The focus now is on maintaining compliance, good governance and adherence to international tax standards.

Our direction is clear and anchored in the new National Development Plan - infrastructure development remains an urgent national priority. Through the Pacific Health Islands Transformation Project, we will receive a package of around \$500 million, supported by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund and Pandemic Fund, that is to modernise our health system, strengthen regional care networks and expand digital and specialised services. I am pleased to inform the House that this financing has become

effective.

This is a transformational investment in the health security of our people. With the construction of the region's first radiotherapy and imaging centre in Suva, and the construction of a 50-bed modular block at Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital, we meet the increase demand in the upgrade and renovation of 17 health facilities across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also acknowledge, with deep appreciation, the commitment of the Government of India, to construct a 100-bed super speciality cardiology hospital in Fiji. Consultations have been completed, and preparatory works are underway. Construction is expected to commence this year. In parallel, we are advancing the development of the CWM Hospital through a direct funding partnership with the Government of Australia and our multilateral financiers. The partnership I have highlighted shows Fiji's growing relationship and our commitment to bringing world-class healthcare closer to our people.

Apart from that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the highlights was last week, the signing of the Mid-Millennium Challenge Corporation Funding Grant of around \$12 million with the USA Deputy Secretary of State, that is to prepare a compact for Fiji with a grant funding in the range of around USD300 million to USD600 million.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the 2026-2027 budget preparation, I wish to inform the House that preparation is already underway and the call for submission, including from our Opposition members. So, we will conduct nationwide consultations, and your submission is important.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government reaffirms its unwavering commitment to sustainable and inclusive growth, social justice, and long-term prosperity, as advocated by His Excellency the President. Together, through partnership and shared purpose, we will build a Fiji that is resilient, inclusive, and prosperous, not just for today, but for generations to come. *Vinaka vakalevu* and thank You.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Members of Parliament; a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to some of the key features of the Address made by His Excellency the President of Fiji at the opening of the new session of Parliament on 16th February. His Excellency had briefly touched on the focus and future development direction that the Government will embark on or continue to pursue in this parliamentary session.

His Excellency mentioned that we need to focus on development and be people centred. It is now more than three years since the Coalition Government took office, promising an improved quality of life for ordinary citizens, jobs, economic recovery and good governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his opening Address that the Household Income and Expenditure Survey confirms that hardship persists for many households, particularly among low-income families in the interior, rural, maritime and urban communities.

The suffering is real. It is daily and felt by every household across our nation. This Government was mandated to deliver and improve the quality of life, yet today we see the opposite - one of the clearest examples of policy inconsistency and poor judgment that has contributed to hardship has been the handling of Value Added Tax (VAT).

In 2023, this Coalition Government increased VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent without adequate planning or proper assessment of its impact on low and middle-income families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the result was immediate and severe. The cost of living surged, food prices rose, basic household goods became more expensive and ordinary Fijians, from farmers to factory workers, from market vendors to civil servants, felt the burden instantly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the damage had already been done, the Government then reduced VAT to 12.5 percent last year, but by then, the hardship had already deepened. Many families had slipped further into poverty. Businesses had already adjusted prices upward, and confidence was already shaken. This was not strategic fiscal management. This was damage control, and now, as we approach the general elections, there is speculation that VAT may be adjusted again, not out of economic principle, but out of political convenience.

The people of Fiji deserve stable and well considered policies, not trial-and-error taxation that punishes them first and corrects itself later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President stated in his opening Address that the Government has commenced a review of the Constitution. I urge the Government that amendments to the 2013 Constitution should not be rushed but ought to be done according to the procedures set out in the Constitution itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, changes must be transparent and inclusive to ensure the voices of all Fijians across all communities, generations and divisions are heard and respected, as stated by His Excellency the President. When it comes to constitutional amendments, there must not be any shortcuts. Any constitutional amendments must be enacted through a transparent consultative process that reflects the people's will. The review must be undertaken carefully, guided by the principles of democratic process, good governance and respect for the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, constitutional governance must strengthen national unity and protect the fundamental human rights of the people of Fiji. At its core, this process must be defined by meaningful public participation, openness and dialogue, not political convenience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address the Government's commitment to improving living standards and access to secure, resilient and well-planned housing across Fiji. The upgrading of informal settlements started in 2020 by the former government. The start was good but, unfortunately, the progress under the Coalition Government very slow and in some areas, there is no progress, and residents are in limbo.

One good example is residents living in informal settlements in Delaisaweni and Nabare and nearby areas in Lautoka. Residents do not have any idea how long it will take, how much it will cost and where to go to get more information on this.

It is Government's responsibility to meet the residents of informal settlements and brief them on Government's plans, and timeframes by which the settlements would be formalised, and people should not be kept in the dark and should not be made to run in circles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Opening Address that the Government is prioritising the delivery of high-quality, equitable and relevant education. Sir, high-quality education can only be delivered when schools across Fiji have the required number of teachers in classrooms. Many schools had serious staffing issues last year and even this year when school started for the academic year. Six weeks into the term, the Ministry of Education is still struggling to resolve these

issues across early childhood, primary and secondary schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving education quality requires a holistic approach, focusing on enhancing teacher training, fostering a positive and safe environment, and strengthening the Ministry of Education and Teacher Partnership. If education is a priority, then no classroom should be without a teacher. It is the teacher who makes the difference, not the classroom. Teacher shortage impacts teaching and learning, and that contributes to poor exam results if teachers are not in the classroom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, quality education can be delivered when schools have teachers, and in Fiji, schools are struggling due to a shortage of teachers. The reason teachers have resigned and left for jobs abroad. The little pay rise for teachers is not enough to cushion the high cost of living, and many teachers are leaving for jobs abroad, particularly to Australia and New Zealand, who pay teachers well and they will not resign. The Ministry of Education should come up with teacher retention strategies.

