

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 10TH MARCH, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 10TH MARCH, 2026

The Parliament met at 9.32 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 and Communications, honourable P.K. Bala and honourable P.D. Kumar.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 9th March, 2026 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members 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 and offices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Vaka Forum

Honourable Members, please, take note that the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has extended an invitation to all honourable Members to the Vaka Forum; a half-day Dialogue on Recycling, Circular Economy and Sustainable Waste Management on Monday, 16th March, 2026, from 8.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. at the Suva Civic Centre.

The Dialogue aims to convene key stakeholders to discuss coordinated national approaches to strengthening recycling systems, advancing circular economy principles, and enhancing sustainable waste management practices.

Honourable Members, given the important role of Parliament in shaping policy and legislative frameworks in these areas, please, kindly take note that there will be no Standing Committee meetings on the morning of Monday, 16th March, 2026, so as to allow maximum participation by all honourable Members to this Dialogue. Standing Committee meetings may continue after lunch. I entreat all the honourable Members to be part of this dialogue initiation. The session will only take half a day, and I am assured by the honourable Minister responsible that they are fully prepared for all the honourable Members to be present in that Dialogue.

Absence from Parliament

There appears to be some confusion on the issue of Members absence from Parliament, and the correct interpretation to be accorded to Standing Order 141 vis-à-vis Section 63 of the Constitution on the vacation of seat of a Member of Parliament, and specifically Subsection 1(f) thereof. Standing Order 141(1) states, and I quote:

“A member obtains the permission of the Speaker to be absent from Parliament by making a written request to the Speaker. If the Speaker does not respond to the request, the member must be treated for the purposes of Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution, as having obtained the permission of the Speaker.”

Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution sets out the penal provisions of non-attendance of absence of Members of Parliament, and it states:

“Vacation of a seat of Member of Parliament

63 – (1) The seat of a member of Parliament becomes vacant if the member:
(f) is absent for two consecutive meetings of Parliament without having obtained the permission of the Speaker.”

It seems at first glance that Standing Order 141(1) is not consistent with the tenor and meaning of Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution. Under Standing Order 141(1), a Member seeks by making written request to the Speaker, permission for absence from Parliament, but in the absence of the response from the Speaker, the permission is deemed to have been obtained for the purposes of Section 63(1) of the Constitution.

However, the Constitution provisions dealing with the vacation of a Member's seat are for reasons of serious offences and/or misconduct/conducts of the Member. A mere absence from Parliament under Standing Order 141 does not fall into the categories of serious behaviours that are sanctioned under Section 63(1) of the Constitution.

The attempt to clarify the situation under Standing Order 141(3), and I quote:

“For the purpose of this clause and the interpretation of Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution, “meeting” means a sitting period” - does not help the cause in my view.”

There is no mention of “meeting” under Standing Order 141, only absence from Parliament. The attempt to interpret the provisions of Standing Order 141(1) with Standing Order 141(3) to mean the absence of a Member as coming under Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution, is clearly inappropriate. So, Standing Order 141(1) allows a Member to be absent from Parliament with the approval of the Speaker, but if the Speaker does not respond to the request, then I quote:

“... the approval must be treated as having been obtained for the purpose of Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution.”

As I have already stated, Section 63(1)(f) of the Constitution deals with serious misconduct by the Members by being absent from two consecutive meetings of Parliament without first obtaining the permission of the Speaker, whereas Standing Order 141(1) presumes that permission is if the Speaker does not respond to the Member's request.

It is clear that “sitting period” under Standing Order 141(3) is synonymous with “meeting”

under section 63(1)(f), and that the Speaker's permission must be first obtained if a Member wishes to be absent for a sitting period.

Sitting period means any of the Parliament sittings in the calendar year, as we have seven sittings this year; a series of sitting days (put it that way). So, Standing Order 141(1) applies only to an absence of a day or so within the sitting period. That, in my view, is the proper interpretation to be accorded to Standing Order 141 vis-a-vis Section 63 of the Constitution.

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

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – *ni sa bula vinaka*, good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu's Address, during the Opening of the 2026-2027 Session of Parliament last month. At the outset, His Excellency the President's Address reflects the aspirations of our people and the collective responsibility of all arms of Government to serve the national interest and work towards the continued wellbeing of our fellow Fijians. His Excellency also stated that the Government's programme for 2026 and beyond, seeks not only to grow the economy, but to create decent work, protect the vulnerable and invest in the capabilities of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in doing so, the Ministry recognises that health and wellbeing of our people remain central to national development, economic resilience and social cohesion. As we forge on, the Ministry will continue to strengthen our health system through reforms that are people-centered, evidence-based and fiscally responsible. The Ministry will continue to modernise health governance, strengthen service delivery and ensure that our health system is resilient to emerging public health risks to severe impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also stated that the Government will be guided by three principles in the formulation of programmes and policies:

- Unity in diversity - ensuring that every person, regardless of background or place of residence, shares national progress.
- Sustainability and resilience - protecting our people, economy and environment for present and future generations.
- Integrity and good governance - strengthening trust in public institutions and leadership.

The Ministry has kept these principles at heart while reviewing legislations, discussing budgetary decisions, undertaking institutional reform, and shaping public policy that will guide national decision-making in the years ahead.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a strong and effective health system must be supported by robust and contemporary legislation. The Ministry has continued to progress the review and modernisation of health laws to protect public health, strengthen accountability and respond to evolving national and global challenges.

In the December Parliamentary Sitting, important health legislations were endorsed, including the Burial and Cremation (Amendment) Act 2025 and the Quarantine (Amendment) Act 2025. The Mental Health Act 2010 has gone through public consultation stage, and we are awaiting feedback from the Solicitor-General's Office. The Nursing Act 2010 is expected to conduct public

consultations at the end of this month, and we will progress from there. These laws strengthen public health safeguards, environmental protection and national health security, while aligning Fiji more closely with international standards and obligations. Further legislative reforms will continue during this parliamentary term to ensure that our health laws remain fit for purpose and responsive to the needs of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Monday, honourable Premila Kumar questioned the status of the Micro Small and Medium Enterprises Bill and Co-operatives Bill that were supposed to be brought forward three years ago but are nowhere to be seen. It is no easy task to review Acts as they are archaic, let alone draft new ones and have them go through the same process of public consultations, legal checks and Cabinet endorsement. So, the question to be asked is, what have they been doing in the last 16 years? Did they even bother to revise these Acts and draft new ones for the benefit of the nation and the people? No!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Now, it has fallen on us to carry out these legislative reviews, and it is not an easy task. Let us do our work and we will do it accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November 2024, the Ministry convened its first National Health Executive Committee (NHEC) meeting at Suvavou House, bringing together leaders, professional communities and partners to reflect on the challenges facing our health system, its policies, and to chart a shared path forward. The outcomes of this national dialogue will guide the development of our new Health Strategic Plan, with a strong focus on prevention, primary healthcare, efficiency and equity, ensuring that reforms are sustainable, deliver meaningful improvements in health outcomes and advancing Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

The Ministry had its second NHEC meeting at Naveicovatu Village in Wainibuka on 28th February, 2025, and the third at Tau Village in Nadroga on 27th June, 2025, and we are expecting a follow-up NHEC meeting soon in Kadavu. Like the careful weaving of a mat, strengthening our health system requires bringing together many strands - sound laws, capable institutions, a dedicated workforce, sustainable financing and strong partnerships to support the wellbeing of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rise in HIV/AIDS cases is a matter of serious concern for our nation, as rightly highlighted by His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, in his Address. On 22nd January, 2025, I formally declared an HIV outbreak, that was thought to be an epidemic in intravenous drug user populations. In response, Government established the National HIV Outbreak and Cluster Response Taskforce (N-HOCRT) under the HIV Board and endorsed a costed Outbreak Response Plan.

Recognising the seriousness of the situation and the need for a dedicated operational capability, in June, I directed the establishment of a standalone diagonal HIV Sexual Reproductive Health Unit within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to operationalise national response through the N-HOCRT and its technical committees and technical working groups.

With the support of Government and our partners, including DFAT, MFAT and essential medicines support from the Government of India, we have strengthened the foundation of a national response programme across treatment, care and support, prevention, harm reduction, diagnostics, data for impact, and procurement and supply chain management. These foundations include clearer clinical and service pathways, stronger community programming and communications, harm reduction implementation planning, improved testing quality and readiness, and more organised procurement and warehouse arrangements which are currently being developed.

However, I must be candid with Parliament: the scale of tangible action on the ground is not yet commensurate with the speed and the spread of the epidemic, because our human resources and field mobilisation capacity remains critically constrained. To date, 23 positions have been filled, out of the 167 required, with a further 30 positions in the early stages of recruitment. This means that a small national team is carrying a countrywide workload, limiting how quickly we can expand outreach, follow-up and decentralise clinical services across all divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite this progress, the latest figures confirm that HIV is worsening and spreading beyond the initial outbreak. In 2025, Fiji recorded 2,003 new diagnosis, up from 1,583 in 2024, with the national rate diagnosis rising to 226 per 100,000 population, up from 13 per 100,000 in 2019 - a 17-fold increase.

Men remain more affected, but the gap is narrowing, showing that infection is increasingly affecting women and families. This is also reflected in pregnancy surveillance: national ante-natal HIV prevalence is now estimated at 3.1 percent. At CWM Hospital it has risen sharply to 3.7 percent in 2025, rising from 0.34 percent in 2023 to 1.82 percent in 2024. When HIV is rising in ante-natal clinics, it tells us this is no longer an outbreak in one population group – it is increasingly present in the wider community and babies are now at risk.

Last year, we estimated that 59 babies were born with HIV, up from 31 cases in 2024. On average, at least one baby died of HIV each month in 2025. In light of this, Government action must now match the urgency of the epidemic. I would like to therefore highlight some of the plans we have moving forward to strengthen national approach built on these three principles - speed, scale and sustained commitment.

Firstly, I seek the Parliament's support for high level, multi-sector national HIV, STI, BBV response, working in close collaboration with communities, civil society and technical partners, and operationalise through the National HIV Outbreak and Cluster Response Taskforce. The Taskforce model is working because it brings together the right technical expertise and community reach. However, the epidemic is now affecting the wider community and requires stronger whole of government mobilization, whole of Parliament across the social drivers of infection.

Secondly, I will request Government to enable an emergency response footing for this national effort so that we can remove bottlenecks and accelerate approvals for recruitment, procurement, infrastructure, and the enabling legal instruments required to expand services quickly and safely. Put simply, we need to move from planning and coordination to visible, sustained delivery on the ground in every division.

Thirdly, and most importantly, I am asking Parliament to support the plan for a minimum five-year national commitment to this response. I said a minimum of five-year national commitment. This is not a short campaign; it is a multi-year national recovery effort. We will therefore seek the support to establish a dedicated Sexual Reproductive Health and HIV Project Management Unit to drive implementation, performance management and field delivery under the strategic direction of the Task Force so that plans translate into sustained action year after year.

Finally, I wish to emphasise that this must be a national, multi-party commitment. HIV does not recognise political lines. The country needs an apolitical, united stance that will hold through this year's elections and beyond. So, the response remains stable, funded and accountable over the full five-year period required to turn the epidemic around. With Parliament's support and with the continued leadership of Cabinet, Fiji can still reverse this trajectory, protect mothers and babies and restore national health security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services with Parliament support and with the continued leadership of Cabinet, Fiji can still reverse this trajectory, protect mothers and babies, and restore national health security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' WASH Programme, in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 6, aims to support the WASH sector in achieving a few of the following objectives:

- Target 6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.
- Target 6.2: By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation with special attention to the needs of women, girls, and those in vulnerable situations.
- Target 6.3: By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping, and minimising the release of hazardous chemicals and materials.

In focusing on the three targets, the WASH Programme within the Ministry of Health is working to scale up Water Safety, Security and Sanitation Planning (WSSSP) initiatives in rural and peri-urban communities. This initiative originates from WHO, with support from partners such as UNICEF, International Water Centre, Griffith University, University of the South Pacific and the Department of Water and Sewerage.

A localised package has been developed and rolled out to communities with urgent WASH improvement needs. Through a series of community-based trainings, this initiative empowers communities to effectively assess their water supply systems, sanitation facilities and hygiene stations. Communities are guided to identify hazards and service gaps to develop a community-based improvement plan to enhance access to safe drinking water, safe sanitation and good hygiene practices.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services also provides targeted funding to support communities in implementing key improvements identified in their plan, particularly the low-hanging fruits. These are often small-scale investments that can lead to significant and life-changing outcomes. As a Ministry, we believe that by reducing risks through training, improved infrastructure, and strengthened community ownership, we can significantly decrease the burden of recurring communicable diseases such as waterborne illnesses, typhoid fever, dengue fever, and leptospirosis. This approach not only saves lives but also reduces the long-term costs associated with treatment and healthcare services.

The WASH Programme also prioritises areas of mass gathering as key points for improvement, including community halls, schools, religious institutions, and healthcare facilities, where access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene is critical for protecting public health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inclusive development is an approach the Ministry is taking in terms of meeting our strategic objectives, most importantly, improving the quality of healthcare for Fijians. Allow me to mention a few projects that have been undertaken or are in progress:

- (1) The Australian Government, together with the support of the Fiji Government has undertaken:
 - (a) complementary works for Taveuni Hospital;
 - (b) complemented works for Kadavu Hospital; and
 - (c) building of the new washroom for the disability at Tamavua Twomey Hospital.

- (2) The New Zealand Government, through partnership with the Fiji Government, has undertaken the:
- (a) rebuilding of Dogo Nursing Station;
 - (b) refurbishment of Korovou Health Centre;
 - (c) refurbishment of Rewa Health Centre, new pharmacy and maternal child health clinic;
 - (d) new SOPD and pharmacy for Wainibokasi Hospital;
 - (e) refurbishment of outpatient at Nausori Health Centre with the support of the Fiji Government; and
 - (f) extension of waiting area at Makoi Health Centre, and refurbishment of the Galoa Nursing Station in Serua.
- (3) The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) completed the:
- (a) Warehouse Tolu in Labasa;
 - (b) Economic Social Development Programme for the procurement of medical equipment and ambulance for the Ministry; and assisted
 - (c) the Ministry in the completion of the Non-Communicable Disease Project.

We are sincerely grateful to other organisations such as USAID, KOICA, LDS and other NGOs for supporting us. Through this partnership, the Ministry is enhancing health system governance, financing and performance, while drawing on the global best practice, adapted to our national context.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a resilient health system depends on a capable, motivated and compassionate supported workforce. The Ministry will continue to address health workforce challenges through improved planning, training, retention and efficient deployment of human resources, recognising the central role of health workers in delivery service and system resilience. In this regard, the Ministry has reintroduced the Deputy Secretary positions for Public Health and Hospital Services. These positions, historically, played a vital role in coordinating and supervising hospital and public health services across the Divisions.

At this juncture, I wish to mention and extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to all our healthcare workers, especially those who serve in the rural and maritime areas, for the incredible work they do. One, in particular, is Staff Nurse Milika Ralota, who has been courageously serving the people of Naitasiri for 13 years now. I had the privilege of meeting her two weeks ago when I travelled to Nakorosule.

Staff Nurse Ralota has been trekking on foot through the terrains of Nakorosule to Nawaisomo, and other villages that fall under the Vunidawa Medical Area. If lucky, she gets to go on horseback. Mr. Speaker, Sir, her commitment, compassion and dedication has enabled her to achieve 100 percent coverage of her Expanded Programme on Immunisation. This is the face of public health, and it is a fete hard to achieve. This is just too good.

There are many more dedicated health workers like Staff Nurse Milika Ralota in the Ministry who have not yet had their stories told. I may not have visited their health facilities, but it is because of them that I stand humbly, yet proudly today as the Minister of Health and Medical Services, and I will endeavour to carry out my duty to the best of my ability in serving the people of this nation Fiji.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all those sitting in the gallery or watching through the live streaming - *ni sa bula vinaka*, a very good morning and *Jai Siya Ram* to everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the opening of the new Session of Parliament. At the outset, I acknowledge the Office of the President and the message of unity, faith and shared responsibility conveyed on 16th February, 2026. We, on this side of the House joined in reaffirming our commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the wellbeing of all Fijians. His Excellency's Address outlined Government's priorities and aspirations for the year ahead.

As Members of Parliament, it is our responsibility not only to listen but also reflect carefully on the direction in which our nation is moving. However, while the vision outlined is broad and aspirational, the true measure of any government will not be found in eloquent words but in tangible outcomes for the people of Fiji. That is why, before we speak about new commitments for 2026, it is important that we reflect honestly on the commitments that were made to the people of Fiji just one year ago.

In the 2025 Presidential Address, this Coalition Government outlined a number of goals and commitments which were presented to the people of Fiji as priority for national development. Those commitments gave hope to many citizens that progress would be made in the area that affects their daily lives - healthcare, agriculture, housing and the rising cost of living. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one year later, many of those promises remains largely unfulfilled. The people of Fiji deserve an honest assessment, because leadership is not measured by number of announcements you made in this House, leadership is measured by promises kept.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the previous address, the Coalition Government committed itself to improving healthcare services and strengthening medical facilities across the country. Yet today, hospitals continue to face a shortage of doctors and nurses. Many health centers in rural areas remain understaffed. Patients continue to experience long waiting times and shortage of basic medical supplies. For many families, access to reliable healthcare remains uncertain.

Healthcare is not a privilege, it is a fundamental service that every citizen should be able to depend on and when the healthcare system struggles, it is the ordinary Fijian who suffers the consequences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the dedication and service of the doctors and nurses at CWM Hospital, especially Doctor Amit and his team at the Accident and Emergency Unit, who continue to serve our people under extremely challenging conditions. Everyday, they work long hours, often with limited resources, in overcrowded wards and immense pressure on the health system. Despite this hardship, they remain committed to saving lives of and caring for our citizens with professionalism and compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you visit one day, you will find this especially on Thursday, Friday and Saturday where wards are overcrowded, and you will find these doctors and nurses trying to juggle and admit their patients because of lack of space. If you still have time honourable Minister for Infrastructure, please visit. You will find potholes right in front of the Accident and Emergency Unit which have been for a long time. I am a frequent visitor there, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the agricultural sector was also highlighted as a key priority in last year's address. Farmers were promised greater support, stronger policies and improved opportunities to

grow the sector. Yet across rural Fiji, many farmers continue to struggle with rising costs of fertilizer, transportation and equipment. Market access remains a challenge. Infrastructure supporting agriculture, including farm roads and storage facilities remain inadequate in many areas. Our farmers are amongst the hardworking people in the country but promises alone cannot sustain the agricultural sector. Farmers require practical support and consistent investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, housing was also identified as a priority. The Government spoke about improving access to housing and addressing the need of families who struggle to find affordable homes. Yet today, informal settlements continue to grow in many urban and peri-urban areas. Many families remain on waiting lists for housing assistance. Young people seeking to build their first homes are finding it increasingly difficult due to high costs. Housing is not mainly about infrastructure. It is about dignity, stability and security for families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps one of the most pressing issues facing the people of Fiji today is the rising cost of living. Honourable Professor Prasad, across the country, families are feeling the pressure of increasing prices. The cost of food, transport and everyday goods continues to place strain on household budgets.

Mr. Speaker, on the same floor when the budget was presented in 2020 where VAT was increased to 15 percent, I uttered the same words that by the end of third term, VAT will decrease and, yes, it was decreased to 12.5 percent. Of course, this is an elections year, you will find it goes further down, but you cannot fool our poor people. You have already milked them. For many working families, making ends meet has become increasingly difficult when the cost of living rises faster than income, it is the most vulnerable members of our society who feel the great hardship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not abstract policy decisions. These are real issues affecting real people across our nation and the people of Fiji expect this Parliament to hold the Coalition Government accountable for the commitments made in their name.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last three years, interior, rural and maritime communities have been promised integration into mainstream and national development. Yet too many of our people in Vanua Levu, Lau, Kadavu, Lomaiviti and the interior of Viti Levu still face serious challenges, including poor road access, irregular maritime transport, limited market connectivity, inadequate health and education facilities, unreliable electricity and water supply.

Development cannot remain Suva-centered. It cannot be announcement driven. It must be delivery driven. If this Coalition Government is serious about empowering rural Fiji, then we call for several concrete measures. Development cannot rely on isolated projects or temporary initiatives. There must be a legally mandated national strategy with measurable targets and dedicated funding stream.

Reliable shipping service is not a luxury for any community; it is a lifeline. Government must ensure regulated shipping schedules, improve safety standards and targeted subsidies where necessary to guarantee reliable connectivity.

Climate-smart farming has become rhetoric, but farmers require the infrastructure to succeed. This includes farm-to-market roads, storage facilities, food processing centers and access to affordable finance.

If we speak of digital transformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must ensure that rural communities have reliable network coverage, affordable internet access and digital literacy programmes. Without connectivity, rural communities cannot fully participate in the modern economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a small island developing state, Fiji stands on the frontline of climate change. Cyclones, floods, storm surges and droughts are becoming increasingly frequent and severe. Yet too often our disaster management approach remains reactive rather than preventative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to draw your attention. I wish to highlight the difficulties faced by the families in the Naquloso Settlement in Nakasi during the heavy rain a few weeks ago. Many residents struggled.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- *Wawa mada, kerekere vakabibi, wawa mada vakalailai!*

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Listen, listen!

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what I am saying. We have to be reactive. I called the honourable Minister and also the Permanent Secretary for Environment. I requested the Permanent Secretary to find out if an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) had been done for the project which was going on. Until today, the Permanent Secretary has not replied. If it was our time, you will find honourable Minister Tabuya running and saying, “Dr. Reddy, look here, where are you?” But we never did that, Mr. Speaker. We went there silently. I requested the honourable Minister, and I thank the honourable Minister for visiting them last Friday with the ration – *vinaka vakalevu*. He went there but after the incident happened, I saw Mr. Narain Sami struggling, running around.

I would like to thank the CEO of Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), who was very active and assisted the team. We, therefore, call for strengthening the National Disaster Management Framework, improving coordination between national and local authorities, and empowering provincial and village level preparedness committee. Island communities should not have to wait for assistance after cyclones.

Luckily, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with God's grace, we did not have a cyclone in their term. Otherwise, God knows, Sir. Relief supplies must be pre-positioned in maritime areas. Cyclone-resilient evacuation centers must be constructed. Early warning systems must be strengthened. Every new road, bridge, jetty and public building must meet stronger climate resilience standards. Rebuilding the same vulnerable infrastructure after every cyclone is both inefficient and financially unsustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address acknowledged that a significant portion of our population lives either below or just above the poverty line. The honourable Leader of the Opposition said, and I quote, “We Fijians are rich in resources but empty in pockets”. Fiji's land structure is unique. Approximately 90 percent of land in Fiji is *iTaukei* land – about seven percent is freehold and only 4 percent is State land. Fiji has total land area of approximately 18,270 square miles, yet only 17 percent of the land is currently used for agriculture. This is according to the 2020 census. There are around 83,000 registered farmers in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I love hiking and while hiking I have seen a number of unutilized land where you will find raintree plants, African tulips and these are all wasted. If you drive from Nadi to Suva just before Sigatoka Town, you will find bushes which can be cultivated and utilised for farming.

I remember my good friend, honourable Tuisawau, when we were together in the Standing

Committee on Economic Affairs. Beside his house in Wainibokasi, there is a piece of land. I said to him, "Honourable Tuisawau, give it to me, I will plant it for you, all costs on me, the profit we will share", but he declined. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there should not be any fear.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- A Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Standing Order 62(4)(d), the honourable Member is using words that may cause ill-will amongst ethnic groups; words that are likely to provoke feelings of ill-will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji. He is saying that for iTaukei land, they are not cultivating it because they are lazy. That is the statement he is trying to say.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will make a ruling on that. My ruling is this. He had not specifically gone the direction you were going, honourable Member. Although I was going to rule him out of order on the relevance of his comments. It has nothing to do with His Excellency's Address.

Please, your speech should be linked to a topic addressed by His Excellency, honourable Member. So, do that or else I will rule you out of order.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Why I used that as an example because His Excellency mentioned that a significant portion of our population live either below poverty or just above poverty line. What I am trying to explain here, Mr. Speaker, the valued land which belongs to the *iTaukei* people, that is your land, that is entitled to you, we are not taking it away. There is no land in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, if I can recall, which has been taken away by the Indo-Fijians, no. If it is *iTaukei* land, Mr. Speaker, I never speak on the land, and I never speak on religion. This is the first time I am speaking because I have seen the hardship of my people, I have seen the hardship of all the *iTaukei* people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these land are just sitting idle. Imagine a Minister, when he was a Member of Parliament, I asked him, "give me the land, we will plant." That will definitely decrease the poverty level. Definitely, when we start utilising the land, then the poverty level will go down, will decrease. This is what I am trying to say, Mr. Speaker. I am just taking the cue from what His Excellency had said. Hardship in rural Fiji is not only about income. It is about access - access to market, access to healthcare, access to education, access to opportunity. If economic growth is to be truly inclusive, rural households must experience lower transport costs, better public services, and real opportunity for sustainable income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome discussions on governance reform and economic diversification. However, reform alone will not repair the broken jetties. It will not fix impassable roads. It will not stop medicines in the rural health centres. Development must not be politicised. It must be equitable. As we move closer to the next general elections, the people of rural and maritime Fiji will judge this Coalition Government not by speeches, but by results. They will judge whether their crops reached the market, their children could attend school safely, their health centres have medicine, and their home could withstand the next cyclone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, on this side of the House, support the initiative that genuinely advances rural and maritime development and strengthens disaster preparedness. But support must be accompanied by scrutiny. We will continue to hold Government accountable for clear timelines, measurable outcomes, transparent budgeting and fair and equitable allocation of resources.

Let this Parliament be remembered for good work, but the practical transformation in the lives of those living in the most remote villages and islands of our beloved Republic of Fiji.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.25 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to begin with the word from the Bible in the Book of Psalm 133:1, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." Those words remind us that even when we hold different views, the strength of a nation lies in our ability to come together in a shared service of our people.

I rise to thank His Excellency the President of his Address at the State Opening of Parliament. I acknowledge the presence of the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of both sides of the House, and all Fijians who are following our proceedings at home and abroad. I also acknowledge the past and present, na *Vanua o Nadonumai vua na Turaga na Tui Suva*, whose ancestral land is home to this distinguished institution, with its rich history and tradition that form the foundation of our governance.

In addition, I also acknowledge all women in Fiji, the *Nana*, the *Nau*, the *Qei*, the Aunty, the *jiji*, all daughters, nieces and granddaughters, on the recognition of International Women's Day last week. I say to each and every one of you, *vinaka vakalevu na loloma vakatina, na loloma kei na veisusu*. If it was not for you, our mothers, we will not be here today. To our children, our girls and our nieces, keep striving to break those glass ceilings. Happy International Women's Day. This day belongs to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish a belated Happy Father's Day to our fathers and acknowledge the celebration of Harvest Sunday across our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to respond to honourable Nath's statement regarding the lack of Government presence in the maritime areas. A villager from Levuka-i-Gau, my *tauvu*, Saimone Rokini, was recorded in an interview, when he was asked about Government services. This is what he said in *iTaukei*, "*Na vinaka ni gaunisala tu qo e Gau, e rawa ni dua e draiva tu e bobo tu ga.*" That manifested the spirit of true *kai* Lomaiviti. Basically, it says, good condition of the road, you can even close your eyes and drive across the island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not only about roads. In the Ministry of Justice, in 2022, there are only 17 Justices of Peace. In 2024, it increased to 23 and in 2025, 28, an additional 15 will be sworn this year. That means, come the middle of this year, there will be 44 Justices of Peace. The Coalition Government truly relies on the principle, 'no one should be left behind.'

I stand in solidarity with the honourable Prime Minister and my fellow Parliamentarians in expressing my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the President of our sovereign nation, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, *Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, for his insightful Address which opened the 2026 Session of Parliament. His Excellency's Address was reflective, measured and forward-looking. It invited us to lead with wisdom and called upon us to examine our past, confront our present realities, and shape a future that is fair, stable and united.

Today, I would like to highlight the central pillar for His Excellency's Address, the review of our Constitution. I would also be addressing the House in my capacity as Acting Minister for Policing.

A constitution is not an ordinary statute; it is a supreme law and establishes the architect of the nation. It distributes power, protects rights, and defines the relationship between the people and the Government. As these things change with time and situations, a constitution becomes a living instrument and must endure and also adapt. These were the sentiments of His Excellency when he reminded us that Fiji has journeyed through four successive Constitutions.

Each emerged from its own historical context and reflected the aspirations, tensions and compromises of its time. That constitutional evolution demonstrates that constitutionalism in Fiji has always been a work in progress. The real question is whether our Constitution continues, in its current form, to fully reflect the sovereign will and the realities of the people of Fiji.

Where there is a perception that aspects of the supreme law were not born of broad-based participation or consensus, it is the duty of a responsible government to open the space for review.

With that being said, the intention of reviewing the Constitution did not emerge overnight. It has been a process unfolding through national conversation, institutional engagement and lawful processes over several years.

We have seen real growth in conversations about our Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is something worth recognising. Our citizens are seriously thinking about their future, and this is reflected in the growing civic conversations about the Constitution.

Academic institutions such as the Fiji National University, in partnership with the Australian National University, hosted a number of public forums over the past two years, exploring constitutional change in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even within this august House, we have not shied away from confronting the question of constitutional review. Honourable Members will recall that last year, we debated and voted on Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025. That Bill did not secure the required majority, but its introduction demonstrated something important and, that is, that elected representatives were prepared to engage directly with constitutional questions where they believed reform was necessary.

Democracy was allowed to function. We debated, we voted, and we respected the outcome. However, when questions arose about the proper constitutional pathway for amendment, when there was uncertainty about interpretation and procedure, we did not attempt to resolve those questions politically. We turned to the proper constitutional guardian of interpretation. We turned to the Judiciary. That is how the separation of powers is meant to operate.

In accordance with the constitutional framework, a significant reference was made by Cabinet to the Supreme Court of Fiji last year. The Supreme Court revisited longstanding questions regarding the validity of the 1997 Constitution and the interpretation of the amendment provisions under the 2013 Constitution.

In doing so, the Court discussed Fiji's constitutional history and made a number of important observations about constitutional continuity, the issue of sovereignty and amendment procedures. The Court observed that the 2013 Constitution bore what it described as a “democratic deficit”, in the sense that it was imposed rather than directly chosen by the people.

In addressing the amendment provisions, the Court interpreted the relevant threshold in a manner it considered “workable”, reading them down to the “extent necessary to make democratic control possible”, while preserving constitutional order.

Beyond the judicial reasoning itself, these Court references demonstrate that when constitutional uncertainty arises, we must submit to the rule of law. We do not step outside the constitutional system. These Supreme Court references show that constitutional questions in Fiji are being addressed through institutions, like our Courts or through our Parliament, or some other legal structured process. Mr. Speaker, that, in itself, is a sign of democratic maturity and progress.

In addition, early last year, Cabinet approved the establishment of a Constitutional Review Commission. Its mandate is to seek the views of the people of Fiji, in all their diversity, about what kind of constitutional framework they wish to see for the future. This marks a new structured phase in our national dialogue, one which is grounded in participation, transparency and national ownership.

To further coordinate this work, the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Review of the Constitution was created to ensure policy coherence, legal compliance, and structured oversight of the review pathway.

In addition, a draft National Referendum Bill 2025 has been prepared and is currently before the relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee. This Bill is a critical enabling measure, as it establishes the legal framework necessary to conduct any national referendum, including one required under the Constitution for its amendment.

By putting this framework in place, we are ensuring that as the Coalition Government where people are called upon to decide on constitutional change, the process will be transparent and grounded firmly in law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when one considers all these steps we have taken, the debates in this House, the votes taken and respected, the recourse to the Judiciary for constitutional clarity and the establishment of the Constitution Review Commission, the creation of a Cabinet Sub-Committee and the preparation of the National Referendum Bill, a clear pattern emerges which is that the Government's approach, both thus far and going forward, in relation to the review of the Constitution is guided by three foundational commitments:

- (1) respect for democratic constitutionalism;
- (2) adherence to the rule of law; and
- (3) meaningful public participation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reflect on the statement made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition yesterday, especially where he asked whether the challenges faced by our nation over the years lay in Constitution, politics or in leadership. That is a fair question, given our constitutional history. This is a reminder that the commitment of leaders and institutions to uphold the rule of law and democratic values determines whether a constitution succeeds in practice.

Findings of the Supreme Court confirm that the Constitution was drafted by only two people with minimal public participation. Let me assure this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will not discard nor destroy any document or draft constitutions. Rather, they should be carefully viewed and thoughtfully considered. That is why any discussion on constitutional reform must be approached with responsibility and honesty.

On that note, let me assure the people of Fiji, any amendment process will be lawful, transparent and consultative and be guided at all times by national interest. The Government will be responsible and honest. I will follow. It will follow the law. We will follow the Institution and the decision of the Supreme Court of Fiji delivered on the constitutional reference last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am currently standing in for the honourable Minister for Policing and Communications, who will personally respond to His Excellency the President's address upon his return.

While we deliberate on the constitutional future, we must also confront the urgent realities of

our present. One of the most pressing of these realities is the growing threat of illicit drugs. This is not an abstract policy issue, it is a lived crisis affecting families, communities and young people across our nation.

We are seeing the increasing prevalence of synthetic drug use, while law enforcement agencies continue to record significant seizures. Fiji's geographical location along key maritime routes makes us vulnerable as both a destination and a transshipment point for transnational organised crime networks. Our proximity to parts of Southeast Asia and America further heightens that risk.

His Excellency the President rightly acknowledged the important role played by the Fiji Police Force (FPF), the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and other enforcement agencies, the *Vanua* and faith leaders, in confronting this crisis. The fight against drugs cannot be left to law enforcement alone; it requires a whole of nation approach.

The illicit drug situation in Fiji remains a national emergency. In 2025 alone, more than 2400 drug-related cases were recorded nationwide. Most offenders were between the ages of 18 and 35, highlighting its severe impact on our youth.

Major seizures have confirmed exposure to transnational trafficking routes, indicating that our country is not only a transit point for illicit drugs but increasingly a potential distribution hub.

The growing use of methamphetamine has also been linked to rising HIV transmission rates, making this both a law enforcement challenge and a serious public health concern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in responding to this threat, Government has intensified its efforts to combat illicit drug cultivation, trafficking and distribution. These measures include:

- (1) joint FPF and RFMF operations targeting illicit cultivation in interior areas and maritime trafficking routes;
- (2) strengthened intelligence-led policing to disrupt organised criminal networks; and
- (3) enhanced border security measures to improve the interception of illicit drugs and other contraband entering Fiji.

The establishment of the Counter Narcotics Bureau will coordinate national efforts under the pillars of harm reduction, supply reduction, rehabilitation and treatment. The Bureau will also support faith-based transformation programmes, assisting in the reintegration of offenders and addicts, while working with relevant Government and community agencies to strengthen family and community support systems.

Under the Duavata Community Policing Framework, the FPF is also:

- strengthening national security awareness through preventative programmes, including scholastic awareness initiatives in schools;
- collaborating with the Substance Abuse Advisory Council in education institutions - the Blue Light youth programmes aimed at guiding young people, and the Solesolevaki ni Veitaqomaki - Matanitu, Vanua kei na Lotu Initiative, also known as CVM-CMS Model. This initiative strengthens community-based coastline maritime vigilance through cooperation between Government, the *Vanua* and faith-based organisations, and is currently being expanded across coastal iTaukei villages throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Policing and Communications is also seeking support from international partners to establish police maritime forward-based facilities in Lakeba, Savusavu,

Denarau and Levuka. Support is also being sought for the acquisition of four police patrol vessels, one for each of these bases. This capability will enable faster police presence to maritime incidents, strengthen enforcement against trafficking routes and support unified multi-agency outreach to maritime communities. While strong enforcement remains essential, punishment alone cannot be only our strategy.

Responses must also be thoughtful, balanced and evidence based. Just last month, during the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting hosted by Fiji for the first time, Ministers discussed comparative approaches to addressing drug trafficking and drug use.

Experiences from other jurisdictions demonstrate that rigid approaches alone do not always produce just or effective outcomes. Our response must, therefore, address the full reality of the crisis. The war we face is not simply a war on offenders, it is a war against drugs, addiction, exploitation and criminal networks that profit from our vulnerabilities.

Drugs are also fueling wider public health challenges, including the rise in HIV infections. Innovative and pragmatic responses, including harm reduction initiatives and rehabilitation programmes, can play an important role in reducing the spread of disease, while creating pathways for treatment, counselling and reintegration into society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a strong justice system remains the backbone of democratic governance, social stability and economic confidence. Our laws must, therefore, remain modern, coherent and responsive to the realities faced by our people. In this regard, the Ministry of Justice has embarked on a focused legislative modernisation programme for 2026 under the Law and Justice Roadmap 2025-2029.

Five key legislation have been prioritised for review, the:

- (1) Illicit Drugs Control Act 2024;
- (2) Sentencing and Penalties Act 2009;
- (3) Crimes Act 2009;
- (4) Bail Act 2002; and
- (5) Sexual Offenders Act 2021.

These laws were selected following careful assessment of constitutional considerations, human rights implications, proportionality of penalties and the need to maintain consistency across the criminal justice framework. Together, these reviews aim to ensure the criminal laws remain firm against serious crime, whilst also promoting fairness, proportionality and public confidence in the justice system.

Legislative modernisation is not merely a technical exercise, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is about ensuring that our laws reflect who we are as a nation, uphold our Constitution, meet our international obligations, and respond to the realities faced by ordinary Fijians.

The Ministry of Justice will continue to work closely with Government agencies, independent institutions, civil society, faith-based organisations and development partners. Public consultations will remain central to this process, ensuring transparency, inclusivity and public confidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me assure this House and the people of Fiji that our nation will not allow organised crime syndicates to undermine our sovereignty, security and social stability. We will confront this challenge with resolve, discipline and unity.

On matters relating to policing and communications, I want to reassure this House and the people of Fiji that our nation remains safe, stable and governed firmly under the rule of law.

Over the past few days, there has been speculation on social media concerning the tragic death of Constable 8012 Peniasi Cagi. I wish to share in this house that the FPF has conducted an impartial and professional investigation into this matter.

Based on the evidence gathered so far, *prima facie* findings have led to two accused persons being charged in connection with the death of the late Police Officer, who died while performing this duty. The matter is now before the courts, therefore, the course of justice must proceed unhindered. Justice must be allowed to take its full and proper course.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Constable Racagi was laid to rest last Saturday in his home village of Naviqiri, Navakasiga, Bua. He was a young Officer, who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to our nation, and whose bravery and loyalty in the execution of his duty will not be forgotten. Let this moment also stand as a clear affirmation from this Parliament, that the rule of law shall remain prevalent in the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also emphasised the importance of digital transformation for Fiji's future. As mentioned earlier, the honourable Minister for Policing and Communications will respond later.

However, I wish to briefly inform this House that the newly established Ministry of Policing and Communications launched two major strategic documents in the National Digital Portal next week. These will be launched on Wednesday, 18th March, 2026 at the Grand Pacific Hotel, and I extend an open invitation to honourable Members of this august House to attend. The initiatives to be launched are the Ministry of Policing and Communications' Strategic Plan 2025-2030, the Cyber Security Resilience Strategy and the National Cyber Security Portal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, digital transformation today is no longer simply a technical matter, it is a foundation for economic growth, national security, governance, effectiveness and societal resilience. Significant developments are already underway with the Ministry, aimed at strengthening Fiji's digital ecosystem, cyber security preparedness and communications infrastructure.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my best wishes to all Members of Parliament. May our deliberations continue to strengthen democracy, unity and prosperity for the people of Fiji. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the next speaker, let me pay my compliments to you, Minister, and your Executive, both the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Attorney-General, for a job well done in successfully hosting our very first Commonwealth Law Ministers and Attorney-General's Conference.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and my fellow honourable Members of this House; I am grateful for the opportunity to reply to His Excellency the President's Address, one that is hopeful and gives us renewed strength and courage to charter our nation's course in a meaningful manner as elected leaders. Many things have transpired since His Excellency the President gave his Address, so it will be an interesting year.

Mr. Speaker, administration rests on three pillars – the economy, our institutions and the safety of our families. Today, every one of these pillars is showing deep cracks. We need to remember that any successful nation requires proper equipment, consistent development and rigorous

team training.

Sadly, Mr. Speaker, this Government has failed to apply these basic principles to its own policies. They launched projects with fanfare but failed to follow through with the development needed to make those projects sustainable in the long term. So, let us look at the first pillar – the economic reality for our families.

The World Bank's own assessments indicate that nearly half of our people are living in a state of economic vulnerability, struggling just to keep their heads above water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2022, families were paying a general VAT of 9 percent. The very first move of this Government was to hike the VAT to 15 percent. This was a direct hit to every household in Fiji, driving up the cost of living and turning basic essential goods into luxuries.

They see the cost of living going up. They feel the back-to-school payments being delayed. They see the rising price of fuel at the pump. They know that the math does not add to their favour. It is not good economics. It is a betrayal of the trust placed in this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need a bottom line that reflects the prosperity for our citizens, not just a balanced sheet of the State. Just last week, the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations very honestly exposed a dangerous governance gap. His admission that foreign workers are arriving with mismatched skills is a startling confession of a systemic failure in our labour governance.

By shifting the burden of due diligence onto local businesses is exposing a massive structural weakness and a coordination failure between the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations and the Department of Immigration.