His Excellency emphasised in his Address that essential learning resources, complemented by financial assistance is reducing barriers for learners, particularly in interior, rural and maritime areas. I agree that learning resources and financial assistance can reduce barriers for learners if they are provided at the right time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, schools depend on the Free Education Grant (FEG) to buy essential learning resources for students. Grants to schools should be released on time. How can schools buy essential resources if FEG is not released on time? The Ministry of Education should ensure that proper planning is done and grants to all schools are released on time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated by His Excellency, financial assistance to students is important. This year, parents and students raised serious concerns because they did not receive their Back-to-School Assistance when the schools opened for Term 1.

Parents and students were sent from one office to another while trying to resolve outstanding payments, creating frustration and unnecessary hardship. The explanation offered by the Ministry of Education was that forms were not filled out correctly. This was simply a lame excuse. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to ensure that application forms are properly verified in a timely and efficient manner. Administrative shortcomings should not result in penalties for parents and students.

Many families depend on this assistance to purchase essential school supplies including bags, uniforms and stationery. Delays place added financial pressure on households and risk negatively impacting students' academic performance.

If the education of our children is truly a priority, these issues must be addressed urgently. The Ministry of Education must act decisively to ensure proper staffing, a transparent appointment process and ensure uninterrupted learning for students across the country. Mr. Speaker, Sir, children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future. Children are the future of our country, and we want to see all of them educated, and no one is left behind. If the Coalition Government fails to address the issue, we will see an increase in youth on the streets committing crimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the issues remain unaddressed, quality education cannot be delivered to our children. His Excellency stated in his Address that enhanced service delivery across rural communities and focus areas will include water and transport. I totally agree that service delivery in rural and remote areas should improve.

Last few weeks, some residents of Saweni, Wairabetia, Lawaki Feeder Road and Rabi were without water. The broader concern is that this Government is now in its fourth year in office and yet we continue to see recurring water issues across many parts of the country. What the people of Fiji expect is not merely temporary measures, but a clear and sustainable long-term strategy to address water supply challenges. These ongoing complaints highlight the need for stronger planning, greater investment and more decisive action to ensure that reliable water services are delivered to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned in his Address that the Government is advancing improvements to our national road network and transport. As a Member of Parliament from Lautoka, I regularly receive complaints from residents in Viseisei Back Road and surrounding communities regarding the absence of reliable bus service. This has been an issue since 2023, and the Government has shown a blatant disregard for the poor bus service. This has left students and members of the public to scramble for whatever form of transport they can find, just to get to school, work or access basic services.

Beyond the condition of our roads, the Coalition Government should come up with innovative ideas in managing the development of our national road network. We now have citizens complaining daily about severe traffic congestion along the Suva-Nausori corridor in Lami and in parts of Lautoka, Nadi and Ba. The Coalition Government has presented no clear or comprehensive plan to address this growing traffic concern. Instead of adopting a preventive and forward-looking approach to infrastructure planning, the Government appears to be reacting only after problems have already reached a crisis point.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we are seeing is a Government that is increasingly disconnected from the everyday struggles of ordinary Fijians at the grassroots level. Instead of addressing these pressing realities, we continue to hear grand announcements and ambitious projects that too often translate into inconvenience, frustration and hardship for the very people they are meant to serve. Development must not exist only in speeches and reports. It must be felt in the daily lives of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the past year has highlighted the pressing challenges that our nation faces - challenges that demand leadership with vision, courage and the ability to deliver real solutions.

The struggles of our people, from the rising cost of living to the lack of clear strategies to address economic and social issues, cannot be ignored. While promises have been many, solutions have been few. Yet, amid these difficulties, the resilience and strength of our people have been steadfast.

Unfortunately, the state of affairs under this Government for approximately the past 39 months has not been up to expectation. Let us remain hopeful and determined. We, in the Opposition, will continue to advocate policies that prioritise our people's needs, protect the livelihood and safety of our Fijians and build a future that leaves no one behind. Together we can create the change our nation desperately needs. God bless Fiji and its people.

MR. SPEAKER.- We have four more speakers on our list, and I wish that we continue and complete the list at one sitting. If I do not hear any objection, we will proceed accordingly. Therefore, I will now ask the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you alluded to, we need to finish today's Order Paper with the four contributions.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians listening through television or live streaming today; good afternoon and *ni sa bula vinaka*.

I rise today to lend my support to the honourable Prime Minister's motion in thanking His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. Before I do so, I would like to pay tribute to Ratu Manasa Naisolevu Kalounivutia, *Na i Taukei Vuniwi, Turaga Na Tui Kuku* and the *Vunivalu* of the *Vanua* of Nailagolaba, who was called to rest a month ago. Allow me to say a few words in the vernacular and then in English.

Vakaturaga saka ki Nailagolaba vua saka na Turaga na Tui Kuku na Vunivalu. Ena vukudra saka na turaga na Prime Minister, na Matanitu Cokovata ni Lewenivanua kei na Soqosoqo Na People's Alliance, au sa mai tauca saka tiko na neimami vakavinavinaka ena nomuni veitokoni na Turaga Na Tui Kuku, mai rawa kina na qaqa ena 2022. Keitou sa na saga me vakacavari na nomuni tatadra me baleta na suka saka ni qele mai Nailagolaba.

The *Turaga Na Tui Kuku* was a strong supporter, Mr. Speaker, of the honourable Prime Minister and myself and was crucial in consolidating our power base in Tailevu South. The People's Alliance Party and the Government are grateful for his support. We thank the *vanua* of Nailagolaba, his family as well.

The *Turaga Tui Kuku's* vision, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was for his people to be able to resolve the issues around crown land reversion in his area. We will make sure this is resolved.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, I would like to wish everyone in this august House a very merry, happy Chinese New Year. I am certain, that it is not lost on the honourable Members of this House, that this is our final debate of His Excellency's Address before we go to the polls.

The Year of the Fire Horse only happens once every 60 years: once in a lifetime, one could argue. So, 2026 will be a special year for Fiji. The horse, not according to Nadroga, but according to the Chinese, is associated with speed, independence and energy. When the element of fire is added, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is regarded as double fire. Therefore, this year will be very special, a very fast energy-filled year, and a fiery year for us all. I wish us all good luck and best wishes in our final session in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency's Address, once again, was filled with wisdom. It exhorts us to reflect on our past. We have risen and fallen together. We have had four constitutions, and yet we are still together. We have tried to build a nation of Fiji with multiculturalism at its core.

His Excellency reminds us correctly that unity does not arise automatically by diversity, but must be consciously built through fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership, and a shared commitment to the common good. Sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir we have had some issues on this side of the House in the last three years, but we have endeavoured to build fair laws, and to consult extensively where necessary.

The child protection laws, mooted by the honourable Tabuya and passed in this House is a classic case in point. Getting rid of Bill No. 17, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the laws relating to women's use of surnames in the electoral roll, a ridiculous law, and getting rid of the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA) once and for all.

Leadership in this House has lost the arrogance that we saw for eight years exhibited in this august Chamber, and there is a feeling that we are all finally working together for the common good.

The return of the GCC is a final signal of respectful leadership in this country. So, we have been endeavouring to bring His Excellency's advice to fruition, and we all agree that there is more to do this year.

Mr. Speaker, I thought I would use my speech today to link key parts of His Excellency's Address to what has been done by this Government. I will speak specifically about private sector-led growth, economic diversification, and digital transformation and communication. If I have time, I will address some of the hot air that has been emanating from that side of the House.

In terms of private sector-led growth and economic diversification, I have to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this Government has done well. Despite the headwinds noted over the course of three years the Ukraine war and challenges at home, our economy has been resilient and buoyant. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been maintained at historic averages of 3 percent or higher. Liquidity remains high, which helps the cost of borrowing, and our foreign reserves are stable. The investment pipeline has now reached \$7 billion and continues to grow in positive momentum.

The Access to Business Fund Act 2025, the development of MSME funding packages and assistance by commercial banks such as Bank of the South Pacific (BSP), Home Finance Company (HFC), Fiji Development Bank (FDB), Bred Bank and Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) is assisting in developing or growing the economy. The increased support of MSMEs and cooperatives across the Government Ministries is laying a solid foundation to a key part of Fiji's economy.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a focus on the *iTaukei* economy with Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL), Merchant Finance, the *iTaukei* Trust Fund and *iTaukei* Land Trust Board (*iTLTB*), providing good grants and financing packages as appropriate. Collaboration with the private sector has been progressing well and the MSME Strategic Plan was launched late last year to drive the MSME and Co-operative sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, the Co-operative movement is the key to unlocking the rural economy of Fiji. As we speak, economic diversification of Fiji is genuinely happening. In Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Google is investing in four subsea cables in Fiji, and Starlink will start opening up remote areas of Fiji. 120 villages are about to receive Starlink connections very soon and will grow to around 300 villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector is booming, with over 8,000 jobs created so far, equating to over \$300 million in foreign exchange. At least six new BPO operators have already started operating in Fiji since our takeover of Government. The \$400 million Lyndhurst Business Park is about to begin construction, and upon completion, there will be an expectation that about 15,000 jobs will be created from this singular investment.

In commercial agriculture, FIJI Water has begun citrus production in Vanua Levu and are looking at mangoes and pawpaw as well. Aitken Spence is about to start in Fiji and is looking at pineapples, banana and even strawberries up in Nadarivatu. A few companies are producing vegetables at scale now, which will help replace imports of vegetables on our shelves and also in hotels, hopefully, and export of pineapples to New Zealand just started recently.

Goodman Fielder and Rooster are looking at developing local feed for its poultry business, which translates to about \$18 million in import replacement. It is likely to reduce the cost of feed for poultry significantly and ultimately transfer to the price of chicken.

A Kava Bill is now being enacted to boost the potential billion-dollar industry and will be brought to this House soon. I hope the Medicinal Cannabis Bill will follow soon after. A company called ONA Coffee is working with other coffee players in Fiji to market Fiji as a specialty coffee destination. They are already looking at setting up in Ra, and a 300-acre cocoa farm is being set up in Dreketi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of aquaculture, there is a possibility to kick-start a genuine prawn industry in Fiji. The import replacement potential is around \$21 million. High-level discussions have now begun with FDB and FHL. We have the local expertise, and ultimately, we can not only look at import replacement but also exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also closely watching the developments in terms of the East New Britain initiative, which hopes to create a tuna industry for the Pacific. There are development partners lined up, and I am sure this will progress in the next few years. Of course, oyster production is fine-tuned in Savusavu, and I am confident that soon some of these oysters may find its way to our hotels and discerning palates offshore. Tilapia farming and Half Pearl production are some of the other areas of opportunity. Nama Fiji is opening up opportunities in terms of seaweed cosmetics.

Aquaculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a global billion-dollar industry and Fiji has the opportunity to realise some of the opportunities that I have mentioned. After all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are 99 percent water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in forestry, the Mahogany Bill is about to be tabled for passing soon, and I hope that we can finally unlock the \$100 million industry in Fiji and provide, more importantly, a measure of economic justice to the landowners of the Mahogany Forest who have suffered under the previous regime. Agarwood, bamboo, and sandalwood are also very interesting market opportunities that are currently being pursued.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even in tourism, our powerhouse diversification also continues. The Sofitel Vatutalei High End Resort and the Kerzner Nacula One&Only Resort in Yasawa will commence Fiji's foray into Ultra High-end Luxury to Fiji. Construction of the Nacula development is imminent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you can see, we have not been messing around. A lot of work has been done to genuinely build a diversified economy here at home, and of course, work closely with the private sector. I will now touch on digital transformation and communication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the words of His Excellency stating that digital transformation is the foundation for resilient and sustainable growth. In Fiji, one of the key issues facing the private sector and our citizens is the need to greatly enhance or resolve the challenges with ease of doing business, which will result in eliminating red tape, making approval processes efficient and transparent, and also making things more pleasant as well.