It is unacceptable for the Government to issue work permits first and then expect the employer to play a private detective role after the workers have already landed. This regulatory gap turns our borders into a revolving door of unqualified labour, leaving Fijian businesses to pay the price for the Government's lack of oversight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Australia and New Zealand require a mandatory independent skills assessment for key trades and technical cooperation before a visa is even considered, Fiji remains stuck in an outdated and paper-based system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this absence of verification mechanism means a photocopy of a certificate is treated as factual qualification, with no robust protocols to catch dishonest foreign agents. This is not a mismatch – it is a policy practice gap that undermines our national productivity and damages our international reputation. If our Pacific neighbours can protect their labour markets with pre-entry testing, then why is our Government leaving our local industry exposed to such obvious exploitation?

The financial consequences of this failure result in significant financial losses and substantial costs borne by employers who must fund airfares, visas and relocation for workers who cannot perform.

Despite the honourable Minister acknowledging that dishonest agents are a primary cause, no enforcement action has been publicly documented, and no registry of blacklisted recruiters has been released. This lack of transparency signals a Ministry that has the teeth to regulate local businesses, but lacks the regulatory will to stop foreign syndicates from defrauding our economy. Every unqualified arrival is a policy failure and acts as a hidden tax on Fijian productivity and investor

confidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is the Government collecting fees for the vetting process that does not actually verify skills? Most importantly, who will take responsibility for the losses accumulating across our industries, or is this a solution to tell Fijian employers to do the Government's job for them? If the Department of Immigration is issuing permits based on data and the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations admits it is unreliable, who is actually in charge of our borders?

Talking of immigration, for the elderly and senior citizens of our nation, passport renewal is becoming a major challenge. Recently, a senior citizen, Mr. and Mrs. Vinod Kumar of Ciri Sigatoka, visited the Immigration Office and they were told very bluntly to apply online and staff were of no assistance to this elderly couple.

I understand that the policy is there and I support it, but there should be a dedicated staff to serve the senior citizens, as many of them do not have smartphones and are finding it difficult to apply online. I hope that the honourable Minister for Immigration, especially the staff in Nadi, will take this into consideration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second pillar of this broken foundation is institutional decay. We were promised good governance, but instead we have a culture of poor governance. We see board appointments that have triggered significant public concern, because we are unable to understand the matrix on these appointments. This is breaking the trust the public has in our system.

We are witnessing non-stop issues that distract from the work of governing, leaving our leadership looking weak and inconsistent. I do hope that the leadership will be more decisive and firm.

It sends a message to the young graduates that it is not about 'what you know, but who you know'. We are seeing a brain drain because our best and the brightest no longer see that that is the bright path for them.

The third pillar is public safety. We hear much about Ocean of Peace, but for the families I visit, there is a state of fear at home. Fiji has become a transit point and a destination on hard drugs, and our communities are being destroyed. Our youths are being targeted. Our neighbourhoods are being destroyed.

Crime concerns are rising as the Government focuses its energy on removing the supply, while failing to address the human crisis at hand. By failing to provide proper rehabilitation and staying stuck in its own machinery, we are allowing the demand to grow, which only invites more supply into our streets.

The explosion of HIV cases reported by health authorities is the tragic result of this failure to manage the social impact of drug trade. You cannot talk about regional security when our own neighbourhoods are being poisoned, because the law enforcement agency is finding it difficult to address the root cause of the problem head on.

We see the same neglect in the public service. Why are so many of our school teachers and nurses leaving for Australia and New Zealand? That is because they no longer see a future in a system that does not value them. They see a system where equipment is broken, where development is stagnant, and where team training is afterthought. They are looking for stability that this Coalition Government has failed to provide.

His Excellency the President asked us to use three tests: Is it true? Is it good or is it useful? As I stand here today, I apply those tests to this Government's record.

Is it true that this Government has brought a fresh start? No. Fiji was promised change, but instead it brought chaos, confusion and crisis management.

Is it good that our families are living in fear? No. This brings our attention to the results of our residents of Kulukulu, Sigatoka, settlement of part of Veivadravadra, where there is a State land without title. Residents have settled there for the last 50 years and so far, no developments have taken place in terms of formalisation of this Settlement.

Recently, this Settlement has seen an influx of new settlers who were allegedly given permission by the Lands Department to settle there. As a result, because of the construction of new houses and access roads, this Settlement is continuously under flood in heavy downpour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while no due consideration is given to the previous settlers who have built decent houses and access roads, the new settlers are given priority, and it is causing a lot of discomfort. I urge the honourable Minister for Lands to address this urgently, and I understand that he may be already looking into this.

The Opposition has remained steady throughout this term. We have supported every law that was truly good for the people because we practice genuine bipartisanship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not here to block progress, we are here to ensure progress actually reaches the person at the end of the road. However, we will not stand by, while the people are misled by a foundation that is clearly breaking apart.

We need leaders who understand that the bottom line is not just a number on a spreadsheet, it is the quality of life for every Fijian.

We need a government that understands that you cannot have development without maintenance, and you cannot have a team without training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the message from the people I meet everyday - the RSL drivers, the farmers, the teachers and mothers is simple: Nothing changes unless leadership changes at every institution that serves people.

The people of Fiji are tired of empty promises and the poor governance that has defined the last few years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are ready for a leadership that is solid, a government that is true and a vision that brings peace - real peace to every household.

Real peace starts with a road that leads to a school. It starts with an economy where a worker can afford to live. It starts with a neighborhood where a child is safe from drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am calling for the immediate, non-negotiable deployment of teams to restore access to these specific roads in Sigatoka. I am calling for an audit of why maintenance appeared to have fallen behind. Government must address this immediately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to hear that RSL services have been suspended because our roads have deteriorated so badly that school children must either trek through deep mud or miss school entirely, is absolutely unacceptable. This is not a hypothetical concern; this is the reality I am witnessing on the ground today.

As I stand here, children in Kavanagasau, Yalasa, Naveueve, Nabitu No. 3, Naikeli, Ciri, Nadola, and along the Olosara Fiji Gas Road, are being forced to choose between their safety and their education.

I have walked these roads myself. I have seen the mud caked on the uniforms of our young girls and boys. I have seen the exhaustion in their eyes after walking kilometres because a vehicle simply cannot pass.

These are no longer functional transport routes; they have become barriers that isolate our families from the rest of Fiji. This is not a natural disaster. This is a failure of basic upkeep. We cannot sit in this air-conditioned chamber and speak of an "Ocean of Peace", while our future generation is struggling just to reach a classroom.

The Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) publicly states that all maintenance payments are up to date and that contractor relationships remain strong. They claim that maintenance continuity is being protected and that any contractor withdrawals are independent of their oversight. Yet the reality on the ground, confirmed by RSL service suspensions, tells a very different story.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community reports indicate that the current condition of these roads has made them impassable during rainfall, and we are now seeing the consequences of that breakdown.

The people in Sigatoka and right across our rural heartlands are tired of being told that the system is working, when they can see with their own eyes that it is not.

Had the necessary maintenance been performed as promised, these roads would have remained passable during the rain. Instead, we see a localised crisis that is not unique to Sigatoka.

I am hearing similar reports from across the country. From the interior of Viti Levu to our maritime islands, families are facing the same impossible conditions. Our people are paying the price for what appears to be a systemic neglect of our national infrastructure.

Right now, a child's education in these areas depends on whether a vehicle can navigate a swamp or not. RSL operators have stopped their services because they refuse to gamble with the lives of our students on routes that are no longer safe. They are making the responsible choice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how is a family expected to reach a hospital in an emergency when the infrastructure beneath them has been allowed to rot? The people are not interested in excuses and we, in the Opposition, stand firmly with them.

We are not interested in hearing about contractor disputes or administrative delays. We are interested in the mobilisation of machinery. Putting people first means their safety and their children's education cannot be treated as secondary to bureaucratic excuses.

The people of Kavanagasau, Yalasa, Naveueve, Nabitu No. 3, Naikeli, Ciri, Nadola, and the Olosara Fiji Gas Road, do not need another debate in this House - they need to see the machinery moving. The time for explanation has passed. The time for FRA to do its job is now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must return to the basics of governance: serving the people, maintaining our infrastructure and protecting our future. I do hope that the Government will take heed of what the honourable Leader of the Opposition stated few weeks ago, and I quote; "A nation cannot rise when chaos becomes culture. It can only collapse under the weight of its own neglect."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, once again, thank His Excellency for a very thought provoking and visionary Address that challenges us leaders to work towards peace, progress and tranquility so that we are able to create a bright future for our children and propel our nation's progress.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, members of the public who are joining us in the gallery and those watching via livestream; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion, moved by the honourable Prime Minister, to thank His Excellency the President, for his most gracious Address at the opening of the 2026 Parliamentary Session.

His Excellency's remarks reminded us that unity must be consciously built through fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership and an unwavering commitment to the common good. It is constructed through leadership that listens to the people before it legislates for them. His Excellency reminded us that nation building is also being progressed through development.

Over the past 152 years since the Deed of Cession, Fiji has achieved significant growth in essential services and national infrastructure. The core message is that these advancements are the result of collective public effort rather than the work of any single government administration. The farmers, fishers, teachers, nurses, civil servants, faith leaders, entrepreneurs, artists and athletes have all played their part, and so too for those who have served Fiji beyond our shores.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, housing is the foundation of dignity, stability and opportunity for every Fijian family, and it is central to the inclusive development that His Excellency has called for. In this regard, the Ministry continues to prioritise vulnerable households, low-income families, women, youth and persons with disabilities, ensuring that no Fijian is left behind as we work to improve living standards and expand access to secure, resilient and well-planned housing across our country.

Housing availability and affordability remain serious national challenges. However, the Ministry of Housing is responding decisively through targeted policy reforms, sustained infrastructure investment and stronger institutional partnerships to increase supply, improve planning, and make home ownership and secure tenure more attainable for Fijian families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this challenge is not isolated - it sits within the broader economic and social realities highlighted by His Excellency, reminding us that hardship persists, particularly in vulnerable rural, maritime and urban communities, and that policies must, therefore, be inclusive, well-targeted and grounded in evidence. Guided by this national direction, the Ministry is strengthening its policy frameworks and operational programmes to ensure that sustainable economic growth translates into real improvements in household wellbeing, especially for those who need support the most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key priority for the Ministry is the upgrading of informal settlements and the provision of secure tenure for families who have lived for decades without certainty of landownership or access to basic services. Over the past three years, the Ministry has made significant progress in advancing settlement upgrading initiatives across the Central, Western, as well as Northern Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the 48 development leases secured by the previous Government under the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme, only three informal settlements namely, Cuvu, Ledrusasa and Waidamudamu, have already been completed prior to this Coalition Government taking office. We have been working to demonstrate our commitment not only to sustain progress,

but to accelerate the pace of upgrading, ensuring that more Fijian families transition into secure tenure and improved living conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government will soon be completing upgrades to the additional four informal settlements that started three years ago from whence we assumed office. To sustain this progress, this Government has consistently increased budgetary allocations for the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme, with \$10 million in the 2023-2024 financial year, \$13.4 million in the 2024-2025 financial year and \$14.6 million in the 2025-2026 financial year. Altogether, this represents a total of \$38 million over the three financial years, ensuring projects such as Sakoca, Tacirua, Tavela, Field 4 and Tore in Lautoka, advance steadily and will be completed in the 2025-2026 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Hem Chand's statement yesterday of the Coalition Government's unconstrained approach towards the formalisation of informal settlements is, therefore, misleading and incorrect. The least the honourable Member could have done was to appreciate the tremendous effort by this Coalition Government in completing development projects that they were not able to do during their 11-year term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, work also continues in other key informal settlement upgrading schemes. The Valewaquyaya in Ba and Vunika Settlement in Labasa projects are expected to be completed in the next financial year, while Nabare and Delaisaweni in Lautoka are expected to commence later this month, whilst Lovu Seaside in Lautoka and Caubati in Nasinu will commence around July this year. These projects are expected to be completed by 2028.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 10 projects are in the planning phase, including Sasawira in Nasinu, Tauvegavega in Ba, Tukutora in Lautoka, Delainamasiasi in Lautoka, Uluisila in Sigatoka, Veivauceva in Nasinu, Wakanisila in Nasinu, Vunivau A and Vunivau B in Labasa, Siberia in Labasa and Nadonumai in Lami.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a further five projects will advance into planning stage in the 2025-2026 financial year, and 20 projects remain at the preliminary phase, ensuring a strong pipeline of future housing opportunities across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as these projects progress, the Ministry is also undertaking a review of the Development of Informal Settlements Act 2022, to address emerging implementation challenges and strengthen the legal and policy framework guiding settlement upgrading.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the promotion of home ownership, in partnership with the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board (PRB), remains a key policy directive. Expanding the supply of affordable housing continues to be a national priority, particularly to support low and middle-income earners in accessing safe, secure and sustainable housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PRB has made notable progress in improving housing opportunities for its tenants and supporting pathways towards secure housing. Sir, 36 residents from the Jittu Estate informal settlement in Suva were issued offer for units at the Lagilagi PRB Flats, enabling them to transition into secure tenancy arrangements and significantly improve their living conditions. The Board also plans to construct 157 additional housing units at the Lagilagi Housing Estate, further expanding housing options for its tenants.

In addition, by late January 2025, 49 families received offer letters from the PRB for the purchase of their units, marking an important step toward home ownership. Early in 2025, the Board also issued offer letters to 11 flats in Kalabu and one flat in Makoi, providing tenants with the

opportunity to purchase the homes they have long occupied, and many of these families have been renting for more than 35 years. This initiative offers them a pathway to secure homeownership and long-term housing stability. Similar initiatives will also be implemented in other existing and new PRB estates across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority of Fiji is expanding its housing delivery approach by providing serviced residential lots and completed houses for sale. New developments are currently underway in Nepani, Davuilevu, Tavakubu, as well as Covata in Labasa. In this year – 2026, the Authority will deliver 236 housing units and 404 serviced lots, totalling 640 Housing opportunities.

These 2026 outputs form the foundation of a comprehensive housing delivery programme, aimed at significantly increasing the supply of affordable housing across the country. Over the next five years, including the 2026 delivery, the Housing Authority plans to deliver a total of 1,463 housing units and 4,356 serviced lots. This amounts to 5,819 housing opportunities, significantly strengthening the national housing supply, and ensuring that the Authority's immediate delivery is fully aligned with its long-term expansion strategy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of its innovation in housing delivery, Housing Authority has also introduced the construction of model homes using prefabricated and steel construction materials, marking the first time such technology has been adopted in its history. These homes are termite-proof, fire-resistant and certified to withstand Category 5 cyclones, while remaining affordable and accessible to low and middle-income households.

Earlier this year - 2026, a total of 101 model homes were awarded through a Call for Expressions of Interest, ensuring a transparent and inclusive selection process. The construction of these model homes has been tendered, and a thorough process has been undertaken to ensure good governance when awarding these contracts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, emphasising the importance of evidence-based policymaking and inclusive national planning, the Ministry will undertake a comprehensive socio-economic survey of all informal settlements across Fiji, supported by New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This survey will strengthen strategic planning, improve coordination of basic services, expand access to affordable and climate-resilient social housing, and ensure that policies reflect the lived realities of Fijian families. This work directly supports His Excellency's call for policies that are well-targeted, inclusive and grounded in evidence.

On strengthening democracy at the grassroots, Mr. Speaker, Sir, democracy does not live within these parliamentary walls, but in our towns and cities, as well as in our settlements. It lives in municipal councils, and in the daily interaction between citizens and the local authority, whether they apply for a building permit, pay their rates, or seek improvements to their community infrastructure.

That is why the upcoming Local Government Elections are so significant. These elections are foundational to daily governance, and they determine who –

- manages municipal budgets;
- oversees town planning approvals;
- ensures that public health standards are maintained in markets and food establishments;
- manages waste collection contracts;
- decides on how urban spaces grow; and
- ultimately shapes the environment in which families live and businesses operate.

This week, on Friday, 13th March, 2026, the Fijian Elections Office, in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government, will formally launch voter education for the upcoming Local Government Election, which means that voter registration will follow. This is a historic step towards restoring elected municipal leadership this year, which is after a lapse of 21 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the journey to this point has not been simple. Since 2023, the Ministry has also undertaken extensive review of electoral requirements in the Local Government Act 1972, examined voter expectations, aligned legislative provisions and delivered amendments to the Local Government Act 1972 to ensure that when elections are held, they are credible, transparent and administratively sound.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reforms must be felt in households, not only discussed in policy rooms. Over the past three years, our Coalition Government has demonstrated that reform must translate into tangible relief for its citizens. We have reduced the interest on municipal rates arrears from a compound rate of 11 percent to a 5 percent simple interest rate. This was not merely a technical adjustment; it was a deliberate intervention to ease financial pressure on families and businesses struggling to clear outstanding dues.

We have also aligned the age of all our municipal workers to 60 years, to align with the national retirement age.

On town planning growth, backed by data and discipline, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Town and Country Planning, for the past three years, had approved a total of \$2.26 billion. In 2025 alone, \$840 million worth of projects were approved - the strongest year recorded. Sir, that is investor confidence and economic momentum. They demonstrate that planning systems, while disciplined, are not obstructive - they are enabling structured growth.

On digital transformation and ease of doing business, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite strong approval performance at the Department of Town and Country Planning, we also acknowledge that manual processes can create delays and frustration. That is why this year, the Coalition Government will roll out the Online Building Permit Approval System. This reform will allow digital submission of plans, real-time tracking of applications, improved coordination between agencies, and reduced processing timelines. We are also developing an internal monitoring system to ensure subdivision and rezoning applications adhere strictly to processing timelines. This digital transformation is not simply a technological change - it is an institutional accountability in action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the Ministry of Local Government is currently working on formulating a Unified Accounting System to modernise and standardise financial management across all Municipal Councils. At present, Councils operate using varied accounting platforms and manual processes, which limit data consistency and timely reporting. The proposed system will provide an integrated platform covering budgeting, revenue management, expenditure control, asset management and financial reporting. Following extensive consultations with Municipal Councils and technical stakeholders, the detailed Scope of Work has now been finalised. The document clearly defines the functional, technical and commercial acceptance requirements, and is confirmed as procurement ready.

This reform will strengthen transparency, enhance internal controls which lacking in most Municipal Councils, and improve the accuracy and timeliness of financial reporting across Municipalities. It will also support better oversight, audit compliance, and informed decision-making at both, Council and national level.

On master planning and balanced growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, development must be guided by a long-term vision. The Viti Levu Concept Master Plan, which has been finalised, will now be supported by a detailed plan. We are providing a 50-year spatial strategy that integrates sectoral priorities, infrastructure planning, environmental resilience and population growth trends.

Parallel to this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, regional growth centres such as Nabouwalu, Keiyasi and Seaqaqa are being developed to decentralise economic opportunity. In 2023 and 2025, approximately \$5.2 million was invested in major capital projects, including the –

- Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal which was completed;
- Keiyasi New Town Subdivision; and
- Seaqaqa Market and Bus Stand.

These projects will stimulate local economies and reduce pressure on larger urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some projects that were completed were the completion of Govind Park in Ba as well as completion of market facilities in Levuka, Savusavu, Nakasi, Vunisea and Dreketi. These projects required sustained commitments - from planning approvals, procurement processes, funding allocations, contractor management and oversight, through to completion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has also continued to strengthen the national emergency response capacity through targeted capital investments for the National Fire Authority. Grant in the sum of \$8.5 million has been provided to the Authority to support the refurbishment of some of the capital projects that are earmarked by the Authority, that is, the new Fire Station in Sigatoka, the construction of Navua Fire Station, as well as new fire trucks that were handed over to Navua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change continues to affect our health, our coastlines, our towns and our economy. Solid waste management, therefore, sits at the centre of climate resilience and public health protection. The Coalition Government has confirmed that Fiji must move beyond fragmented, enforcement-driven approaches toward a nationally coordinated infrastructure-led and Public-Private Partnership-enabled waste management system.

The way forward is clear, we must implement a sequenced and bankable reform pathway, anchored in an Integrated Solid Waste Management Master Plan, supported by legislative reforms that introduce mandatory waste separation at source and harmonise existing laws under a more coherent implementation framework. For this year, the Ministry will be working on some remediation works, which is very important for dumpsites in Fiji, and we will be starting off with remediation work at the Sigatoka Dumpsite, as pilot project for the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President called upon us to think strategically and act decisively. That is precisely what this Coalition Government is doing - strengthening democracy at the grassroots, modernising institutions, planning for long-term growth, decentralising opportunity, and ensuring that development is disciplined, inclusive and sustainable.

Our mission remains clear - to improve the daily lives of ordinary Fijians and to build a resilient forward-looking nation where opportunity is not limited by geography, status or circumstance. With unity, discipline and unwavering commitment to the common good, we will continue to build a stronger Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak in support of His Excellency the President's gracious Address. May God bless Fiji.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, fellow Fijians from every walk of life, the iTaukei, the Indo-Fijian, Rotuman, Banaban, Chinese, European, Pacific Islanders and all who call this blessed nation home; *ni sa bula vinaka, Ramram, Salam malaikum* and *Namaste* to you all.