This Government has taken genuine steps to address these issues, but we all agree that more needs to be done. Initiatives such as the Starting A Business (SABS) process and building permit approval processes are a harbinger of things to come. The National Digital Strategy, which was launched last year, will now create a pathway for genuine digitalisation across all Government ministries and processes.

A National ID will be introduced at least in the next 12 months and will set a platform for a greater and better ease of doing business environment. In the meantime, some agencies, such as LTA have embarked on their digital journey, and the results are impressive. This is where the country is headed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Digital Strategy will also look at reforming laws such as the Telecommunications Act, introducing laws relating to data protection, laws that can manage Facebook access, and misinformation and disinformation. I am certain this will address some of His Excellency's concerns about freedom of expression and the fact that with freedom of speech comes grave responsibility.

Finally, before I resume my seat, one of the reasons I am excited about 2026 is the fact that we will decide on a new Constitution for Fiji, and we will have a major opportunity to unite this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 Constitution has many flaws. His Excellency talked about a document that reflects the aspirations, values and lived realities of all Fijians, I repeat, all Fijians. Some say we need a lot of time. I say we do not need too much time. Six to eight months will be enough, why? We have seen the limitations and challenges of this Constitution for the last 11 years and know exactly what needs to be changed. The areas of common concern are many, the areas of contention are very few. We just need Mr. Speaker to work together, and it is therefore my hope and prayer that this House works collectively for the sake of the people of Fiji to fashion a Constitution that takes us forward as one country united under God.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I close, may I be allowed just to address some of the hot air that was emanating from the other side of the House. The honourable Kumar talked about crowding out, and crowding out means is where Government borrowing limits the amount of borrowing that the private sector can do. At the moment, liquidity in our country is \$2 billion, so there is no crowding out. I am not sure what sort of facts honourable Kumar was using when she said there was crowding out. On top of that, because of the liquidity being high, the cost of borrowing remains low, and that is because of the good management on this side of the House.

In terms of cost of living, I am not sure where the other side of the House was, when the honourable Professor Biman Prasad actually announced the budget of that year to the House. If we all remember vividly, much of the money that was gained through revenue went straight back out to the people of Fiji. In terms of increased funding for ministries, in terms of the Back-to-school \$40 million, bus fare, social welfare adjustments, et cetera. Finally, on inflation, I am not sure where she got her facts from, but on inflation at the moment, is well contained.

Finally, I would like to address a point by the honourable Leader of the Opposition on HIV/AIDS and the drug issue. My question is, what did the previous side of the House do before we came into office? I will ask that question again. What did the other side of the House do before we came into office?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I hope in my speech I have reflected what this Government has been doing in three specific areas as mentioned in His Excellency's speech. I can assure you, Sir, that each minister in this House can similarly talk about what they have been doing and the major work that has been achieved over the last three years. Economic diversification is real. Private sector collaboration has been genuine and real and the digital transformation pathway that is ahead of us is not only real but will transform Fiji. It has been an honour to serve the people of Fiji over the last three years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but there is still much to do and I am sure that all of us will probably be thinking of returning next year to continue the good work that we have been doing in rebuilding this wonderful country.

With a constitutional reset on the horizon, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am optimistic about Fiji's future and fully support His Excellency's most gracious Address.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, I rise today with humility and gratitude to offer my response and deliver my right of reply to this august House to the esteemed Address delivered by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji Islands. A very good afternoon to each and everyone of you present here today, at home and those listening and watching via other mediums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am deeply saddened by the recent killing of late Constable Peniasi Racagi that has shaken our community and reminded us of the fragile nature of peace and human life. Such acts of violence not only take away innocent lives, but also have families grieving, communities fearful, and societies searching for answers. Today, I remember the victim and extend my deepest condolences to the family and loved ones who are enduring unimaginable pain. May Almighty God bless his soul.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate the Fiji 7s Team at Vancouver 7s, though they lost in the semi-final, failure is not the end, it is the start of their comeback.

On safety and security, the safety and security of our people is the most solemn responsibility of any Government. In recent years, many Fijians have voiced concern about the growing presence of illegal drugs in communities. Under the current Coalition Government, some Fijians feel that the country is facing a serious challenge with drug trafficking and substance abuse. Communities that were once known for strong cultural values and close family ties are increasingly worried about the social consequences of drugs, which can weaken social structures, create crimes and put pressure on already struggling families.

For indigenous Fijians, these concerns are often tied to the protection of culture, land and traditional ways of life. Community leaders frequently emphasise that if drug use continues to rise, it will harm the wellbeing of future generations. Many fear that addiction, crime and loss of direction among youth could slowly erode the cultural identity and stability of indigenous communities. Elders often stress that protecting culture requires strong leadership, effective law enforcement and

community-based solutions. Strong border control, better policing and improved education about drug dangers are often suggested as key steps, together with community leaders, supporting youth, strengthening cultural values and encouraging healthy lifestyles. If these efforts work together, many believe Fiji can protect its people and ensure a safer future for the next generation.

Agricultural Diversity and Strengthening Agriculture Sector — Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a country with rich natural resources, fertile land and a suitable climate for agriculture. With these advantages, Fiji has the potential to become self-sufficient in food production. For agriculture to grow, there must be a fair system that benefits both farmers and landowners. Providing a long-term lease allows farmers to access loans and invest in improving their farms, which increases food production. At the same time, native owners should be paid a fair market rental for the use of their land. This ensures that landowners receive proper benefits while farmers have security. They need to develop agricultural land, which will strengthen the agriculture sector and support national food security.

The iTaukei Land Trust Board should mediate and facilitate discussions between landowners and farmers to ensure fair agreements and long-term cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should provide incentives to farmers by giving them proper infrastructure. For example, the people of Valley Road, Nabitu and the surrounding areas, known as the Salad Bowl of Fiji, if they stop farming, Viti Levu will have a shortage of vegetables, and the price will increase by 400 percent to 500 percent. The Coalition Government should look into the road conditions of Kavanagasau to Nabitu, which are in the worst condition and should be tarsealed. Majority of the vegetables are coming from Valley Road, Nabitu and those areas.

The Government should give incentives to farmers for agriculture and diversity, where farmers can start with a variety of crops, livestock and farming systems. The Government should give incentives to farmers for agricultural diversity where farmers can start with variety of crops, livestock and farming system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's ambassadors should be proactive in finding new markets for our agricultural products rather than just enjoying themselves abroad, as some Ambassadors seem to be cronies of the present Coalition Government without much knowledge and experience.

I think we should not forget the COVID pandemic, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think you have to withdraw the comment you have just made. I do not think you have any proof whatsoever that our Ambassadors abroad are not doing anything, do you?

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, I will withdraw.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's infrastructure is in pathetic condition, with very little improvement or new development with this Coalition Government. So far, we have seen the projects of the previous government being cheered by this present Government. People of this nation are frustrated because the Government often says that there is no money, yet operating expenses continues to rise while capital investments decline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the current Government, the operating expense to capital expense ratio is around 74 percent to 26 percent from 2023 to 2025 while during the previous government, the ratio was around 32.3 percent to 67.7 percent from 2017 to 2022. This simply means that more infrastructure work such as bridges, roads, power supply, telecommunication and others were carried out during the era of the previous government. Changing the name of a ministry does not

automatically increase its capacity or effectiveness. What really matters is resources, planning, action and a visionary leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Land Development and Management of our natural resources are an issue of great importance to our nation. Land is one of our most valuable assets. It sustains our communities, supports agriculture, encourages investment, and provides opportunities. If managed wisely, land development can create employments, improve infrastructure and raise the standard of living for our people. However, development must be balanced with responsibility. Our natural resources - forests, rivers, oceans, and fertile land must be protected and used sustainably. Short term gain should never come at a cost of long-term environmental damage or the loss of resources for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actions of the Lands Department in leasing green reserve area is an example of decision that raise serious concerns about how our land resources are being exploited. Green land reserve with a creek crossing near the Suva Motor Inn has been fenced and it seems that a development will be taking place soon.

Furthermore, a road reserve as per Scheme Plan but on Survey Plan SO 3699, Lot 19, it is stated as a State land without a title and has been leased which used to serve easement to the *tiri* land at the rear where residents of that area catch crabs from. I request the honourable Minister for Lands to look into it as people seem to be taking advantage of errors on plan.

We are seeing developments taking place without properly fulfilling the requirements of the Town and Country Planning Regulations. These requirements exist for a reason – to ensure that developments are safe, properly planned and environmentally responsible and in the best interest of the public.

I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Local Government for recent outburst that all conditions of development have to be met. Thank you, honourable Minister. Furthermore, I am also thankful to the honourable Minister for his involvement with the Tanoa Hotel's stormwater which was affecting some residents of Legalega, Nadi. That area has a drainage problem, and I look forward to a thorough investigation by the Ministry as it seems that the Nadi Town Council was reluctant to address the issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, delaying concerns by the Ministry of Land is an ongoing issue. Some cases turnaround times are more than six months and at times documents get misplaced. People are frustrated, lose interest and delays timely investments. Some consent seems to be deliberately delayed.

Civil servants should be always reminded that they are working for the public and they should serve them with respect, dignity and with responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has spoken many times in his Address about integrity and good governance.

Recently, the honourable Minister of Lands has echoed fossil fuel (oil exploration), which is in the Bligh Water basin of Fiji. It will be prohibitively expensive due to deep water offshore challenges, and complex geological structures. Some of the factors driving high potential extraction costs in that area are deep water and offshore challenges, small market scales, geological complexity, and environmental protection.

This somewhat gives false hope to our Fijian people, rather than spending funds on these areas, it is better to utilise the same to improve other sectors of our natural resources and development of indigenous land in terms of better roads, water supply, power supply and more importantly in the agricultural sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has said in his Address that majority of land is collectively owned by the *vanua* and significant areas remain under-utilised, hence the Government should focus on those areas.

Before I proceed further, I would like to request the honourable Minister of Lands to look into the VanuaGIS, which has not been operational since the starting of February and is hindering the daily routine work of valuers, real estate, housing and most of the Government departments. We have called many times, but there is no fruitful solution. We look forward to a speedy action and hope that the honourable Minister is aware of it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmers can survive and strengthen the sugar industry if they are supported to diversify through intercropping. Sugarcane farmers should not depend on a single crop, but by planting short term crops, farmers can earn additional income while waiting for cane harvest.

Farmers continue to face serious challenges that threaten the sustainability of the sector. Some of the major difficulties is the shortage of labour during harvesting, high cost of labour, transportation cost which delays farm operations and reduces productivity. If we truly want to revive the sugar industry, the Government should address labour shortages and improve transportation support so that farmers can continue to sustain this important industry.

Another factor which the Government should look into is the regular breakdown of meals, which are a major concern. Rakiraki Mill was supposed to be constructed as per the promise by honourable Charan Jeath Singh, but nothing eventuated in three years, and he was later removed from the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, says the Government has not yet publicly set out a detailed list of specific constitutional changes it wants to make. Section 28 of the 2013 Constitution gives the *iTaukei* landowners the guaranteed protection to their land, ensuring it remains under communal ownership and cannot be sold to non-*iTaukei*. However, under the 1997 Constitution, there were no such provisions, and section 6 of the *iTaukei* Land Trust Act (Cap 134) had the provision to transfer Native land to State, and that section of *iTaukei* Land Trust Act was used to betray the indigenous landowners. Why I am saying this is because the land is very close to their hearts and *vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the elections is looming, we should not make false promises to our people. We must speak frankly about the issues in the upcoming elections. Time and again, the people of Fiji have been promised of jobs, better services and improved livelihoods, only to see little or no action after the vote. This undermines public trust, weakens democracy and leaves ordinary citizens disillusioned.