Today, I rise with profound gratitude and renewed purpose to respond to His Excellency the President's sterling Address on the opening of our Parliament for the 2026-2027 Session. His Excellency has painted a vivid blueprint of Fiji's future. Our nation is resilient against global storms, innovative in the face of change and united in our shared pursuit of prosperity.

It is a profound honour to rise in response to His Excellency's inspiring Address, which charts a visionary path for our beloved Fiji in 2026. Your words resonate deeply with the spirit of unity that binds our multiethnic nation. A tapestry woven from iTaukei resilience, Indo-Fijian enterprise, Rotuman pride, Banaban strength and the vibrant contributions of our Chinese, European, Solomon Islanders, Ni-Vanuatu and other communities.

In this parliamentary session, we recommit to fostering multi-ethnic affairs as the heartbeat of our democracy. In his words, we are called to build bridges, not walls, to harness our diversity as the engine of progress. Nowhere is this responsibility more vital than in the realm of multi-ethnic affairs, culture, heritage and arts portfolio, which I am proud to be associated with as an Assistant Minister.

In his wisdom, His Excellency has eliminated the path forward for our beloved Fiji, a nation that is resilient, diverse and poised for prosperity in 2026. His Excellency's words resonate deeply with the spirit of our people, reminding us that unity is our greatest strength amid the challenges of a changing world.

We all know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is happening in Ukraine and the Arab States now, and we are proud that we are living in a much more peaceful place. Sir, His Excellency reminded us that our diversity is our strength and that unity must be consciously, consciously built. This message is extremely important for a country like Fiji, where people of many cultures, religions and traditions live together as one nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am particularly honoured to contribute to this debate as the Assistant Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts. At the outset, I must thank the honourable Prime Minister for having the confidence in me to serve in this role. I also wish to acknowledge my Minister, honourable Charan Jeet Singh, for his leadership and guidance, as we continue to strengthen the work of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am, once again, grateful to the honourable Prime Minister for incorporating the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts into the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs. This addition makes the Ministry complete and more holistic, as preserving culture and heritage should be linked to all the ethnic groups. This vision is very commendable on the part of the honourable Prime Minister and this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our stewardship is of culture, heritage and arts. Fiji's rich heritage, from ancient *talanoa* traditions to contemporary Pacific fusion arts, serve as a bridge across ethnic lines.

We will advance the National Heritage Preservation Act, safeguarding sites like the Sigatoka Dunes and Levuka's colonial legacy for future generations. Our Arts grant will spotlight multiethnic collaborations such as the upcoming Fiji Festival of Unity, featuring *meke* dancers alongside

Bollywood-inspired performances. These initiatives promote pride in diversity while reinforcing the constitutional values of mutual respect and harmony that His Excellency so eloquently championed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform that the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts is currently working with the Ministry of Education to ensure culture, heritage and arts are reflected in the national curriculum. The review of Fiji's national education curriculum is timely as it will allow stakeholders in the cultural sector to voice their recommendations on a culturally inclusive curriculum for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts is closely aligned with the vision outlined by His Excellency. Our responsibility is to ensure that every community in Fiji feels respected, valued and included in our national journey.

His Excellency highlighted the significant importance of bringing all our ethnic communities together as one nation, a concept we refer to as social cohesion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, social cohesion is not something that happens automatically. It must be nurtured through dialogue, community engagement, cultural recognition, deliberate and targeted state initiatives and policies, and inclusive development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has done so much to promote social cohesion. I also joined the honourable Minister in sharing his inspiring vision for Fiji based on strengthening democracy and inclusivity, not only for Fiji. However, our honourable Prime Minister is also a leading figure in promoting peace in the region through the noble concept of Ocean of Peace. This tells a lot about him and his commitment to social cohesion.

This momentum must continue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, it must be strengthened. Here, I would like to quote one of our foremost scholars on media and social cohesion based at the University of the South Pacific, the Associate Professor, Shailendra Singh, as he observes, and I quote:

“Without social cohesion, there is no real development because whatever progress we make can be destroyed by upheavals, with ethnic tensions being a key underlying cause.”

This underscores why social cohesion must remain a priority for the foreseeable future. It is a long-term project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no quick fix. Let us never forget that Fiji's political instability is partly due to its colonial legacy, which has cost Fiji \$5 billion in lost development. This is money that would have improved our people's quality of life.

Fiji simply cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes. I also wish to point out that in Fiji, social cohesion is often viewed primarily as an iTaukei and Indo-Fijian issue, but as Dr. Shailendra Singh has pointed out in his writings, Fiji is rapidly changing demographics and political configuration means there is an increasing risk of fractures within the same ethnic groups. In Dr. Singh's words, and I quote:

“Social cohesion is not just between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians anymore, but increasingly within the same ethnic group. As such, any future framework must therefore take these intra ethnic dynamics into account and be both visionary and forward-looking, otherwise, it risks becoming redundant very quickly.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a living testament to multiculturalism. From the bustling markets of Suva where Hindi melodies blend with *meke* rhythms, from the lush highlands of Naitasiri to the serene villages of Vanua Levu, where Rotuman folklore dances alongside iTaukei traditions, our

multi-ethnic harmony is not accidental, it is nurtured deliberately and daily. Yet in these times of economic recovery, post-pandemic, climate threats to our shores and youth aspirations clashing with limited opportunities, we must do more. We must empower our communities at the grassroots level.

That is why, in direct alignment with His Excellency's vision, my Ministry supports multi-ethnic, community-based grant support programmes. These are not mere handouts. They are a seed of self-determination, cultural revival and economic vitality planted firmly in the soil of every community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs Grant Programme has become extremely popular among communities across the country because it directly supports community-based organisations in improving their facilities and services. Through this Programme, communities receive assistance for projects such as boreholes, accessibility improvements, solar systems, community facilities, musical equipment, renovation projects and water management systems. This year, the number of applications has increased significantly to more than 1,000. This shows the trust that communities have in this Programme and the important role it plays in supporting grassroots development.

I am also pleased to note that the allocation for this Programme was increased to \$2 million this year, which is an increase of \$700,000 from the previous financial year. I hope we will get more funding next financial year, as there are many requests from the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these projects may seem small individually but together, they create a powerful impact. They bring people together, encourage cooperation and strengthen relationships across ethnic and religious communities. This promotes social cohesion, too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also been actively engaging with communities across the country. Since I became the Assistant Minister, I have been able to visit communities in Nausori, Navua, Labasa, Nasinu and in the Western Division. These engagements have allowed me and the Ministry staff to listen directly to communities, understand their needs and find practical ways to support them. I am proud to say that we have been able to support these communities in whatever way we could. We are trying our best and we will continue to do that as a Ministry that is tasked to do so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also spoke about the importance of reflecting on our national journey and honouring the contributions of those who came before us. In this regard, the Ministry continues to advance several initiatives relating to the Giriti legacy.

The Giriti Commemoration remains one of the most significant national events that recognises the sacrifices and contributions of the Giritiyas and their descendants to the development of Fiji. As a son of the province of Naitasiri, I am particularly proud that this year's National Giriti Commemoration will be held at the Ratu Cakobau Park in Nausori on 15th May. This will provide an opportunity for people in my area to come together and showcase the past, present and the future of the Giriti legacy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to invite you and fellow Members of Parliament to grace their presence during this momentous occasion in my hometown of Nausori.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also commenced the Giriti records digitisation project. This initiative will digitise more than 60,000 Giritiya records and create a searchable database that will allow descendants to reconnect with their heritage. At the same time preparatory work is underway for the establishment of the state-of-the-art Giriti Museum. This Museum will serve as a cultural and educational centre that will preserve this important history for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are several other important initiatives being undertaken by my Ministry, which will be further elaborated by the honourable Minister when he delivers his contribution later in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also reminded us of the importance of responsible public discourse and leadership, particularly in an era where information spreads rapidly across digital platforms. As leaders, we must ensure that our words and actions strengthen unity rather than create division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, social cohesion requires leadership that is respectful, responsible and committed to the common good. I urge those who are engaging in negative posts, especially those on social media, to think again and be responsible for the sake of social cohesion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have mentioned before in this House, I am a product of social cohesion. As I was raised in the multi-ethnic community of Viria in Naitasiri where people speak each other's language fluently, we respect each other's values, culture, tradition and religion. This is something that I am very proud of, and as a representative of the people, I will try my best to see that I spread the virtues of goodwill to all people. Sir, I consider my role in spreading the virtues of social cohesion as my responsibility, which I take very seriously. I also urge all members present in this august House to do the same.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reaffirm the commitment of the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts to continue strengthening unity across our nation. We will continue engaging with communities, supporting inclusive development initiatives, preserving our diverse cultural heritage and promoting dialogue among our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's strength lies in the harmony of its people. As we embark on this Parliamentary Session, let us draw inspiration from His Excellency's message of hope and resolve. Together, with God's grace and the collective will of our people, we shall build a Fiji where every citizen thrives in harmony and abundance.

Let us continue to work together to ensure that every citizen of this country feels a sense of belonging and pride in being part of our beloved nation. Let us take social cohesion seriously for the sake of our communities and for our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the beauty of our people when we stand together, and we have seen the pain when we allow ourselves to be pulled apart. I urge everyone to march forward together as one nation, as one people, as clearly articulated by His Excellency in his Address on 16th February in this august House, and I quote, "our diversity is our strength, our unity is our purpose".

Indeed, His Excellency's words echo the words of our forebearers. *Noqu vakacegu ena veisiga ni dua na kalokalo*. Our dreams are coloured by unity's rainbows. Mr. Speaker, I thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address.

MR. SPEAKER.- I would urge honourable Members to seriously consider the very kind invitation by the Assistant Minister, for a big celebration at Ratu Cakobau Park on the occasion of the Girit Festival this year.

Before we suspend our proceedings for lunch, I remind the House Committee that we will meet immediately when the House rises at the Small Committee Room. I am sure that lunch will also be served there, so you will not miss out on lunch.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 12.18 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *bula vinaka, namaste, assalam walaikum* and a very good evening to you all.

I rise to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his most gracious Address to this august House. His Excellency the President has reminded us rightly that this Parliament must be judged not by noise, but by outcomes, not by speeches, but by service. However, before I begin my response to His Excellency's Address, I want to remind this House of something I said in this Chamber in 2024, as per Hansard Record – 14 months into the life of this Coalition Government.

I warned that this Coalition Government was becoming a dysfunctional and delusional Government, one that failed to deliver on its promises it made to its people before the election. At the time, some of my colleagues on the other side laughed, and some dismissed those concerns as Opposition politics. However, today, in 2026, the people of Fiji can see that those warnings were not politics, they were factual observations which stand correct today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2024, I said that this Coalition Government had inherited a nation that was stable, united and economically resilient despite the global challenges of the pandemic. I said that all the Coalition needed to do was maintain sound policies and continue the economic momentum that had been built. Instead, what we witnessed over the past three years is a Government that has managed to turn everything into uncertainty, confidence into doubt and progress into stagnation.

The reality today is that many of the fears raised by the Opposition and by many Fijians have, unfortunately, come true. Investors' investment confidence has weakened. Hundreds of our most qualified, skilled and experienced citizens continue to leave our shores in search of opportunities elsewhere. The brain drain that we warned about has accelerated. Every time another young professional individual boards a plane at Nadi International Airport with a one-way ticket, it is not just a personal decision; it is a vote of no confidence in the direction this Coalition Government has taken the country.

I want to acknowledge His Excellency's words that should echo through this Chamber all year round. I quote: "History will judge this Parliament not by the sharpness of its debate, but by the wisdom of its outcome." If that is the standard, then let us be honest about what the people are experiencing outside this Chamber, because right now, Fijians are not asking for poetry or drama, Fijians are asking for prices to come down, wages to stretch, roads to be safe, hospitals to function and leaders to follow the rule of law. That is the wisdom of outcomes that families measure every day – at the supermarket, at the bus stop, at the pharmacy counter and pothole-filled roads at night.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs also spoke about history, and I quote: "History will judge how we govern, not just what we build." I actually agree with him, but I do not think this Government understands that history is already taking notes and it is not writing a glowing report for this Government, in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if history is judging governance by this Coalition Government, then what exactly will it see? History will see portable cameras going up without warning signs, punishing drivers instead of fixing roads. It will see roads so badly maintained that potholes are turning into *lovo* pits. It will see many allegations hanging over Ministers. History will see hospitals struggling while leaders make speeches about progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, history will see families crushed by the rising cost of living, while the Government talks about economic recovery. History will see drugs spreading while communities feel less safe. History will see businesses struggling under the policies that change faster than Cabinet portfolios. History will see people losing trust in institutions that were supposed to be independent. History will see road humps built with ideas that look like they came from a 1985 Engineering textbook.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, history will also see endless Cabinet reshuffles like the Government is playing musical chairs instead of running a country. It will see commission inquiries burning taxpayers' money, while ordinary Fijians count coins at the supermarket. It will see leaders travelling the world while problems at home multiply. It will see teachers waiting for appointments while students wait for teachers, and it will see more, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, history will judge. The problem for this Government is that history does not read press releases. History reads outcome. History reads the struggles of ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about good governance, Fijians are frustrated about various allegations against various institutions such as the Fiji Sports Council, FICAC, Judicial Services Commission, our Fiji Police Force, Fiji National University and while many allegations surface over social media and other media platforms, our people struggle daily.

Mothers and fathers, who are the backbone of Fiji are trying to make a better life for their families. That is the brief reality of a single mother in Drekeniwai deciding between welfare and lunch money. That is the retired army pensioner, waiting for the after-care fund or increment and choosing between medication and electricity. And that is the young couple postponing building a home, because everything is more expensive, and the future feels less stable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, so let me put it in plain language for this Chamber. GDP figures don't cook dinner. Press releases by this Coalition Government do not pay rent. Slogans by these Ministers don't reduce school expenses. This Government had three years, Sir, and as we move into an election year, the question ordinary Fijians are asking is simple. Where is the change they were promised?

And here is the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that will fit in one sentence and one headline, this Government promises, better but delivered harder. Harder to afford basic groceries, harder to do business with policy uncertainty, harder to trust institutions when independence is questioned. Harder to believe in accountability when standards appear selective and the people are not confused; they are simply tired.

His Excellency also reminded the nation that democracy must be sustained by respect for the rule of law. He spoke about constitutional governance and the Constitution as a living document, but also the need for transparency, public accountability and national interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to put on record a principle that should never be controversial in this House or in this nation. No Minister is above the 2013 Constitution. No Government is bigger than the law. No political deal is stronger than the nation's supreme document. That must be our baseline, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, when the public sees confusion, inconsistency, or a two-speed approach to accountability, one for the standard for ordinary Fijians and one for the powerful — trust collapses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when trust collapses, the nation pays a price:

- Investors hesitate;
- public servants become cautious;

- communities become cynical; and
- young people learn the wrong lesson - that connections matter more than rules.

That is not the Fiji our forefathers have envisioned. That is not the Fiji His Excellency the President described when he spoke of unity, integrity and good governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, independent institutions must be independent in reality, not only in name. Oversight bodies must function without fear or favour. Investigations must be timely, credible, and appointments must be based on merit, not political convenience because when institutions bend, citizens break. They lose faith. When faith is lost, division grows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also gave this House a timely warning, and I quote: "As we move towards an election year, the tone you set in this House will shape the health of our democracy tomorrow."

I agree, Mr. Speaker, Sir, elections must be a contest of ideas, not fear, not division, not ethnic tension. So let me make my commitment clear, I will campaign on the struggles of ordinary Fijians that I speak to daily.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let the Government also understand this. In an election year, you cannot hide behind speeches. You have to answer to receipts! Receipts at the supermarket, pharmacy, for school expenses and for the vehicle damages they repair. So far, we have received many promises, but no receipts, little to no action!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we have seen a whole lot of alleged scandals, instances of alleged abuse by Ministers being investigated, more public officials being investigated and a drug war, HIV pandemic and many more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about issues, there is a big list. I will need another 24 hours for this, but here are a few issues that people have shared with us and we are bringing here to Parliament so that our Government can listen and action them.

Nightclub owners across the country are still waiting for trading hours to be revised back to 5.00 a.m. Restoring those hours will not only support the hospitality sector but also stimulate our Night-Time economy. When nightlife thrives, taxi drivers earn more, small food vendors and barbecue stalls do better, and many ordinary Fijians find opportunities to earn an honest living late into the night. This is not just about entertainment; it is about economic activity and livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while some businesses are waiting for relief, the ordinary Fijians are battling a more frustrating problem every single day, traffic congestion. Recently, someone posted on social media that they would vote for a leader who could simply solve this traffic problem. The post went viral and it shows how people feel about this issue.

The solutions are not complicated, Mr. Speaker. Sir, we have suggested that police presence on roads between 6.00 a.m. and 9.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. could significantly improve traffic flow during peak hours. Instead of experimenting with poorly designed road humps everywhere, we should be looking at smarter infrastructure solutions. For example, in areas like Tamavua near the Wailoku junction, overhead pedestrian walkways would help reduce congestion and improve safety. Similarly, in Waimalika in Sabeto, unnecessary road humps have been constructed near schools that now cause massive traffic buildups. While safety is important, poorly planned infrastructure should not punish hard-working Fijians trying to get to work on time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another serious concern is the increased flooding in areas that historically never used to flood. The reason is simple, drains are not being cleaned properly, the rivers are not being dredged regularly and when maintenance is ignored, even a small rainfall begins to feel like a natural disaster. The people see this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yet the Government remains strangely silent.

Our copra industry should not be forgotten in this whole chapter. They are in need of important infrastructure like power and roads. Our copra industry should be revived with more eloquent Government support, subsidiary for machineries including boreholes and copra dryers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, the world is grappling with this war that is happening in the Middle East, and Fiji will be the one that will bear the consequences. I urge the Government to reduce VAT to nine percent and also remove the \$0.20 tax on fuel. My suggestion to the Government is that, during this war that is currently being conducted by USA on Iran and the Middle Eastern countries, maybe the Government can put a relaxation on the \$0.20 tax and maybe bring it back whenever the war finishes. I do not know when!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of addressing all these pressing issues, the new Minister for Finance has decided to blame Fijians for drinking grog too much as the reason our kava exports are not growing. Sir, Fijians are already struggling with the cost of living. Traffic congestion, flooding and failing infrastructure and grog and other exports are not growing. The last thing they need is to be told that their problem exists because they drink too much grog.

His Excellency the President has called for unity and diversity, sustainability and resilience. Integrity and good governance. They are noble principles, but the measure of leadership is whether those principles are reflected in daily lives. So, I say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to every family listening at home and abroad, even if the Government is not listening to you, we hear you. Even if they do not see your pressure, we see the pressure. Even if they do not see your frustration, we see the frustration. And we will not accept a Fiji where hardship is normalised, and accountability is optional.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Government, to my honourable colleagues on the other side, my message is simple, fix the basics, follow the Constitution, respect the people, or they will replace you this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I repeat this, fix the basics, follow the Constitution, respect the people or they will replace you. As highlighted by my fellow colleague, honourable Sanjay Kirpal, Fijians need a leader who knows what is happening and is aware of their Government's daily business and operations. Sir, Fiji needs a decisive and visionary leader who puts his nation and Fijians first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I want to take this moment to pay tribute to two very special people in my life - my grandparents, late Bidiya Wati and late Bissesr Lal. I lost my grandmother in October last year, and just three months later, my grandfather followed, and they both lived long lives, more than 80 years and shared nearly 60 beautiful years of marriage together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were among my biggest supporters. Even though they did not understand English, they would still watch Parliament session on television and cheer proudly for their only grandson who made it to this august Chamber. My grandmother, after watching me speak, would lovingly complain that I should wear more colorful tie or trim my beard better. Those small, affectionate remarks carried the warmth only a grandparent could understand or give.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, their lives remind me that no matter who we become or what positions we hold, we must always honour and respect our parents and grandparents. They stand by us unconditionally. That is the spirit of what Fiji is truly about. We are all a family in our own ways,

bound by the values of love, respect and *kai vata*.

Today I stand here in this Chamber carrying not only my own hopes, but also the prayers, love and sacrifices of those who came before me. May their souls rest in peace, and may their values continue to guide me and all other members in serving our people and our nations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge and wish our women's community a happy International Women's Day. A happy Father's Day, and also a belated Holi and blessed Ramadan and a blessed day ahead.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- 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 support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister and the Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the opening of the 2026 Session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to echo and support His Excellency in acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land in which we gather today and for decades this seat of Government has been established here in Suva. I joined His Excellency in paying respect to the *Vanua o Nadonumai* and the *Turaga na Tui Suva*.