As an Independent Opposition Member of Parliament, I call on all political leaders to be honest and transparent with the people. Campaign pledges must be realistic, achievable and backed by clear plans so that voters can hold their leaders accountable. For example, not like one of the politicians was harping about reducing tax and VAT on lamb chops, lamb shanks and lamb neck, but after in Government, nothing happened. The people deserve the truth, not empty promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end with a quote of a great leader, late Atal Bihari Vajpayee and I quote:

"Democracy thrives when leaders listen more than they speak and place the nation's interest above personal ambition or political advantages."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's needs a leader who knows what is happening and is aware of the Government's daily business and operations. Fiji needs a decisive and visionary leader who puts the nation and Fijians first. I wish my Muslim brothers and sisters a blessed Ramadan. Thank you and God bless Fiji.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, our viewers joining us in the gallery and on livestream – *ni sa bula vinaka saka, namaste* and a very good afternoon to you all.

I rise today in full support of the vision set out by His Excellency the President in his Opening Address of Parliament 2026. His Excellency reminded us that the true strength of Fiji is not measured merely in economic indicators or infrastructure projects, but in our unity, our compassion and our collective resolve to protect every Fijian, especially the most vulnerable among us.

Before I proceed further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to acknowledge the women of Fiji. To the women of Fiji, we see you, we hear you, and we stand with you. Equality must not remain a promise. It must become your lived reality.

To the women who have gone before us, to those in our homes, in our communities, and in this august House, to those who are struggling in silence, those who lead with courage, those who pave the way for the others, and those who work quietly so others may succeed, I say a happy International Women's Day. And to the men who stand beside our mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts and nieces, thank you. If we are to mend our Fiji, we must journey together. For if we journey together, we will journey far.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I echo His Excellency's heartfelt appreciation to our faith leaders. Their partnership with law enforcement and community authorities in confronting illicit drugs is not only commendable, it is essential at a time when drugs threaten our youth and undermine the very fabric of our society. Strengthening of our families and community solidarity are among our most powerful defense.

Our government is very focused on targeted alleviation of poverty and after Cabinet's endorsement, our Ministry has been undertaking a review of the 1999 Fiji Poverty Alleviation and Eradication Strategy Framework. We have completed consultations and now are developing framework that will guide poverty alleviation efforts through to 2030. This framework is not simply a policy document, it is a national commitment.

It will ensure that our programmes are efficient, targeted, evidence-based and sustainable. Its broader goals are clear that people experiencing poverty have equitable access to opportunities and essential services across all the government agencies, that they are enabled to participate fully in society and that they develop the capabilities needed to improve their wellbeing sustainably.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Coalition Government remains steadfast in strengthening Fiji's social protection systems through our national commitment to gender equality, inclusion and dignity for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of December 2025:

- more than 108,000 Fijians received assistance through our four major social protection programmes;
- 46,000 benefit from mobility assistance; and
- 22,000 receive transport support.

These are not just numbers. They represent families who can put food on the table, elderly citizens who can access care and children who can go to school with dignity.

In line with His Excellency's call for a more responsive and inclusive system, the Ministry is undertaking ambitious reforms. Guided by the 2021 Social Assistance Policy, we are rolling out a new social protection management information system and in the process of finalising our Integrated Beneficiary Management System. These digital reforms will streamline operations, strengthen our accountability, reduce duplication and improve service delivery. We are updating the Proxy Means Test model for the family assistance scheme using the latest household expenditure data to ensure fairness and accuracy. We are strengthening, monitoring and evaluation framework so that every dollar spent delivers measurable impact.

Mr. Speaker, social protection must not trap people into dependency. It must open doors to independence. We have started to pilot economic inclusion programmes for our social protection beneficiaries:

- 99 beneficiaries have completed Start Your Own Business Training in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce;
- 160 recipients have received seed grants to establish income generation programmes from poultry farming, fishing to tailoring, catering and handicrafts;
- Skills training partnership with Fiji National University (FNU) and Flour Mills of Fiji (FMF) have equipped beneficiaries with sewing and baking skills; and
- We are now working with more families, from poverty to productivity, from dependence to dignity.

Mr. Speaker, when a nation empowers its women, it secures its own future and prosperity. In 2026, our national priority is the implementation of the Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP) 2025-2030. We have set bold national targets:

- increasing women's labour force participation to 60 percent by 2030; and
- expanding women-owned MSMEs to 50 percent by 2029.

These are not symbolic targets, they are transformative commitments, it is a shift away from tokenistic, short-term or symbolic gestures towards structural, long-term investment in gender equality. We are shifting our focus from just awareness to market-driven, measurable, results-orientated interventions, and our priorities include expanding digital inclusion for rural women, ensuring geography does not determine their destiny.

Strengthening product development and market readiness for women artisans, revitalising women's market platforms and help set up centralised markets for rural women's products, so they have an easy access to market and they can get cash readily. To work with the Ministry of Agriculture to support the National Women's Agriculture Symposium, recognising women as central to food security and primary industries. Establishing structured mentorship programmes for women-led businesses and strengthening women's leadership pathways within the civil service.

However, empowerment is not only economic, it is also about safety, justice and dignity. We have launched shelter guidelines for Gender-Based Violence Safe Homes, progressed the National

Action Plan to prevent violence against women and girls and completed our sixth CEDAW reporting cycle. Survivors must receive timely, compassionate and effective support. Justice must be delivered because if justice is delayed, it is justice denied. For this reason, service delivery protocol across all agencies have been reviewed to ensure support and justice is delivered on time.

Gender equality is not a women's issue, it is a national development imperative. Through gender transformative institutional capacity development, this Government is working to integrate women's needs into policies and budgets across 14 government agencies.

Mr. Speaker, the rise in substance abuse among our youth demands urgent and unified action. Recent child-focused policies including the Child Justice Act, Child Care and Protection Act 2024 and Fiji Health Promoting Schools and School Health Policy 2024-2029 creates opportunities to address the impact of the drugs crisis on children and adolescents within existing Government frameworks.

We are establishing Child Wellbeing and a Recovery Centre to help rehabilitate and reintegrate our children who are on the streets and struggling with drug addiction. We are also establishing a National Alcohol and Other Drugs Rehabilitation Centre for girls in partnership with Empower Pacific. But rehabilitation is not enough. We must prevent, intervene early and support reintegration.

However, rehabilitation is not enough. We are also establishing a National Alcohol and Other Drugs Rehabilitation Centre for girls in partnership with Empower Pacific. However, rehabilitation is not enough. We must prevent, intervene early and support reintegration. We need to ensure we are providing wrap-around services for children exposed to drugs, delivering case management to make sure their complex needs are handled in a comprehensive way.

In partnership with UNICEF Pacific and Government of Japan, we are embarking on a project for prevention measures against drug use among children and youth. This four-year project will support national systems, strengthen community resilience, and ensure holistic services across our ministries are available for children and adolescents to remain healthy, safe from drugs, and thriving. Importantly, it will involve linking with civil society and faith-based organisations who have a key role to play and have already offered their services.

We are working with our partners on developing a National Action Plan to prevent all forms of violence against our children. This initiative reflects our urgent commitment to safeguarding every child, recognising that their safety is a non-negotiable foundation for our nation's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, dignity must extend to every stage of life and ability. The revised Fiji Disability Policy 2025-2035 marks a decisive shift from recognising rights to realising them. It prioritises accessibility, inclusive education, rehabilitation, economic empowerment and protection for persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities.

For older persons, recent data shows an alarming rise in psychological and financial exploitation. We are working on strengthening protections for older persons and are in the process of reviewing the national ageing policy that expired more than a decade ago to ensure that our elders who built this nation live in security and respect. We are working with the Ministry of Housing and HART Homes to ensure we have additional age care facilities to take care of our older persons in need within this financial year, while we scope to upgrade and develop aged care facilities in Suva and Lautoka.

His Excellency has asked us all to recommit ourselves to the spirit of nationhood, not only on Fiji Day, but every day acknowledging unity and diversity. As a nation, we have had many traumatic events and carry many wounds. We need to heal these wounds if we wish to build nationhood. As Nelson Mandela said in his autobiography – *A Long Walk to Freedom*, and I quote: “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

We have to collectively take responsibility, take the time to reflect and heal in order not to pass our trauma to future generations. The Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission creates this platform, and His Excellency has urged us all to make use of this platform so we can collectively, genuinely move the nation forward. Let us celebrate our diversity by respecting different traditions and engaging in cross-cultural events, fostering deeper mutual understanding within our communities.

This month is very special indeed. It is Chinese New Year and Happy Chinese New Year to our Chinese brothers and sisters. This month is considered holy in most of our traditions and I wish *Ramadan Mubarak* to our Muslim brothers and sisters, *Holi ki shubh kaamnaye* to our Hindu brothers and sisters and wish our Christian brothers and sisters a meaningful Lent season.

In conclusion, His Excellency the President has set a clear and principled direction for our nation, one grounded in unity, compassion and shared responsibility. Our work reflects his vision across poverty reduction, women's empowerment, child protection, disability inclusion and support for older persons, and the Coalition Government is committed to delivering for the most vulnerable.

To this House, let us rise above division where it matters the most. The vulnerable do not ask which side of the aisle we sit on. They ask only whether we will stand for them. Our direction is firm, our commitment is unwavering and our work continues. May God bless Fiji.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament and most importantly, the people of Fiji; I join others who have spoken before me, to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address in the Opening of the 2026 Session of Parliament. I summarised His Excellency's Address outlining today's pivotal juncture of our nation, a moment that demands not merely reflection but radical renewal of our civic duties.

In his Address, His Excellency spoke with great emphasis regarding the 152 years of our journey since the Deed of Cession. For many, that number is a point of pride, a milestone of history, but if we are honest, those 152 years has also been a lifespan of Colonial hangover that run so deep in my generation that it has become a poison and a self-built prison.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even today in 2026, I see a desperate desire where some to push this nation back to a subservient position to act as if we are still subjects, waiting for permission to progress. We have endured hardships of independence. We have bled, sweated, sacrificed to become a sovereign nation. Why is it that some of us still crave the cold comfort of change of a Colonial mindset?

His Excellency added, asked us to pause and reflect, that we may draw wisdom from our past and gain clarity for our future directions. Clarity requires us to admit that we are still haunted by the ghost of 1874. We speak of sovereignty, yet we act with the hesitation of the colonised. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the reflective pause.

His Excellency the President called for an honest evaluation of whether we are truly free in our minds or we are merely administrators of a legacy that was never meant for our prosperity. His

Excellency highlighted the pending Constitutional Review. We need to ensure transparency over ambiguity in this exercise. His Excellency confirmed that the Coalition Government commence a review of the 2013 Constitution promising a robust public debate on the Amendment Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must remind Parliament that we have stood on this ground before. Last year, during the debate of the failed Constitution (Amendment) Bill, the Opposition asked the same fundamental question and we ask again today - "What exactly do you want to change and why?"