I acknowledge His Excellency for outlining the Government's legislative priorities and policy direction for the year ahead and beyond. The Address was reflective in tone, grounded in history and forward-looking in ambition. It called for unity, resilience, integrity and shared responsibility. These are aspirations that every Member of this House can support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency invited us to reflect on our shared journey as a nation from the Deed of Cession through Independence in 1970 to present day. This reflection on our history is not merely ceremonial, it is instructive, offering guidance as we navigate the challenges of today and tomorrow. His Excellency reiterates and calls for unity despite our diversity in such a time where there is uncertainty at the global and regional levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully align with His Excellency's emphasis on the vital role of collaboration in driving national progress. True development depends on strong partnerships among landowners, Government, the private sector and development partners built on transparency, trust and a shared long-term vision. The *iTaukei* concept of *sa i doko na karikari*, which His Excellency has repeatedly drawn our attention to, aptly captures the kind of leadership our nation requires at this critical juncture. It calls for courage, accountability, and unity - leadership that accepts the burden not reluctantly, but with resolve and clarity of purpose in service of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, traditional leaders are central to this effort. They must guide communities with clarity and foresight, foster innovation and ensure that land and sea resources are utilised purposefully while safeguarding our culture and identity. Through principled leadership and strategic partnerships, *iTaukei* institutions must seize this moment without delay. When land and resources are used and aligned with national priorities, it becomes a foundation for resilience, dignity, and shared prosperity. I also believe that the Government should also take heed of the needs of the people, respecting cultural context in which development is to progress.

Nevertheless, there must be strong leadership and good governance in any community, villages, as well as settlements that are governed by District Advisory Councillors and Special Administrators in the case of municipal councils. These are crucial factors for any development - whether it be national, divisional, provincial, district or community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this reason, I wish to acknowledge His Excellency's recognition of the crucial role that our rural and maritime communities play in advancing national development. As rightly mentioned by His Excellency, rural and maritime development must no longer be relegated to the margins of national planning and should no longer be viewed as secondary or approached as fragmented standalone community initiatives, a tendency that has persisted since the Colonial era. Instead, rural and maritime development must be embedded at the core of our national strategy, with sustained investment and co-ordinated planning. I echo the words of the late *Turaga na Tui Nayau*, former Prime Minister of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and I quote: "The development of rural areas is a solid measure of the progress of the nation". This speaks of a fundamental truth. A country's progress cannot be judged solely by growth of cities or size of its GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, true national progress is reflected in the living standards of those living in our villages, settlements and maritime islands where they have access to roads, clean water, electricity, healthcare and education. Markets determine whether opportunity is shared equitably. These areas are home to a majority of our people, custodians of our land and cultural heritage and vital contributors to our economy through agriculture, fisheries and natural resources.

When rural communities thrive, when farmers can access value chains, when young people can find livelihoods close to home, and when basic services are reliable and resilient, then development is balanced and inclusive. Therefore, investing in rural development is not a charity or peripheral policy – it is a clear and measurable indicator of whether our growth is sustainable and truly national in character.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Risk Management plays a central role in turning this principle into reality by ensuring that development reaches the most remote and undeserved communities. Through our seven development programmes, the Ministry prioritises the following areas:

- (1) Infrastructure development;
- (2) Water and sanitation access;
- (3) Improved access to rural housing; and
- (4) Enhanced economic livelihoods.

His Excellency clearly positions the primary sector - agriculture, fisheries, forestry and our broader natural resources as central to rural transformation and national resilience. The Address affirms these sectors as vital to livelihoods and food security, focussing on climate-smart practises, better water and land management whilst shifting from raw commodity exports towards value addition and innovation to retain more wealth and jobs locally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural and Outer Island Programme of the Ministry endeavours to create this enabling space for resource owners, actively improving rural farm access and infrastructure as well as supporting rural producers with technical assistance and agricultural implements to boost productivity. Through our Rural and Outer Island Programme, a total of 54 community farm access roads spanning 270.8 kilometres have been constructed nationwide, of which:

- 134.5 kilometres in the Northern Division;
- 54.9 kilometres in the Western Division;
- 54.4 kilometres in the Central Division; and
- 27 kilometres in the Eastern Division.

These investments are intended to improve reaches to markets, services and opportunities for rural farmers and communities.

As part of this strategy, construction has commenced on two agricultural processing facilities in Gau, focussing on *yagona* and cassava processing. Similarly, fisheries processing facilities in Lakeba and Viwa Island will enable our fisherfolk to transition into commercial operations, improve product quality and access higher value markets. These initiatives are designed to establish rural manufacturing hubs that add value to local resources, strengthen export growth and create niche markets within Fiji. Above all, they aim to empower rural communities, create employment and build resilient local economies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I echo the sentiments shared by His Excellency that we recognise the private sector as the engine for growth in our country. In all the Ministry's programmes that I have mentioned above, we would not be progressing without the engagement of the private sector companies and businesses to construct roads and buildings, build or supply boats and engines, supply materials for our Rural Housing Assistance Programme, et cetera. This is promoting public-private partnership at community level.

I appreciate His Excellency's profound statement that there will be special emphasis placed on empowering interior, rural and maritime economies so that development reaches every province and island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry is committed to supporting resource-based sectors for economic diversification and value addition. These are important for our rural, remote as well as maritime communities, to unlock a great potential and open up doors of opportunities.

We are gradually expanding our service delivery in this space, through our Rural and Outer Island Programme, but we are treading cautiously, as we try to fully understand the underlying principles, that will enable successful small businesses to flourish, to become exporters through the rural and maritime development value chain framework.

We cannot progress without also giving due consideration to building the human resource capital of our nation. Investing in our children and the education system is critical. If we have to ensure that future growth is sustainable, we must recognise the talents and skillsets that would necessitate this.

I totally support the prioritisation given to review the Education Act and the holistic review of our education system, and the approach being adopted to reduce barriers for learners, particularly in the interior, rural and maritime areas. It is common knowledge that our rural children migrate to urban areas for better school opportunities and to pursue their career dreams.

With technology available, I hope that our education institutions will soon set up satellite institutions in the maritime islands that will enable children from the Lau Group to remain on their islands and be able to pursue diploma and degree programmes without having to relocate to Suva and never return home until after one or two decades. They could remain on their islands and still live a healthy lifestyle and contribute to the economic growth of their village, *tikina* and province. Whilst I know that this requires a collaborative effort of all the key stakeholders, I believe that this dream is achievable but requires shared vision and commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminds us that development is a collective endeavour, dependent on the collaboration of every sector of our nation. Our Ministry continues to strengthen partnerships with these stakeholders through coordination, dialogue and resource sharing on the ground.

As the Ministry advances the finalisation of the National Rural Development Policy, consultations across sectors and communities have consistently underscored the need for stronger collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders. This reflects the very essence of the policy that development partners must work collectively rather than in isolation. Sharing responsibilities and resources to achieve common goals, such an integrated approach will lay the foundation for inclusivity, sustainability and long-term national transformation.

It would be remiss of me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not to acknowledge the various partners, regional and international, that continue to show their commitment to improving the lives of our people. UNDP through the Governance for Resilience Programme in providing support in improving communication network, advancing work on minimum standard designs for our infrastructure projects, technical and financial support in advancing the National Rural Development Policy, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) for their support in constructing four new evacuation centres, to name a few.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to highlight a few areas that caught my attention whilst going through the responses from the honourable Leader of the Opposition to the Presidential Addresses right from 2023 2024, 2025 and 2026. The main source of my materials is from the *Daily Hansard*, and I believe that the one yesterday is still in a draft form.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition then in 2023 began his attack on Government and His Excellency the President right from the very start of his contribution and he was full of anger and animosity. He was just like someone who cannot accept defeat and was trying his best to hang on to power, either by hook or by crook. I only hope that that type of leadership does not come back to haunt this Parliament again in future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not so with the current honourable Leader of the Opposition where his response to the Presidential Address in 2025 mentioned, in the United Kingdom the Leader of the Opposition is sometimes referred to as the leader of His Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition, depicting that the Opposition was not considered an enemy nor disloyal to anyone, but they play a very important role in any Constitutional democracy. He went on to say that we, the Opposition, will endeavour to work with Government on matters that unite us as a nation.

However, just listening to some commentaries from that side of the House yesterday and today's deliberation, there seems to be a lot of finger-pointing and to some extent, contributions deeply rooted in personal and political vendetta. I want to remind them that when you point a finger at your neighbor, three more are pointing back at you - a proverb reminding us that when accusing or criticising others, your own flaws and shortcomings are often exposed.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency for a very aspiring Address, and I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate this afternoon.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Members of Parliament, those present in the gallery and those watching live through various digital devices, ladies and gentlemen - *ni sa bula vinaka, Jai Siya Ram* and a very good afternoon to you all.

First of all, I would like to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his most gracious Address. It is our duty as elected Members of Parliament to see that everyone is treated equally and demand honesty, integrity and genuine commitment to the welfare of every member of

our community.

A nation cannot move forward when its leadership is distracted, divided and disconnected from the realities on the ground. For any nation to prosper, we need disciplined governance, clear national priorities, transparent decision making and a public service empowered to deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, signs of our struggles are clearly visible in daily life, in the form of rising cost of living, the collapse of rural livelihoods, the exodus of young people, the spread of drugs, the increase of crime, the erosion of public trust, and in the quiet despair of families who feel forgotten by those meant to serve them.

I appreciate the speech given by His Excellency the President to Parliament, where he talked about the Government's projected economic growth and social advancement. Primarily, I support the drive to increase investment, create sustainable industries and enhance trade opportunities. Yet I as an Opposition Member of Parliament believe it is essential to look at the more tangible aspects needed to achieve these goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while His Excellency rightly noted the uncertain global economic environment, the implications of these developments deserve closer scrutiny. Over the past week, we have observed significant geopolitical tensions within the Middle East. The war involving the United States, Israel and Iran is already having a significant impact on world commodity prices. The price of crude oil increased to over US\$100 a barrel yesterday. It came down to \$85 today but is expected to rise again amidst the uncertainty surrounding the prolongation of the war in the Middle East.

By way of context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bulk of the world's oil exports originates from the Middle- East; more precisely, it passes through the Strait of Hormuz (a 55-kilometre-wide passage between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman). At present, Iranian military has caused a closure of the Strait of Hormuz, essentially choking the global oil supply chain. Ships are therefore reluctant to pass through the Strait, as one oil tanker has already been struck by Iran.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these events will not just have a direct impact on oil prices, they will have many ripple effects, starting from a sharp increase in the cost of insurance. In global trade, marine insurance has significant impact on freight prices. Since Fiji predominantly imports the bulk of its goods, and also most raw materials that are manufactured locally will inevitably see prices of not just fuel, but all goods and services rise over the short term as a result of an increase in global freight rates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fuel and freight prices are a major contributor to inflation. Since we follow a one-month lag period for fuel pricing in Fiji, we could see pump prices rising from as early as next month. These will drive up transportation costs, which could see public transport providers demanding a fare increase. Shipping and logistics providers locally would also want to increase their prices to offset the increased fuel costs. We could also see energy prices rise, which will mean businesses' overhead expenses would increase. Who would all of these costs end up being passed onto? The consumer. The ordinary Fijian will inevitably end up paying more for almost everything, which is essentially a rise in the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the causation factors are global, and Fiji does not have influence over world commodity prices that are driven by trade wars or geopolitical tensions. What we do have control over, however, are prices once they reach our borders. That is where the role of government comes in. It is up to the government on whether they want to introduce initiatives that could provide relief to ordinary Fijians.

The government cannot effectively force businesses to absorb the increased costs because we have a free market economy. Most prices are subject to supply and demand, except in the cases of certain essential items that are regulated, however, even those regulated items would see prices increase when input costs increase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Government can do to insulate consumers from sudden shock is to subsidise prices at the point of sale. These can be in the form of direct or indirect subsidies, and I trust that economists at the Ministry of Finance would be able to advise the Government through a more detailed analysis, considering they are more familiar with the Government's current position. We, on this side of the House, do not have access to that data, so all we can do is estimate and project.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more importantly, what we can successfully project for the government without requiring data is that the outcome of these upcoming elections will hinge significantly on the Government's ability to firstly reduce the already high cost of living, and secondly, insulate consumers from the price increases that are to come.

On the health sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our country's wellbeing and future depend on a commitment to healthcare and education. While progress has been achieved in renovating healthcare facilities and improving medical services, it is critical to emphasise the recruitment and retention of healthcare personnel to overcome current shortages and offer quality treatment to all Fijians.

On this side of the House, we support a people-centered and evidence-based health system. This is an essential priority for our country. However, the test of our resolve and commitment to this issue is not in summits and speeches, but in actual delivery. Many of our people in our rural, maritime and interior areas continue to face a shortage of doctors, essential medicine and service delivery. Therefore, if we are to deliver on the issue of equity, we must ensure that there is an adequate supply of doctors and essential medicine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prevention must also be accompanied by actual investment in community outreach, health, education, mental health support and non-communicable diseases. While the Health Transformation Summit is a good initiative, we must see actual results. What are the actual deliverables of this Summit? What are the actual targets of this Summit? How will we evaluate this and report to Parliament and to our people? Legislative reform must involve actual consultation and health with health professionals and communities to ensure that the laws remain practical and responsive to actual issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition is ready to support actual reform in the health sector. However, we will hold the Government to account. Our people deserve actual results and not just promises. As the Opposition, we are dedicated to working with the Government to pass laws and policies that benefit all Fijians, respect democratic ideals and promote societal wellbeing. Let us participate in constructive discourse, rigorous debate, and comprehensive supervision to accomplish our common goals of Fijian growth, prosperity, and solidarity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now respond to His Excellency the President's Address on housing and upgrade of informal settlements. From this side of the House, we support the overall intent of better living conditions and greater access to formal and well-planned housing. Housing is a basic need rather than a privilege. Upgrading informal settlements and providing development leases are positive actions, and we acknowledge the successes in the Western, Northern and Central Divisions.

However, it is critical to look beyond the figures. While we have achieved 48 development leases and upgraded three informal settlements, a great number of people in Fiji continue to suffer in ignored conditions - flooding, poor sanitation and insecure living conditions. Upgrading informal

settlements must keep pace with the enormity of the task. Long term leases may provide security, but people still require affordable building materials, necessities, good drainage, roads, electricity and potable water. Without these necessities, formalisation alone will not improve living conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we support the Government's initiative to assist first-time homeowners through the Housing Authority, Public Rental Board and Fiji Development Bank. However, a great number of working people still face problems with escalating construction costs, rising interest rates and increasing land costs. It is critical to ensure that housing finance schemes are within reach of the low and middle income earners. The Opposition is ready to support housing reform in a transparent and accelerated manner. Our people deserve better than just long-term leases. They deserve safe, affordable and resilient living conditions to enable them to prosper.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank His Excellency for his Address, and I believe we share the same perspective on the land, sea and air space of Fiji. It is a strategic asset, essentially linked with the concept of the *iTaukei* people's identity and custodianship. However, we need to be mindful of the term "underutilised land". Land not commercially exploited is not underutilised. It is a land where the present and the future can thrive. Before we encourage landowners to unlock the land's resources, we need to remove the obstacles – the lack of infrastructure, access to finances, market linkages and the lease structure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we support the initiatives on agriculture, tourism, renewable energy and housing, we believe true unity comes with transparency. Landowners need to get a fair return. The environment needs to be protected and *qoliqoli* and forest conservation need to be upheld for the present and the future.

Leadership is also about accountability. Traditional leadership needs to be supported with technical expertise and a governance structure that is not politicised and not made cumbersome through lack of resources. While we support the empowerment of the *vanua*, we will ensure that the concept of development brings dignity and progress to our people.

I would like to thank His Excellency for his Address at the beginning of this legislative Session, on the issue of the build-up towards the general elections. We, the Opposition, agree that the outcome of the election must be a contest of ideas, not a contest of fears or divisions. We agree that the strength of a democracy is measured by the integrity of our leaders, and the ability of our citizens to exercise their franchise freely and without any fear of reprisal.

However, the respect for the rule of law for the integrity of the electoral process requires more than mere rhetoric. It requires the rule of law to be upheld and the institutions that are entrusted with the responsibility of running the electoral process to be independent, transparent and well-funded.

We also agree that the call for a constructive dialogue among the people of our multicultural nation must be heeded. Our diversity is a strength, and no leader must use ethnicity, religion or any other attribute of a citizen for political expediency. At the same time, however, unity does not mean the suppression of dissenting views, however constructive they might be. In fact, dissenting views are the very foundation of a true democracy.

His Excellency, the President spoke of a vision of a new Fiji, a Fiji that is confident, inclusive and resilient. That vision must be translated into tangible gains for the citizens of this nation – jobs, a decent standard of living, quality health and quality education. That vision must be judged by the people, not by the rhetoric of the leader, but by the actual gains that the citizens make. We need to put people first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now seek your permission to speak in Hindi.

Is saal ke udghatan par rashtrapati mahoday ne desh ke liye kuch niji niyamo ki ghoshna ki hai aur yah sarkar ke upar hai ki wah kis tarah se in nitiyo ko laagu kare taaki desh pragati kare. Sabse pahele sarkar ko kharch mei katauti karne par dhyaan dena hoga khaas kar ke abhi jab ki Madhyapur yaane ki Middle East mei yudh, yaane ki ladai jaari hai aur is karan se jo indhan yaane ki fuel hai iske daam mei bhari vridhi hone ki sambhavna hai.

Hum sabhi jante hai ki abhi ek barrel crude oil ka daam lagbhag double ho gaya hai – US\$60 se badhkar US\$100 ho gaya hai. Yah upar- neeche ja raha hai aur is karan se fuel ke daam mei bhari vridhi hogi. Hum sabhi jaante hai ki jo shipping companies hai, fuel desh mei laane mei kaafi khatra ka saamna kar raha hai. Is karan se humara jo freight hai isme bhi vridhi hogi. Freight mei is karan se bhi vridhi hogi kyuki desh mei hum log kaafi kuch aayat karte hai. Aur itna hi nahi, desh mei bhi kaafi kuch, jo yaha hum khud banate hai, iske liye jo raw materials hai, kaccha maal hai wo bhi hum videsh se lekar aate hai. Iska matlab hai ki lagbhag sabhi samaano mei hum log vridhi dekhenge jaha par samaano ke daamo mei vridhi hogi.

Hum kahe rahe hai ki sarkar ko yah dekhna hoga ki kis tarah se hum kharch ko kam kar sakte hai. Hum dekh rahe hai ki ek rasta ho sakta hai ki jo VAT hai ismei katauti ki jaye. Aap jante hai ki jab yah sarkar aayi thi tab inhone VAT ko nau pratishat se badha kar pandrah pratishat kar diya tha. Halaki shayad us waqt iski bahut zarurat bhi nahi thi kyuki Fiji ki arth vyavastha us waqt bahut acha tha. Fiji was one of the fast-growing economies in the world, us samay. Khair jo bhi hua. Lekin ab hum yah soch rahe hai aur sarkar ko ye salah de rahe hai ki hume ayesa kuch karna padega ...

Mai yah bhi bata du ki VAT mein jo vridhi hui thi, kal isi sansad mei mananye mantri Kamikamica ji ne is sansad mei kahathat ki us vridhi se jo aamdani hui thi, us aamdani ko humne social protection aur Back to School mei kharch kiya hai. Vasto mei hum invest karte hai desh mei, capital expenditure, aysa kuch karte hai jisse ki wapas aamdani desh mei aaye. Lekin aesa kuch nahi hua.

Aur bhi samasyae hai sarkar se jaese spread of drugs. Aap dekh rahe hai ki desh ke lagbhag kai ilako mei aap sabhi isse waqif hai ki kaha-kaha nasheele padarth paye ja rahe hai. Is tarah se samasyaye samne aa rahi hai.

Kewal nasheele padarth nahi, isse HIV ki samasya bhi desh mei bahut badh rahi hai aur humare aspatal, yaha tak ki St. Giles mei aaj jagah nahi hai kyuki logo ki mansik sthiti theek nahi hai. Iske alawa apradh bahut badh rahe hai. Yaha tak ki, abhi haal hi mei aap ne suna hoga ki is sambandh mei ek police officer ki bhi mrityu hui hai.

Toh bahut saari samasyae desh mei hai jise hume sudharna hoga aur in samasyao ke karan se humare yuva pidhi desh chhod kar ja rahe hai. Kai samasyae hai, khaas roop se hum dekh rahe hai ki sewae nahi uplabdh hai. Rakiraki mei kal pata laga hai ki waha par dhaan kaatne waala machine jo hai wo bigda khada hai. Itna hi nahi, jo truck machine ko lekar jaata wo truck bhi bidga pada hai.

Mai ye kahena chahta hoon ki kaafi log online services ke baare mein nahi jaante hai, toh sarkar ko iski vyavastha karni chahiye.

[This year during the inauguration of the Parliament sitting, His Excellency the President had announced some policies and rules. It depends on the Government of the day on how it is going to implement or address these policies for the progress of this nation.]

In the first place, the Government needs to cut down its expenditure, particularly, when there is a conflict or a war in the Middle-East. Due to this conflict or war, we are most likely to face a significant increase in the fuel prices. We are aware that at present, the price of a barrel of crude oil has almost doubled. It has increased from US\$60 to US\$100, which we see as going up and down. For this reason, we are going to encounter an increase in fuel prices. Bringing fuel to our shores is also becoming a hazardous job for the fuel companies. Due to this, I understand, our freight charges will also go up.

The other reason the freight charges will go up would be, we also import things such as raw materials for our local production. We depend on such imports, therefore, we are going to encounter an increase in costs too. It is the duty of the Government to look into this issue as to how we can minimise the expenditure or the increase in costs. At this juncture, I suggest getting the VAT down.

When this Coalition Government came into power, it had increased VAT from 9 percent to 12 percent. At that time, there was no good reason to increase VAT. At that time, the country was progressing well in terms of the economy. Fiji was termed as one of the top most fast growing economies of the world.

I would like to suggest to the Government that such steps have to be taken to minimise the costs. Yesterday, honourable Kamikamica revealed in Parliament that that the money that was collected from VAT increase was utilised on social protection and back-to-school expenses. In fact, when we put money for such capital investments, in return we get the money back.

I must say that at present, there are even bigger problems the country is facing, especially, the drug issue. Not only narcotic-related problems, the society is also facing an increase in HIV cases. We have come across cases where a number of patients in our hospitals, mainly at St. Giles Hospital, an increase in people with mental conditions. The country is also exposed to crime-related incidents.

Recently, a police officer had lost his life due to the severity of such crimes. Apart from all these, there are many other social-related problems in our country that needs to be tackled. I understand, due to such problems, youths of our country do not see Fiji fit to stay and are leaving our shores. I have been told yesterday that in Rakiraki, the rice harvesting machine has broken down and lying idle. Not only this, the truck that is used to transport the machine in and out is also not in a working condition.

All I want to say is, there are people in the country who are not familiar with online services, therefore, the Government should consider finding a solution to this problem.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of our democracy depends on the contribution of all of us, including the Opposition, and we are prepared to make our contribution not only by participating in the electoral process, but also by ensuring that the outcome of the elections does not undermine the very foundation of our democracy. I urge the Government to go beyond words and slogans and take practical steps to establish an inclusive, sustainable and just Fiji. God bless Fiji.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to offer the support of the Ministry of

Education to the honourable Prime Minister's motion on His Excellency the President's Opening Parliament Address.

His Excellency has laid before us a vision that is bold, principled and uncompromising in his call for national progress. As we stand in an election year, the people of Fiji are watching closely. They want to know which leaders have the courage to make a difficult decision, who has the political will to drive real reform and who has delivered results over the past three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government has chosen the harder path, a path of rebuilding, restructuring and restoring integrity to our national institutions. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me be very clear, the reforms we have undertaken in the last three years have not been easy. They have required political courage, administrative discipline and a willingness to confront long standing weaknesses that previous governments ignored or avoided.

When we assumed office, we inherited a fragmented education system, outdated legislation from 1966, weak curriculum standards, poor learning outcomes, infrastructural neglect, a demoralised teaching workforce and an institution that had drifted from their core mission. It would have been easy to maintain the status quo, it would have been easy to avoid difficult reforms, but this Coalition Government chose progress over convenience. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand proudly to say we have delivered, reformed and we have laid the foundation for a stronger education system for the next generation.

His Excellency reminded us that 152 years ago, the Deed of Cession placed education and civilisation at the heart of Fiji's development and today that mandate is not only historical, it is political, moral and urgent.

We thank the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma for accepting the challenge that our education system faces, in terms of moral values and student behaviour. This year, the Methodist Church calendar has scheduled the *Macawa ni Vuli*, prior to the beginning of the academic year, as a yearly event where issues related to education, such as drugs, are discussed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has made education a national priority because we understand that a nation that invests in its people, secures its future. As in the 2025 - 2026 budget allocation, \$847 million was budgeted to the education sector, with \$675 million to the Ministry of Education alone. This is a deliberate strategic investment in the future of every Fijian child.

The 2023 Denarau Declaration, the Fiji National Development Plan and Vision 2025 are the backbone of our reform agenda. It sets out seven thematic pillars that guide every decision that we make, from curriculum reform to teacher development, from infrastructure to digital transformation. This Government is not patching holes, we are rebuilding the system from the ground up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Education Bill of 2025 is the most significant legislative reform in more than 60 years. The 1966 Act belongs to a colonial era. It cannot serve a modern Fiji, and the new Bill will establish:

- (1) A National Curriculum Advisory and Assessment Authority which will enforce compulsory education with real accountability.
- (2) Regulate Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary, secondary, TVET and higher education under one coherent framework.
- (3) Introduce provisions for home schooling and private schools.

- (4) Mandate a future ready curriculum including AI, digital literacy, climate change, civic responsibility and cultural identity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is not just a legal document, it is the architect of Fiji's future.

The Fiji Education Commission's early findings are clear, that we must move from exam-driven schooling to learning first; a system that values critical thinking, problem solving and real learning outcomes. The data is sobering that over 80 percent of schools report Year 4 students below math standard, nearly two-thirds report Year 4 students below reading and writing standards and almost half of secondary schools Year 9 entrants are below proficiency. These findings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, justifies the scale and urgency of our reforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in October 2025, we launched the Yavutu Programme, a US\$5 million initiative supported by Global Partnership for Education (GPE), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). *Yavutu* ensures that every child, including those with disabilities and those in remote communities, receive quality early childhood education. A strong foundation is not optional, it is essential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2025 LANA results show real progress. Year 5 literacy increased from 90 percent to 95 percent, and Year 7 literacy increased from 93 percent to 95 percent. But numeracy remains a challenge in Year 5 numeracy, stagnant at 74 percent, and Year 7 numeracy declined from 83 percent to 81 percent. We are responding with a targeted numeracy strategy, and I will report back to this House on its implementation.

The Year 13 Flexible Pathways Programme is already being piloted in 11 schools. It provides a structured transition to tertiary education, tertiary style learning experiences and vocational and workforce ready pathways. This is how we prepare young people for the real world, not by chance, but by design.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new curriculum will integrate digital literacy and AI, climate change and sustainability, civic responsibility and discipline, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi, health nutrition and physical education. We will also strengthen digital media literacy to combat misinformation, a growing threat to national unity, especially in an election year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Technical Vocational Education Training (TVET) is central to creating decent work and empowering rural and maritime communities. Over 90 percent of TVET graduates secure employment within months, and we are expanding these pathways and aligning them with industry needs. For the first time ever, the Ministry of Education, National TVET Skills Fair was hosted at the HFC Bank Stadium, providing a platform for student projects, an industry talent, scouting, which will be an annual event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we prepare our children for the technological world we live in, the Ministry of Education is investing in e-learning platforms that will allow students to access quality online learning resources. These platforms include Moodle, the widely used learning management system that supports interactive lessons, assessment and teacher engagements. The system is currently being piloted with Year 13 flexi-schools that will expand the horizon of students for exploration learning.

Full implementation will take place in 2027 for all the schools taking into consideration electricity, connectivity and geographical locations. The GIGA Implementation as Fiji is the first East Asian nation in the GIGA initiative had trained 746 schools across its four Divisions on the GIGA meter and now has 772 schools live on the GIGA dashboard for real time internet connectivity

status updates.

On Education Perfect, the Ministry has entered into an online learning tool subscription agreement with Education Perfect Limited. The objective is to enhance education services for students through an online learning platform. Currently, we are verifying with vendors to agree on implementation and contractual arrangements.

On digital audio and video broadcasting studio, the Ministry of Education now has two studios and one editing room to support the development, educational, audio, video and graphic materials for students. The Australian (Fiji) Education Programme provided financial boost for the recording of the materials, and 63 examination revision video lessons were developed, and these lessons were aired on the Walesi TV Programme and uploaded on the Educational Hub and the Ministry's media platform.

On the FEMIS and FESA systems, the system which integrates student data and learning resources to improve access and monitoring numeracy exams, teacher history and assisting teacher placement and teacher appointments and data input from school levels needed to be accurate, timely and complete to allow effective utilisation of FEMIS and FESA. These platforms are being rolled out progressively with training provided to teachers and staff to ensure effective integration into the classroom. The goal is to ensure that every child in Fiji, regardless of location has access to the same quality of education through digital means.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet has endorsed the Student Progression and Retention Policy to strengthen learning outcomes and ensure students have advanced through the education system with necessary foundational knowledge and skills, with clear guidance on retention where learning benchmarks are not met.

In addition, the scaling of marks for national education has been reintroduced for Year 8, Year 12 and Year 13 National Examination to promote equity, fairness and national credibility in the assessment, while ensuring that no student is disadvantaged during the transition.

Our commitment to equity is demonstrated through free education in primary and secondary education, 100 percent tertiary fee subsidy for eligible students, infrastructure investment in rural and maritime schools, decentralised service delivery and inclusive education provisions in the Education Bill 2025.

Compulsory education provisions will ensure that every child is enrolled and attending school. Persistent non-compliance may result in penalties, not to punish parents, but to protect children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education must remain the cornerstone of our nation's development. Today, I am pleased to report that Government assistance under the Back-to-School Programme has reached approximately over 200,000 children, representing 98 percent of those who requested this support. The remaining 2 percent who have yet to receive assistance are encouraged to check with their children's respective schools, and complete the application process.

To ensure that no child is left behind, the Ministry of Education has extended the deadline for applications until this Friday. Parents and guardians can access the forms online, fill the forms accurately, and get a stamp by School Heads to ensure that they are bona fide students, and drop it at Divisional Education Offices, who will forward it to the Ministry of Education Headquarters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have established 13 new secondary schools in disadvantaged and remote areas. Seven have already been opened, and three schools established in 2005 have yet to be opened, which are Totoya Secondary, Matuku Secondary, and Wainikeli Junior Secondary. The seven schools that were opened in 2026 included;

- (1) Namuka Junior Secondary School,
- (2) Ratu Meli Memorial Secondary School,
- (3) Nawaka College,
- (4) Naweni Secondary School,
- (5) Yasawa South Secondary School,
- (6) Naboro Junior Secondary School, and
- (7) Nadroga-Navosa Provincial College.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the remaining three - Nalaba District Secondary School, Nagonenicolo Junior Secondary School and Tokaimalo Junior Secondary School, are in the final stages of preparation for their official opening, which is anticipated shortly. These schools will accommodate Year 9 class only, with minimal student numbers of 20 required to begin operations, commencing with Year 9 classes this year and Year 10 classes every year onwards. That will ensure that students in remote and disadvantaged communities are able to access secondary education closer to home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet has endorsed the establishment of the National Research Council, legislated under the National Research Council Act 2017, which provides the legal framework for the Council and oversees the National Research Fund. This Council will be appointed in the near future.

At Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS), I am proud to confirm that there has been a significant increase in TSLS support for all eligible students. Out of the 22,151 who are currently on full scholarship, over 10,000 students are on new scholarships, which included 320 who have opted for tuition-only option.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our progress is not achieved in isolation. We acknowledge with deep gratitude the support of our development partners. The Government of Japan has funded the construction of classrooms and facilities under its grant assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects, including new classrooms and solar systems for schools such as Namalata District School, Ratu Nacagilevu Memorial School, Tagaqa District School and Navurevure District School, to name a few. These grassroots projects were recommended after a lapse of five years due to poor governance and accountability with stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the United Arabs Red Crescent Partnership with the Fijian Government, it has commenced Phase 2 of the MOU signing for the building of two duplex quarters for Ratu Simone Matanitobua College, Sigatoka Methodist High School and Muaira College, and work should commence by the second quarter of 2026.

The Australian Government, through the Fiji-Australian Vuvale Partnership, continues to provide substantial development assistance. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is supporting water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in 45 schools along the Suva-Nausori corridor, benefiting around 30,000 students. We also thank the Australian Government for the audit that was done in the Suva-Nausori corridor, and we hope that future discussions will undertake an audit for schools in the Nadroga-Ra corridor and the Northern Division, to give us the current status of WASH facilities and school conditions. The new schools that will be constructed under these programmes are Davuilevu Secondary School, Vatuwaqa Primary School and Suva Primary School, and preliminary work has started on these projects.

We also acknowledge other bilateral partners who provide scholarships, teacher training and technical support, strengthening our education system and ensuring that our children have access to quality learning environments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak directly to our teachers. Teachers, you are entrusted with the lives, minds and future of our children. Your influence is profound and your decision shapes the next generation. In an election year, when emotions run high and misinformation spreads easily, I urge our teachers to remain focused on their noble calling. Your classrooms remain places of learning, not arenas of political influence, and your decisions must prioritise the safety, wellbeing and development of our children. We trust our teachers, and with that trust comes accountability.

I also highlight a milestone achievement that speaks directly to the political will and leadership that this Coalition Government has demonstrated. For 16 long years, the Ministry of Education had no meaningful engagement with the teacher unions of this country – 16 years without structured dialogue, without genuine consultation and where the voices of teachers, the very people who carry the weight of our education system, was sidelined. Under this leadership, that era has ended.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has restored the spirit of partnership and goodwill with the teacher unions. We have reopened the doors of dialogue. We have re-established formal consultation mechanisms and have done so, not out of political convenience, but out of respect for the teaching profession and a commitment to building a stronger and more collaborative engagement system. This renewed partnership has already produced tangible progress, improved the teacher deployment process, transparent dialogue on promotions and appointments, collaborative work on teacher-welfare and professional development, joint participation in policy discussions, including curriculum reform and school governance, and a shared commitment to improving learning outcomes for our children. This is what political will looks like. This is what leadership looks like and this is what progress looks like.

I now turn to an issue that threatens the very soul of our nation. Fiji is facing a drug crisis, not a distant threat but a present danger, not a problem for tomorrow, but a national emergency today. We are seeing –

- an increase in drug trafficking;
- the targeting of schoolchildren as carriers or couriers;
- the infiltration of communities by organised networks;
- the rising addiction among youth; and
- a deeply alarming surge in HIV cases linked to needle sharing and drug use.

This is not just a law and order issue; this is a national survival issue.

We cannot, and we will not allow our children to be used as pawns in the drug trade. We cannot and will not allow drugs to destroy the future of this nation, and we cannot and will not stand by while HIV infections rise because of unpreventable and dangerous behaviours linked to drug use. This is not just a law and order issue; this is a national survival issue.

The Ministry of Education is not fighting this battle alone. We have a strong partnership with the Fiji Police Force, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Women, international governments and development partners, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations and community leaders. Together, we are implementing school-based drug awareness programmes, an early warning reporting system, counselling and rehabilitation pathways, HIV prevention and education campaigns, community outreach and parental

engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we do not act now, we risk losing an entire generation but if we stand united - Government, schools, families, communities, we can save Fiji from this path of destruction. Let this be our rallying cry, not our children, not our school, not our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, education is a foundation upon which we build our nation's future. With the support of our Government, development partners and our communities, we are ensuring that every child in Fiji has the opportunity to learn, opportunity to grow and opportunity to thrive. Together, we are not only investing in classrooms and scholarships, we are investing in digital platforms that connect our children to the world of knowledge, and we are investing in the dreams and potentials of our young people. Let us continue to work hand in hand to build a stronger, smarter and more resilient Fiji through education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is not waiting for change; we are delivering it. We are not talking about reform; we are implementing it. We are not promising a better future; we are building it. His Excellency has set the direction, the Ministry of Education is executing the mission, and the people of Fiji will judge us not by our words, but by our results.

We wholeheartedly support His Excellency the President's motion before this House. *Vinaka saka vakalevu, dhanyavahd* and thank you very much.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Minister for Education for his contribution to the motion. Honourable Members, there are three more speakers in today's batting line-up, plus two further items in our Order Paper, one of which is a motion with a list of six speakers.

In light of this, we will have a short adjournment of half an hour, but before we do, given the lateness of the hour, I will entertain a suspension motion. I call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you have mentioned, we have three speakers left and, of course, the Motions on Schedule, plus No.5 – Consideration of Bills.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 3.58 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.35pm.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching from the comfort of their home; good afternoon, *Ram Ram, Salam and Bula* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to offer a response to the Address delivered by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, on the occasion of the opening of the fourth and final session of this parliamentary term and for this Government.

His Excellency spoke of the reflective pause to evaluate our present circumstances. Upon reflection, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the view from the Opposition bench suggests that while Government rhetoric is polished, the reality for the average Fijian remains battered by hardship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President rightfully acknowledged that while our economy has expanded, the benefits have not been evenly shared. This is a polite way of describing the widening gap between the elite and the vulnerable.

The Household Income and Expenditure Survey confirmed that approximately one quarter of our population lives below the poverty line, with another 25 percent struggling above it. That is 50 percent of Fijians are suffering, under this Government, to put decent meals on the table for their family.

His Excellency noted that global instability is driving the rising cost of living. However, the Government proposed that prudent fiscal management must do more than reduce debt exposure, which this Government has drastically failed in achieving. It must put food on the table for those in vulnerable interior, rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead, what this Government does is increase VAT, corporate taxes, bus fares, road penalties, a new rate for Fringe Benefit Tax, increase the Departure Tax, introduced Resident Interest Withholding Tax, sitting silently while Fiji Airways prices touch the sky just like its planes. Most of these increases were for businesses, but they were passed on to the consumers, thus increasing the cost of living indirectly.

We hear of a vision for decent work, yet our youth continue to migrate in an unprecedented demographic shift because they do not see a future in the current labour market, nor do they have faith in their own country that they can have a greener or a brighter future. As parents, we want our children to study and go overseas. Why is that Mr. Speaker, Sir? The answer is clear. As parents, we are losing faith in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, law and order has become a major issue, that people do not feel safe walking alone during the day in our towns and cities. Imagine what must be happening during nighttime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now on the change of the Constitution, it must not be a tool for political expediency or further instability. It cannot be that the Government is unaware as to what they need to change. To date, the Government has not come out clearly with what they want to change in the Constitution, as rightfully said yesterday by honourable Koroilavesau that Government needs to come out clear as to what needs to change in the Constitution. If the Government continues on its path to change the Constitution, people may get the same type of change they wanted before the 2022 General Election. People voted for change and they got a messed-up Government. Likewise, if the Government continues, they will give a messed-up Constitution. This Government is a clear showcase of expectation against reality.

We hear the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) saying that this Constitution should be thrown out. The GCC says that the iTaukei community needs to be protected. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei are the majority in this country, not one of the minorities. We hear that this Constitution is not empowering iTaukei community and stopping the progress of iTaukei. Are we joking? Just by putting words in the Constitution, will it empower any particular ethnic group? Let us face the facts.

Indo-Fijians coming to Fiji was not because of their choice or their own will. Indians were fooled into coming to Fiji through the Girit system by the British. Our forefathers worked on farms as slaves that they never owned. Once the British left, they were given a piece of land on a lease under the ALTA on which they started farming. Did the Indo-Fijian community ever claim ownership of the land? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and never will they! Did we ever go back to ask them for ourselves, like what happened in other places where British rules were ruled for decades? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

A typical example is British-India, a country was partitioned into India and Pakistan to protect the minority Muslim community. Did we ever show such an idea floating in Fiji by the minority Indo-Fijian community? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and nor will it ever happen! Our forefathers came, they struggled, they did hard work, they ensured that schools are built so that their children are educated, as they know that they were in a country which may never belong to them, nor would they own any piece of land, but the only way forward would be through hard work and investing in their children's education. Education and hard work are the key ingredients leading to the success of an individual, which will eventually contribute to the success of the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am saying is that putting words in the Constitution would not just empower a particular community. One needs to work hard and be educated to live a decent life. His Excellency the President spoke about unity. Let me remind all our iTaukei brothers and sisters, we are not here to claim or take your land, nor are we creating obstruction in your success.

On pre-independence and post-independence, the iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities have lived side by side and had genuine unity. We never took any iTaukei land, land lost as freehold was taken by the British and then sold to others. What Indo-Fijians are asking for is to lease the land to us, let us do the hard work on the land, so that the economic benefit is shared back to the resource owners as lease money. No one can take land away. It is protected under the Constitution, and it is protected under the 2013 Constitution unlike the 1997 Constitution, which saw Momi and Denarau slip away from iTaukei landowners.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 60 on relevance, especially Standing Order 60(1). The words which are added can create ill will amongst the races living in Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- On the first issue on Section 66 on the relevance to the statement to the President, His Excellency.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- He is going on, talking about the GCC and the land, et cetera, which is not a problem regarding that, and we understand what he is talking about. However, to bring it to this level by politicising that with His Excellency the President's Address, I think it is irrelevant.