Transparency is not a buzz word to be used in a speech and discarded in Committee rooms. It is the lifeblood of a democracy. If a change is truly for the betterment of the nation, if it strengthens the right of our people and the stability of our democracy, we will support it. But if these changes are designed to benefit a few, to consolidate power, or to create legal loopholes for political convenience, then our answer is a resounding no.

We must put our people first. We demand a process that is not rushed. We need robust consultation that goes beyond a town hall meeting in Suva. We need our people in the maritime islands and rural highlands to understand how their fundamental law is being altered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Government is sincere about rehabilitating public confidence, as His Excellency the President suggested, then let us start putting all the cards on the table. Show us the draft, tell us the why, anything less is just more of the same Colonial style of governance where the few decided for the many. We must look at dismantling the Colonial fiction of incapacity. For 152 years, our resources have been taken. For 152 years, *iTaukei* resource owners have been told they are not capable. They do not know how to commercialise their own land or manage their own wealth. We have been treated as spectators on our own soil, watching the machinery of global commerce turn while we are left with the crumbs of lease interest. This is a Colonial fiction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as has been noted in Parliament, the land may be ours in name, but not in law, not in use and not in truth. We are resource owners who lack the financial benefit of the very resource we perceive to own. Look at the institutional barriers. We are trapped by the frameworks where the bars are set so high, demanding tens of millions in capital, the *iTaukei* interest automatically sidelined in favour of the multinational corporations. This is the true cost of being mis-measured. We must stop these sideliners in our own development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must break the myth of sentimental value against economic sovereignty. It is time to open our eyes to the corporatisation of our land. For too long we have been anchored by the narrative that sentimental value is enough. We are told that our land is sacred. Yes it is, but sentimental value has been weaponised against us to justify stagnation.

Let me be blunt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sentimental value alone is worthless. It does not put money in the pockets of landowners, it does not create jobs for our young people, and it does not generate the income our family needs to improve their standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we allow land to sit idle under the guise of protection, we are not protecting our heritage. We are presiding over our own poverty. Land that sits idle serves no one but the ghost of our ancestors. Our ancestors were navigators, builders and innovators. To honour them, the land must work for us. It must become an active asset that lifts our people, strengthens our communities and creates real economic power for landowning units. We must move beyond the role of a passive landlord waiting for a pittance of rent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lease that is not renewed out of spite of refusal to engage with the modern world is a wasted opportunity. It is an act of economic self-sabotage. We need commercialisation

through partnership where the land-owning units are not just landlords but corporate partners to grow and see the direct dividends of development. If we do not corporatise our approach, we will remain resource rich and cash poor for another century.

We look at the communal corporatisation. This is the blueprint for success. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the path forward is communal corporatisation and partnerships. I have already stated in Parliament during my End of the Week Statement, we must establish *mataqali*, *yavusa* and *tikina* trusts with clearly defined corporate arms. This is the only way to separate our sacred obligations from our business operations. When we mix the two, we fail at both. Our communal trust should be the guardians of our culture, our *mana* and our welfare, but our corporate arms must be efficient engines of growth. This dual structure allows us to participate in global economy without losing our soul.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we see hundreds of millions flowing in from land leases and royalties, yet only 5 percent of that income is directed towards savings or investment. This is not a shortage of resources, it is a shortage of strategic management. We must shift our mindset. Long term prosperity cannot continue to be traded away with short term consumption. To unlock real value, we must be open to international public-private partnerships. Our people are ready to work, but we must work as owners, not as subjects, not as passengers, but as persons with a stake in that outcome.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency brought a modern and chilling warning to Parliament regarding the misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI). He warned that AI could have a detrimental effect on governance, national unity and peace. We must be alert to the emerging threats of AI and the digital election battlefield.

As we head into an election year, this threat is not theoretical. We are entering a period where truth can be manufactured; some will use AI and digital misinformation to win at any cost. They will create deep fakes to smear opponents and attempt to spread lies in our vulnerable, in our vernacular language to incite fear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy, His Excellency the President noted that it carries a grave responsibility. We must be vigilant towards those who seek to hijack the minds of our voters through digital deception. If we allow our elections to be decided by algorithms of hate, we are not sovereign people. We are a manipulated people. We must protect the integrity of the 2026-2027 Elections from this new digital colonisation. An investor wants to know the bottom line and the bottom line for Fiji is stability. You cannot have stability if your democratic process is being poisoned by digital lies.

This brings me to the warning against fear and division. His Excellency the President has warned us against sowing seeds of fear and division as elections approaches. He reminded us that unity does not happen automatically. It must be consciously built through fair laws and inclusive policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cruelest part of our 152-year history has been the calculated division sowed between us *iTaukei* and our brothers and sisters of Indian descent. This hatred was not born here. It was imported to keep us weak. I want to speak directly to those who cling to this ethnonationalistic poison. Look what your division has brought us. Has it brought prosperity to the *iTaukei*? No. It has brought us decades of lost time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the same upon those who claim to be Christians on Sunday but spend the rest of the week spreading the rot of ethnic hatred. How can you profess the love of Christ while your heart is a vessel of division? You are not protecting the *iTaukei*, you are holding us back. You are a hateful few who stand in the way of a blessed nation. His Excellency said that we must reject

those who profit from fear. The sovereign path is the only path we should consider.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the trajectory of Fiji's future hinges upon our fortitude to lead with ethical clarity. We must break this Colonial hangover once and for all. We must be transparent about our Constitution. We must be vigilant against the digital lies. We must remember the need for investment, partnerships, development and testing everything before we claim victory.

Fiji has been blessed with everything that we need to lead the Pacific, but we are being anchored by a small group of people who profit from our fear, and it is time to make our land work for us. It is time to grow up and realise that our true strength lies in working together as one Fijian people. The Ocean of Peace must start with peace in our hearts, in unity and our purpose. We must look after our people first. May God bless Fiji and all Fijians.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your presence and your contribution to today's proceedings.

Parliament stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.46 p.m.