MR. SPEAKER.- The issue, as I have mentioned, the honourable Member was to link His Excellency the President's Address to that you are raising, and it is important. I think, honourable Lal did very well on that, so he addressed His Excellency's Address specifically when he came to the

the point he wanted them addressed.

I wish everyone would do that, so that we do not get embroiled in the decision, whether you are just raising issues that you normally would have raised on a normal day. This discussion is on addressing the President's Address - your commentaries on it, so you keep it in line with the various themes that His Excellency the President had said from this podium. Please, can you, honourable Maharaj?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, if I may just clarify, His Excellency the President spoke about the change of the Constitution, the unity that he wants to be brought into this country, and I am talking exactly about that. He talked about the empowerment of the iTaukei community. I am talking exactly about that. I am just giving a perspective as an Indo-Fijian as to how we can actually achieve that unity. That is all, and I need to explain myself in order to be quite clear as to what our perspective is. I am exactly following what the President...

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I am just worried that you will get carried away on the issue of land, and you have left the other issues behind that you discussed. That is all.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Exactly, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Alright, you may proceed.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No one can take the land away. It is protected under the Constitution. Have terms and conditions so that investment on land benefits both the lessee and the landlord. Let us get things right.

We cannot fix it if we do not talk about it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is about educating our children. It is about their upbringing and values that are supposed to be instilled in them. Just putting words in the Constitution will not grow a tree bearing money in the backyard that will automatically improve the socio-economic status of any particular community. Under the last administration, ethnic-based stats were released, and that had its own pros and cons, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I clearly remember this, that the Government started ethnic-based breakdown, but unfortunately, this breakdown is only used when it is about money, poverty, and Government grants. This is not empowerment, but it is increasing the dependence.

Mr. Speaker, I ask, what about the ethnic breakdown when we are dealing with criminals? Criminals who are rapists, thieves, murderers, drug abusers, and drug dealers. What about teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and inmates in prison? Are we comfortable talking about all this in Parliament? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not. If I talk about it over here, I would be taking it as racist, or making a political point, or a point of order is going to be raised. These are issues that are decaying our society. Indo Fijians have been tagged in social media as racist, and they should go back to India. I request the Government of the day to look and talk about the social issues affecting the major ethnic group, to bring in genuine unity.

Mr. Speaker, the President spoke about...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, Leader of the Government in Parliament.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Standing Order 62 (4)(d), regarding words that are likely to

provoke ill feeling. Sir, he just mentioned this phrase, "Indians go back to India".

MR. SPEAKER.- Correct, I was going to raise that. I do not think it was appropriate, and I will ask you to withdraw that because it goes right to the grain, you withdraw that comment.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I withdraw, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, the President spoke about "*sa i doko na karikari*", calling for a vision of unity in resource use. The Opposition supports the integrated review of the Native Land Administration. However, this review must truly remove the structural constraint from the colonial era, rather than just mainstreaming iTaukei institution to save the Government's current development priorities. Landowners must be partners and entrepreneurs, not just bystanders to value addition.

I have been vocal with regard to the provincial council, as this institution is basically doing nothing to empower our iTaukei community. Villages are losing faith in the provincial council. As for any development, they must go to rural development, so the role of the provincial council can be questioned. We need to strengthen the provincial council to really empower our iTaukei community.

We have provincial companies - 80 percent, even after acquiring all properties from the provincial council, are not even giving a single cent back to the provincial councils. We need to fix this institution, which was formed with a very objective to develop the province and for the empowerment of our iTaukei brothers and sisters. Until we achieve social cohesion, we cannot walk on the path of economic prosperity. Are we not happy with the Constitution or the authors of the Constitution? I agree as well.

A Constitution should be a living document, and it should change to deal with the real issues. Let me get this thing straight. I can say, I would not like these five articles to be changed:

- (1) common identity;
- (2) equal citizenry;
- (3) secular state;
- (4) security of land tenure; and
- (5) Bill of Rights.

Can the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji assure all Fijians that they will never change these five articles in the Constitution, which are very close to the hearts of the minorities in Fiji?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the descendants of *Girmityas* are still planting sugarcane. These sugarcane farmers need immediate mechanisation initiative, not just preparatory work for long-term reforms. Where is the high-level Parliament Committee that was formed to look after the sugar industry? Unfortunately, they have not met once. Yet we talk about improving the industry by removing...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order! I want to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, raise Standing Order 62(4)(d). I think the honourable Member, despite your counsel earlier about restricting himself to His Excellency the President's Address, but I think he is stretching what His Excellency said beyond the factual imagination. I think the Constitution process has not started, and here is an honourable Member of Parliament, trying to say that we on the Government side, or the honourable Prime Minister, should say 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 will not be changed, or 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 will be changed. The process that was adopted for the 1997 Constitution, he knows it very well.

The submissions were very different, but it was a political process. The then Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, the then Leader of the Opposition, Justice Jay Ram Reddy, then worked

out and said, "This is what the Constitution would be, it was acceptable. I think what he is already doing is creating this ill-will and perceived hostility ahead of the process even being started. I think honourable Maharaj should be honest, that we said very clearly as an NFP, that this Constitution needs to change very early. However, we also have our position as a party as to what we would like to see changed. I cannot come here and give him answers because he demands it. What do you want to change? That is foolishness and stupidity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, I think you have to restrict yourself to the President's Address and specifically on issues raised in that Address. I accept the fact that you were referring to the Provincial Councils, that is a fair comment in my view. When you touch on other issues that evoke ill feeling and a bit of hostility between the races, I will not allow that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, they have not met once. Yet we talk about improving the industry by removing it as a standalone Ministry and managing it under the Ministry of Agriculture. On one side, we are talking about empowerment and on the other side, we are weakening the very institution that can empower the sugar industry. A lot of talks about renewal of leases, but on the ground, go and talk to the farmers. According to them, they have been informed that the leases were not going to be renewed. The Government is not aware what TLTB is doing. TLTB is not aware of what the staff are doing. Everyone just seems to be worried about their own. We do not have to go and look overseas for investors. We already have people in Fiji who are willing to invest, and its only investment that improves the livelihood of farmers and the landlord.

Why was Minister removed, if for the last 3 years on numerous occasions everyone sitting on that side, defended that he will bring the revolution. He is the messiah. Every time we were told, wait its coming, its coming, little we knew that what was coming was end of days for the Minister in his office.

His Excellency invoked the three sieves of Socrates: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it useful? Let us apply this to the Government's own agenda: "A freedom that is devoid of responsibility, is certainly very destructive." We agree. However, responsibility begins at the top. Accountability is not a personal attack; it is the "lifeblood of democracy". One thing that is most consistent with the Prime Minister, "I am not aware". Blunder after blunder, I am not aware. Minister's not performing, I am not aware. Abuse of office, I am not aware.

More than half of the time, we hear the Prime Minister is not aware, no wonder His Excellency spoke about strong and decisive leadership, a leadership that can navigate us through this rough time to prosperity where we have a genuine unity, resilience, and trust. That is why just like me, many Fijians believe that honourable Inia Seruiratu is the best person to lead Fiji as prime minister. Let's join forces and vote for honourable Inia Seruiratu to lead us as Prime Minister under the newly formed People First Party.

We join the President in thanking the faith leaders and disciplined forces for their work against "illicit drugs". At least they are talking about the issue that is affecting us today, unlike this Government, trying to portray everything as flourishing well, but we must be honest.

The expansion of HIV cases fuelled by illicit drugs is a national crisis. While this issue was on surge, the Government was playing the blame game, and drug peddlers were undermining the foundation of society, and drugs was creeping in and destroying our societal and family values. Even the police were involved. School students are now involved in drug peddling and are using drugs. This is the future this Government has given to our younger generation. A "Health Transformation Summit" is a start, but our people in maritime and rural areas need accessible quality services now, not just a "new Health Strategic Plan".

We did the groundbreaking to lay the foundation of Maternity Hospital, but this Government has basically shaken the foundation of CWM Hospital. CWM has never been in this mess. Only in Fiji:

- Patients are given IV drips while sitting on benches and chairs, if not on floors.
- Doctors and staff are stressed at CWM Hospital. Operating Theatres are nonfunctional after the heavenly father unleashed the hell from the ceiling.
- Patients are being sent to private hospitals to get their operation done.
- The Lab Department is out of reagent to conduct critical blood tests.
- The Hospital has faced consistent water supply shortages and low water pressure, forcing the provision of bottled water to patients.
- The boiler and laundry rooms, which were destroyed by fire over two years ago, have not been rebuilt, forcing the hospital to outsource all laundry services.
- The existing 500-bed capacity is insufficient to meet the rising demand from the Lami-Suva-Nausori corridor.
- The Maternity Unit has been highlighted for its inability to cater to the volume of women seeking care, leading to complaints about the lack of space and basic dignity for new mothers.
- Critical medical machinery has gone beyond lifespan; for example, the hospital's primary sterilizing machine has been in use for over 24 years.
- Overwhelming patient numbers and facility limitations have contributed to high levels of stress and burnout among healthcare professionals.
- Public health advocates have reported unhygienic conditions in bathrooms, including the presence of mold, lack of hand soap, and a general failure to meet hospital cleaning standards. One has to hold his or her breath as they enter the washroom till they come out of the washroom.
- Families often report difficulties in obtaining timely and transparent medical report about the condition of their loved ones from hospital staff.
- The Indian Government is doing the hospital for free, yet it has taken this government to allocate the land and that to just beside the Kinoya Sewerage Treatment Plant. This Government cannot even get something done that is done for free for them, when will they get thing done that requires money from their own budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we approach an election year, we heed the President's call that elections be a contest of ideas and visions, never of fear or division.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Opposition remains ready to engage in dialogue, but we will not be silent when the aspirations of our people are treated as afterthoughts in the budget or labelled as community projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the emerald anniversary of our independence has passed. Now is the time for the sacrifice and stewardship that moves us beyond rhetoric towards a fairer, stronger and more cohesive and developed Fiji.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament; I rise today as a Backbencher and as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, as well as on behalf of the people of my constituency, to respond to the inspiring Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the opening of this

session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency presented a visionary and transformative legislative agenda grounded in unity, stability and sustainable development. His Address speaks directly to our collective aspiration for a resilient, inclusive and prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is this very reason that fueled my own journey as a voting Member of Parliament, a path that has not been easy. There were moments when my reputation was tested, and I faced challenges that tried to shake my resolve, but through it all, I continue to serve the people of Fiji with my heart. Fiji matters most to me, and I am committed to doing everything I can for our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to take a moment to thank my lawyer, Mr. Tevita Tagaroa Vakalalabure, who stood by me through thick and thin. He fought tirelessly for me during the second round of my case, after I was initially acquitted of a 'no case to answer', back in February 2025. Later, the case was appealed by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), and in September 2025, the High Court in Suva overturned the decision, ruling that I had a 'case to answer' and sent the matter back to the Magistrate's Court for trial. The full trial was completed earlier this year, and I was finally acquitted in January 2026.

I am deeply grateful for the love and support of my wife and family. Their prayers and encouragement have kept me strong during difficult times. To my supporters and voters, especially to the people of Lomaiviti, thank you for your continued prayers and belief in me. Your faith means everything, and it fuels my dedication to serving you better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I reflect on my journey, I hold on to the *Bible* verse in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". It is this faith that strengthened me and carried me through the hardship and inspired me to keep going.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded this august House of the profound virtue of gratitude and unity as a national cohesion. His Excellency the President's emphasis on gratitude, compassion, empathy, equity and inclusivity, sets an appropriate tone for this parliamentary term.

In a nation as diverse as ours, spanning the iTaukei heartlands to maritime islands and multicultural communities, unity must remain our guiding principle. The Fijian idiom, "*sa i doko na karikari*", reminds us that collective efforts achieve far more than individual ambition.

I commend His Excellency's call for respectful dialogue and his caution against rhetoric, particularly on social media platforms. As leaders, we must model restraint, dignity and responsibility in our public discourse. National cohesion must always take precedence over partisan interests.

His Excellency's Address highly acknowledged our traditional landowners, our youth and most vulnerable citizens. True development is measured not by statistics alone, but by how we uplift those who rely on us most.

Talking about economic growth and sustainability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the projected economic growth of 3.4 percent in 2025, with the potential to reach 5 percent through structural reforms, is encouraging. However, growth must be inclusive and sustainable.

Agriculture, tourism, Fisheries, Forestry and MSMEs remain the backbone of rural Fiji. To diversify our narrow economic base, we must strengthen infrastructure, particularly rural roads, jetties, storage facilities and market access systems, while ensuring that local industries are protected

and empowered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Development Plan provides a clear roadmap, yet its success depends fundamentally on political stability, strong institutions, adherence to the rule of law, investor confidence and long-term growth, anchored in certainty and good governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, drawing from my experience as a former Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, I firmly believe that empowering resource owners through value addition rather than mere raw commodities export is a key to driving sustainable economic expansion.

Speaking of natural resources and sustainable management, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fisheries and Forestry Sectors contribute over \$140 million annually to our economy and remains critical pillars of our rural livelihoods.

On alignment of sector reforms with the National Fisheries Policy 2024-2028, the Aquaculture Development Plan 2024-2028 is both timely and strategic. As Chairman of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I welcome the Government's commitment to sustainable resource management, mangrove restoration targeting 50,000 acres, expansion of aquaculture enterprises and increased participation of women and youth in the resource-based industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our fisheries sector's marketing initiatives, including processing of undersized catch through block chain technology, demonstrate how innovation can reduce wastage, add value and increase return to both communities and Government.

In forestry, the target to increase forest cover from 60 percent to 64 percent through REDD+ initiative, expanded nurseries ambition, yet achievable. However, this objective must be supported by improved rural access roads and logistics to ensure that the produce can reach markets efficiently.

Sustainability must remain central to all natural resources policy. Economic growth cannot come after the expenses of environmental stewardship.

Speaking on rural development and youth empowerment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, renewed focus on national rural development policies is commendable. Breeding urban rural divide is essential for balanced national growth.

Infrastructure development in outer islands, including areas such as Lomaiviti, alongside initiatives such as the Nabavatu relocation and the Nabouwalu Terminal Project reflect the Government's commitment to inclusive development and poverty alleviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our youth is our greatest national asset. Initiatives such as the Youth Rehabilitation Programme, Innovation Hub and Mobile TVET Services are forward-looking investments in our human capital. Skills development aligned with fisheries, agriculture, technology and entrepreneurship will strengthen both, employment and productivity.

The development of the Fiji Institute of Sports further positions Fiji as a regional sporting hub, while promoting health discipline and opportunity for young people.

Speaking on health, education and national security, Mr. Speaker, Sir, health reforms are long overdue. The modernisation of the CWM Hospital, strengthening HIV response mechanisms and targeted recruitment of foreign medical professionals, are necessary interventions to stabilise and improve service delivery.

A review of the Education Act 1966 through nationwide consultation ensures that our education system is responsive to labour market demand. Strengthening TVET path is particularly important for supporting growth in fisheries, agriculture, construction and other technical industries.

National security reforms, including the review of the Police Act 1965 and Illicit Drugs Control Act 2004 are critical in addressing the emerging threats, including drugs, trafficking and organised crimes, which undermine community safety and national stability.

Speaking on employment and iTaukei affairs and cultural preservation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the modernisation of the employment legislation through the Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2025 and the Work Care Bill 2025 demonstrates Government's commitment to balancing workers' rights with productivity and economic competitiveness.

The establishment of a National Productive Commission is both timely and necessary. Empowerment of the *iTaukei* community through enhanced skills development, the proposed Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expression Bill and institutional reform are equally important. This initiative must align with our obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) on fostering greater participation in a formal economy.

Speaking on climate leadership and foreign policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's leadership in advancing the concept of Ocean of Peace enforces our role as a responsible Pacific nation. Climate change remains a single great threat to our security, livelihood, and natural resources. Robust adoption strategies are essential, particularly for coastal communities and small-scale fishers, who are the most vulnerable to climate impacts.

The forthcoming Foreign Policy White Paper will further strengthen Fiji's position as a nation that is friend to all and enemy to none, while safeguarding our sovereignty as a national interest.

Lastly, speaking on call to service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address is not merely ceremonial – it is a roadmap for resilience, reform and renewal. In the face of global uncertainties, imported affiliations, geopolitics, tensions, and climate risks, unity remains our strongest shield.

As Chairman of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I assure this House that we stand ready to rigorously scrutinise all proposed legislations relating to fisheries, agriculture, forestry and environment protection, to ensure transparency, accountability and sustainability. Let us rise above political differences, let us lead with humility and let us serve with integrity. Together, we can build a Fiji defined by opportunity, stability and prosperity.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I response to His Excellency the President's Address, I would like to make a few remarks. First, I would like to ask a question to the honourable Members of the House, are we being honest in saying things in this House, especially the Opposition?

We have just received a statement from honourable Maharaj whereby he stated that the honourable Leader of the Opposition is the best leader to lead this nation. Is he honest? Even the honourable Member cannot even hold on to 12 or 13 Members of his Party, so how can he lead the nation? Please, be honest with what we say.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the consultations on the Kava Bill conducted across Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, I am honoured and proud to inform this august House of the overwhelming support shown by the people who attended these consultation meetings. The level of engagement and encouragement demonstrated by our farmers, community leaders and members of the public clearly reflects the strong interest and confidence that they have in this Government and its efforts to

strengthen and regulate our *yaqona* industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only fair and prudent that we acknowledge the villages, communities, and the *vanua* for their support, enthusiasm, and the warm Fijian hospitality extended to the consultation teams throughout the process.

Allow me, Sir, to acknowledge the people of the Naitasiri Province, in particular the Villages of Naivucini, Naqali, Waidina, Vuna, Na Gone ni Colo, Lutu, Matailobau, Muaira, Naboubuco and Noimalu.

For the Province of Serua/Namosi, I wish to acknowledge the kava farmers and communities of Wainiyau, Wainikoroiluva, Nuku and Veinuqa.

For my own Province of Nadroga/Navosa, I acknowledge with gratitude the farmers and the communities of Nukulau, Nasikawa, Noikoro, Namataku and Navatusila.

In the Province of Ba, in the villages of Bukuya, Magodro, Qaliyalatina, Naloto, Nalotawa and Savatu.

I also extend my appreciation to my *tauvu* in the Province of Ra, particularly the Villages of Nanukuloa, in Saivou, Nalawa and Nakorotubu.

In Vanua Levu from the Province of Bua, I acknowledge the farmers and the communities of Kubulau, Wainunu, Nadi, Vuya, Dama, Lekutu and Solevu.

In Macuata, I extend my appreciation to the Villages and communities of Dreketilailai, Vunaqalutu, Lomoloma, Seaqaqa, Nabiti, Nakanacagi and Wailevu.

In Cakaudrove, I acknowledge the communities of Yaroi, Korotasere and finally the Districts of Tukavesi, Somosomo and Vuna.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry is sincerely grateful for the hospitality extended to our teams and more importantly, for the active participation and valuable contribution made by our farmers and stakeholders during the Kava Bill consultation process.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Kava Bill consultation team for their dedication, commitment and endurance throughout, what was a very demanding exercise. I commend the drivers, the secretariat, the media team, the technical staff and our consultant, Ms. Losalini Leweniqila. Despite the long journey by road, the rough seas, the cold early mornings and the long days of consultation, the team remained focused and resilient, and together we were able to successfully accomplish our mission. For that, I say *vinaka vakalevu* to each and every one of you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and ladies and gentlemen; I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address at the Opening of the 2026 Session of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, and to outline the operational progress and forward agenda of the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry.

His Excellency the President has reminded us that agriculture remains central to livelihoods, food security and economic transformation. For our Ministry, this is not an abstract policy statement, it is a daily operational responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to extend our deepest condolences to the late Mrs. Tagiyaco Vakaloloma, our Senior Technical Assistant based at the Legalega Research Station, who tragically drowned on Sunday at the Sabeto River. Her commitment to public service was evident in her active involvement in the Juncao and Mushroom Project at the Research Station, and she exemplified her leadership grounded with values, tradition and service. Her legacy of public duty and community devotion continues to inspire the farmers, and the Ministry mourns the loss of a daughter who walked the path of service with humility and wisdom. The Ministry will always be committed to the welfare of its officers, and may her memory be in the hearts of all those whom she had served and worked alongside.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past, our focus has been practical delivery, strengthening production, supporting farmers, modernising the system and ensuring that growth translates into resilience and income security for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in responding to His Excellency's Address, it is also important to recognise that since Cession, agriculture has played a foundational role in the nation's development. From the early establishment of commercial crops such as sugar under the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company to the growth of indigenous farming enterprises supported by institutions such as the Fiji Sugar Corporation, the agricultural sector has sustained livelihoods, generated export earnings and strengthened rural communities.

Beyond sugar, the expansion of crops such as cocoa, copra, rootcrops and, more recently, horticultural and livestock industries, have enhanced food security, created employment and supported small and medium enterprises. Agriculture has not only fed our people but has also contributed significantly to infrastructure development, trade and overall economic resilience, firmly establishing farming as a cornerstone of national progress, alongside education, health, transport, energy and communications.

In strengthening its commitment to climate-smart farming practices through integrated soil and land management initiatives, the Ministry is actively promoting the use of organic liquid compost, soil conditioners and regenerative farming techniques to ensure soil structure, increase water retention capacity and improve resilience against severe droughts and intense rainfall. These measures are complemented by targeted programmes aimed at reducing land degradation, restoring soil fertility and encouraging sustainable land use planning through farmer training, demonstration programmes and the adoption of innovative and adaptive technologies, we are keeping our agricultural communities with practical solutions to safeguard productivity and climate change conditions.

Collectively, these interventions are improving livelihoods, stabilising food production, reinforcing agriculture as a resilient and enduring pillar of the national economy and continue to contribute to the development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in response to His Excellency's Address, the non-sugar agriculture sector under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry has placed renewed emphasis on productivity, climate resilience and comprehensive farmer support as central pillars of national development. Through the promotion of "climate-smart farming practices, strengthened land and water management systems, and the adoption of innovative and adaptive technologies, the Ministry is safeguarding livelihoods while enhancing food security".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry reaffirms its strong commitment to advancing climate-smart agriculture through the adoption of innovative and adaptive technologies. The Ministry is proactively advancing protected agriculture systems, including the development of plastic houses, to safeguard crop production against extreme weather events and enhance year-round productivity. This initiative aims to reduce reliance on imports while meeting domestic consumption needs and the tourism sector's demands. We are expanding smart agriculture initiatives by deploying drone technology to enhance crop monitoring, precision agriculture, and data driven decision-making.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in alignment with His Excellency's Address, the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry is advancing a strategic approach to strengthen agricultural resilience and safeguard livelihoods through the targeted "promotion of resilient crop varieties". Recognising the value of traditional crop species that have consistently withstood climatic variability and local pest pressures, we are prioritizing our conservation, multiplication and reintroduction, alongside carefully selected improved hybrids. This balanced approach enhances food security, stabilises production and reduces farmers' vulnerability to external shocks.

At the same time, the Ministry is scaling up mass production and distribution of high-quality planting materials and certified seeds for high-value commodities such as kava, turmeric and ginger, thereby improving productivity, quality standards and market competitiveness. Through strengthened research partnerships, nursery expansion and farmer support programmes, these initiatives are directly contributing to improved household incomes, greater food system stability and the sustained role of agriculture as a key pillar of our national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is actively advancing the adoption of nature-based seawalls as a strategic alternative to conventional coastal protection infrastructure. Recognising the increasing vulnerability of our coastal communities to erosion, storm surges and sea-level rise, the Ministry is integrating hybrid shoreline protection systems that combine natural materials, ecosystem restoration and traditional knowledge with appropriate engineering solutions. Through the restoration of mangroves, the re-establishment of native coastal vegetation and the incorporation of locally sourced materials, these initiatives enhance biodiversity, strengthen natural wave attenuation and provide cost effective long term coastal defense.

This approach not only reduces reliance on hard concrete structures but also supports sustainable livelihoods, safeguards agricultural land and reinforces the reliance of our waterways and sugar-producing regions. By embedding nature-based solutions into national coastal management planning, the Ministry is delivering practical, community centered and environmentally responsible infrastructure that responds directly to His Excellency's call for innovative and climate-speaker development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also prioritised establishing agro-ecology sites as practical demonstration farms that promote organic and climate resilient farming systems, while strengthening farmer- to-farmer knowledge exchange. These sites serve as living classrooms where sustainable land management, soil regeneration, integrated pest management and diversified cropping system are demonstrated and adapted to local conditions.

By integrating these sites within targeted investment in rural infrastructure such as improved irrigation, farm access roads and post-harvest facilities, the Ministry ensures that sustainability initiatives are grounded in practical applications and accessible to rural communities.

Furthermore, structured training programmes, technical advisory services and partnerships with research institutions and development partners are embedded within these sites to build farmers'

capacity, enhance productivity and improve market readiness. Through this holistic approach, agro-ecology sites are not only advancing environmental stewardship but also strengthening rural livelihoods, food security and long-term agricultural resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with His Excellency's vision for sustainable development and economic resilience, the Ministry is championing the use of water-efficient irrigation technologies such as drip and sprinkler systems. These modern methods minimise water wastage and improve irrigation efficiency, leading to higher crop yields and reduced production costs for farmers. By promoting greater efficiency and sustainability, the initiative strengthens food security through more stable agricultural output, while also enhancing farmers' incomes and building more resilient farming systems. Through these efforts, the Ministry is reinforcing agriculture's role as a strong and sustainable foundation of the national economy, supporting long-term growth and responsible environmental stewardship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, operational efficiency, transparency and value for money remain at the core of our Ministry's implementation framework. We are strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that public resources directly benefit farmers and rural communities. Every dollar spent must translate into increased productivity, reduced vulnerability, and improved rural incomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture is more than just an industry. It underpins rural livelihoods, ensures food security, preserves cultural heritage and strengthens a nation's resilience. These past three years have demonstrated that when policy direction is matched by operational discipline, measurable progress follows. This year we will demand even greater coordination, innovation and partnership with farmers, landowners, the private sector and development partners.

In responding to His Excellency's Address, I reaffirm the Ministry's commitment to delivering practical and measurable outcomes that improve livelihoods and strengthen the agricultural backbone of our beloved nation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on to Item 5 in the Order Paper.

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE – FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purpose of Section 145(1) of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 131, I move that:

Parliament approves a –

- (a) Government guarantee for the Fiji Development Bank (Bank) borrowings for the 12-month period from 1st March, 2026 to 28th February, 2027 (Guarantee Period) through the issuance of short and long-term bonds, promissory notes, term deposits, any Reserve Bank of Fiji financing facility and other short-term borrowings;
- (b) the increase in Government guarantee limit for the Fiji Development Bank borrowings of \$190 million for the period 1st March, 2026 to 28th February, 2027 (Guarantee Period), by \$30 million to \$220 million; and
- (c) the Bank pays a guarantee fee of 0.075 percent on the cumulative utilised guarantee.

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

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to section 16(1) of the Fiji Development Bank Act 1966, it provides that the Bank may, from time to time, with the consent of the Minister responsible for Finance, borrow such sums as are required by it to meet any of its obligations, discharge any of its functions, provide necessary working capital and the Bank may, with the likely consent -

- (a) issue and sell bonds and debentures; and
- (b) issue promissory notes, certificates of deposits and other instruments, acknowledging or evidencing a borrowing for the terms of borrowing.

Furthermore, section 16(3) of the Act states that the repayment of any sum borrowed under the provisions of this section and the payment of interest thereon may be guaranteed by the Government, as required under section 62(1) of the Financial Management Act 2004, which states that subject to any other Act, the Government may guarantee the financial liability of an entity in respect of a loan or otherwise, but only if the giving of the guarantee is approved by Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2026-2027 Government guarantee request from the Bank is to continue the facilitation of Government's policy by lending to the essential sectors of the economy, particularly resource-based sectors, including agriculture, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, transport, communication, Micro Small and Medium Enterprises, wholesale, retail and hotels, sustainable energy from fossils to renewable sources, and professional and business services. Those will:

- (i) Assist the disadvantaged of the community to earn a decent livelihood.
- (ii) Introduce choice home loans to provide affordable housing loans to all needy Fijians. The solution is designed to enhance affordability and accessibility for affordable houses for low and medium income Fijians.
- (iii) Introduce revolving working capital term loan to help businesses and individuals manage their operational cash flow with agility and confidence.
- (iv) Lend to the resource-based sector, which will assist in the development of the agricultural sector and assist in development of the economy as entailed under the National Development Plan and Vision 2050.
- (v) Continue to provide finance that supports the growth of the nation's economy and improves the standard of living for all Fijians and improves people's social economic status by assisting them with their needs and making the correct development investments.
- (vi) Ensure that the Bank's borrowings are guaranteed by the Government, therefore reducing the perceived risk associated with such borrowings. This will make the Bank's instruments more attractive to investors and reduce the cost of borrowing for the Bank.
- (vii) Ensure the bank's proposed term deposit and RBF import substitution export finance facility and any other RBF facilities guaranteed by the Government. This will build investor confidence and thus help the Bank to manage its liquidity position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB is operating well. Based on the Bank's latest unaudited financial statement as of 31st January this year, it recorded a total loan portfolio of around \$557.52 million, as compared to \$550.92 million in 2025. Out of those consisting of 7,709 accounts totalling \$470 million; \$470 million of those are in the focus sector and 889 accounts, totaling \$87.4 million in the non-focus sector.

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non-focus sector.

They continued to move towards the focus sector in numbers. The focus sector accounts for around 89.7 percent, while 10.3 percent are in the non-focus sector. Within this focus sector, agriculture is around 32.91 percent, and SMEs on wholesale, retail, hotel and restaurant, around 36 percent. Together, they account for around 68.5 percent of the total number of loan accounts as of January this year.

The Bank is also addressing gender dynamics by offering financial solutions tailored for women entrepreneurs, aligning with Government's initiative to improve women's economic participation. Notably, 2,594 loans were awarded to women accounting for 30.2 percent of the Bank's overall loan portfolio in both sectors. Those are focus as well as non-focus sector.

On the Bank's financial performance and financial position, at the end of the 2025 financial year, the Bank reported a consolidated profit of around \$14.18 million, a 153 percent increase when compared to the same period in 2024. The increase in profit is driven by prudent cost management and reduction in borrowing expenses of around \$1.1 million, prudent strengthening of the Bank's credit quality and increase in other income by around \$2.7 million, which collectively supported the year's improved profitability.

The overall asset base stood at around \$578 million, a 9.26 percent increase when compared to \$529 million in 2024, while total liabilities increased to \$375 million, a 10.2 percent increase from around \$341 million in 2024. This total shareholder equity has also improved by 7.55 percent to around \$202 million, as a result of the improved performance of the year. In addition, the Bank has total cash and cash equivalent of around \$77.9 million, an increase of around \$5.8 million when compared to 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the forecast for 2026, the outlay is projected to be around \$291 million as opposed to \$169 million during the 2025 guarantee period. The Bank's inflow forecast is around \$71.6 million. Given the Bank's forecast inflow, there is only \$71.6 million during the proposed guarantee period, the Bank requires an additional \$220 million guarantee to fund the outlay of around \$291.6 million. An additional \$220 million is proposed to be raised through the issuance of bonds, promissory notes, short-term borrowings, RBF financing facility, and the RBF housing facilities for loans up to \$50,000, or any other short or long-term borrowings during those periods.

The provision of Government's guarantee over the years to the Bank has enabled flexibility to optimise its borrowing mix, lower borrowing costs, as well as attain the ideal maturity profile of its debt structure. The FDB guarantees requested on an annual basis given that Parliament only approves to guarantee the FDB borrowing for the next 12 months, which is a strategy to stringently monitor the risks associated with these borrowings to minimise the risk exposure to Government.

As an update, the total Government guarantee for 2020 to 2025 stood at around \$890 million, out of which, \$311.75 million is outstanding liabilities. On interest rate, the Bank's current average lending rate is around 5.48 percent, with a borrowing cost of around 2.13 percent as of January this year. With the availability of funds at a reasonable cost, the Bank accommodates and delivers a variety of Government's socio-economic and direct lending policies, therefore, requests that it continues to be assisted by the provision of a Government guarantee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank has never had to call on Government to honour its guarantee of borrowing, showing that it has been managed prudently in a sustainable manner, even though there is a guarantee fee that is being paid for the utilisation of those guarantees. As alluded to earlier, the Bank's outstanding liabilities guaranteed by the Government as at 31st January, 2026, amounted to

\$311.7 million, of which bonds stood at \$149 million, which is around 48 percent of liability, term deposit around \$65.6 million at 21 percent and RBF import substitution export finance facility is around \$97.1 million which is 31 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the event of a default by the Bank, the Government will be liable for the utilised guaranteed borrowings of the Bank.

In the past years, the Bank has never called on the Government to honour its guarantee. However, the Bank continues to pay the guarantee fee promptly upon the utilisation of the guarantees. The overall picture of the Bank's financial performance in 2025 displays a sound financial health and its pivotal role in development and growth in Fiji. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the FDB staff for working diligently and closely with the stakeholders and driving the Government of Fiji on that agenda.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers with me, as agreed by the Whips. Each Member will be given 12 minutes for their contribution.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion brought to the House by the honourable Minister of Finance. We all know, Sir, that the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) was set up to assist in development - large scale, now smaller scales and, in some instances, personal scale. I am a former customer of the FDB and they are very, very alert to our payments, and they come out to inspect the little things we said to them we would be doing with the money they lent us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB has long served a very strategic partnership with the people of Fiji in national development architecture. As a development finance institution, the Bank plays a critical role in bridging the gap between commercial finance and the needs of sectors and communities that require targeted support to grow and prosper.

I had a bit of a problem during my tenure as a client of the Bank. I planted many acres of *dalo* and just before harvest, we were struck by *El Nino* and many thousands of *dalo* went to waste. Fortunately for me, a former and a very prominent farmer too, a high chief and President at the time, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, told me, “*tea tale.*” (replant it). I tried again after the cycle and was able to keep up with my repayment to the Bank.

The Bank's mandate extends beyond conventional banking; I have tried that too. It is fundamentally about empowering communities and individuals, enabling entrepreneurship and capitalising sustainable economic transformation, particularly in sectors where access to credit remains constrained. Through its development-oriented financing and advisory services, the Bank continues to support farmers, small business owners, co-operatives and rural entrepreneurs and emerging industries, helping to transform ideas into viable economic opportunities and improving livelihoods across our provinces.

This work is intricately woven within the Bank's 2024 to 2028 strategic plan. Its core theme is, “to remain sustainable in serving our customers while adapting to changes in our environment.” It is a key reflection of its commitment to resilience and its proactive approach to supporting Fiji's evolving economic landscape.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank's strategic direction aligns closely with the priorities of the Fiji National Development Plan and Vision 2050, particularly in advancing inclusive growth, strengthening rural development and expanding opportunities for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. By focusing its investment in productive sectors such as agriculture, MSMEs and

emerging value chains, the Bank plays a vital role in supporting diversification of the economy while strengthening resilience within communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to diversify its revenue base, the Bank has formulated necessary action plans to ensure that it maximises both, traditional and non-traditional revenue sources. This reinforces its stance on fiscal responsibility and innovation, demonstrating that the Bank is not solely dependent on Government support and backing, but it is actively seeking to enhance its own financial self-sufficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in its 2024 Annual Report, the number of active accounts served by the Bank grew by 3.66 percent, bringing the total to over 9,700 accounts. You heard most of this data from the honourable Minister of Finance, but it shows that the Bank is very active and keeps growing and the number of its clients keeps increasing. The figures demonstrate the Bank's commitment to financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

By expanding access to capital for women, youth and rural entrepreneurs, the Bank is strengthening participation in the national economy and fostering a more inclusive development pathway. Equally important to note that the Bank continues to pursue strategies and strengthen its own financial sustainability. Also, the Government guarantee that we are now talking about, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will play a very important part and an enabling role in supporting the Bank's mandate. In short, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to support the Bank, support the people.

The Fiji Development Bank remains a vital catalyst for growth, a trusted partner for entrepreneurs and a key contributor to our broader development agenda. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the Board of Directors, senior management and staff regarding the work that they have done so far and wish them well in the future.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to contribute to the motion before the House, as moved by the honourable Minister of Finance. The details of the guarantee and the borrowing is not expressly articulated in the motion for debate, but we will talk around the issues that surround the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) and the benefit that will be brought about for the investors that the Bank serves.

The motion is an annual programme that has been debated in Parliament years in the past, and basically it is asking Parliament to give a guarantee to FDB and in this case, it increases the present amount by another \$30 million, which will give you the total amount of \$220 million for the period until February 2027, and a guarantee fee of 0.75 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we know, FDB is a government backed institution that provides the engine of growth in our private sector in Fiji. We in the Opposition support the motion as it is necessary to provide the necessary support for businesses to be established or expanded if they are already operating.

Passing this motion will ensure that Fiji's economy will be supported, especially for MSMEs. The Parliament must always provide the necessary support to allow FDB to assist and facilitate the growth of business, irrespective of size of investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB, as the honourable Prime Minister has alluded to, plays a pivotal role in assisting landowners to develop their land, especially for agriculture and small cottage businesses and industries. The FDB, in coordination with Investment Fiji, can identify investors to partner with landowners to establish big commercial farms and provide better returns for our indigenous population of Fiji. The FDB is and will continue to be prominent in our rural and maritime islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to ask the honourable Minister of Finance to identify the linkages between FDB and Government Ministries and agencies. I think this is very important. As a Member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, we have found a gap that exists between the Government agencies that govern or manage the various businesses within Fiji, especially agriculture, MSMEs under the Ministry of Trade and Commerce.

When the amount is being given out, the lack of supervision from the various Ministries seems to be very visible when the projects goes belly up and we believe, and this has been quite a discussion between the Committee and FDB, if the various Ministries and agencies handhold the various small businesses that are assisted by FDB. I am not sure, but maybe honourable Professor Prasad will be able to lead you in the various efforts that have been made in the past, but there seems to be a very visible disconnection between the FDB and the agency.

I think the honourable Minister for Agriculture understands what I am trying to say here. If the funding agencies can get that support from Government Ministries and agencies, it will greatly assist in the projects that are on the ground. The FDB helps resource-based industries, as I have said, the Ministry for Agriculture, MSMEs and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry.

As I have already stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition supports the motion before the House, and I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this motion before the House. The Fiji Development Bank (FDB), as was alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister, was formed to serve as a dedicated development finance institution to drive Fiji's economic growth, particularly in areas where commercial banks were unwilling or unable to provide sufficient medium and long-term financing.

It was established on 1st July, 1967, and this followed a period where development banking in Fiji had begun earlier, in around 1951, and there were various entities. One of those entities was called the Agricultural and Industrial Loans Board. It was later discovered or realised after 1951 that a more structured and a more permanent institution was needed. So, when FDB was created in 1967, it took over all the assets and liabilities from prior arrangements and became Fiji's primary and till today, still the only existing national development bank.

There were a couple of reasons which have been identified in the statute of why FDB was created, and I name a few:

- (1) Facilitate and stimulate the promotion and development of natural resources, transportation, industries, enterprises and other priority sectors in Fiji.
- (2) Provide special consideration and priority to economic developments of rural and agriculture sectors, recognising agriculture's very central role in the economy of our country, in particular, sugar in the early days, and the need to support a larger population around the rural communities.
- (3) Provide medium and long-term financing, financial services and advisory support for projects that contribute to our overall economic diversification - private sector growth, job creation and improvement in the quality of life for all Fijians.
- (4) Address the gaps in the financial systems of our country. Commercial banks at the time focused on short-term low-risk lending, leaving higher-risk or longer-term developmental projects, especially in areas of agriculture, industry and rural areas,

underfunded.

Post-independence, just a few years after FDB's start, the Government used FDB as a major tool for accelerating our nation's economic growth, reducing resilience on dominant sectors, like sugar and tourism, and promoting private enterprises.

Needless to say, over many decades, FDB has contributed significantly to Fiji's National Development Plan. In essence, FDB was created as a strategic Government instrument to fill financial gaps, support priority sectors and foster sustainable economic and socio-economic progress in a very young, determined and developing nation.

Sir, FDB's role is to provide medium and long-term financing for projects that support Fiji's economic development, particularly in higher-risk areas such as agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, as we would have seen during the COVID-19 period, housing, and, more significantly, in the last decade or so, SMEs and other priority areas where commercial banks may hold some level of reluctance to lend due to high risks or longer repayment terms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB raises funds for its lending activities through various instruments, and they include issuance of bonds both short and long-term, promissory notes, term deposits and facilities from the Reserve Bank of Fiji, such as housing facilities and other borrowings. The Government guarantee is required for these borrowings for the following reasons:

- (1) When guarantee is present, it enhances investor confidence. Lenders and investors, bond buyers or depositors are more willing to provide funds to FDB knowing that Government backs the repayments and it reduces perceived risks to them.
- (2) It lowers borrowing costs. With the Government's credit backing, the FDB can access funds at a lower interest rate than it could on its own merit, making its lending more affordable and sustainable.
- (3) It enables larger and continued funding. This allows FDB to maintain or expand its lending portfolio to support national priorities like business growth, housing, economic resilience and developmental goals, even when its own balance sheet or risks profile might limit unsecured borrowing.
- (4) It supports its developmental statutory mandate. As a development fund institute for Government, the FDB often lends or leads to higher risks on priority sectors, and we have identified them as agriculture and MSMEs that aligns with Government's policy but may not attract commercial funding.

The guarantee ensures that FDB can fulfil this counter-cyclical and gap-filling role without funding constraints. For the short-term, FDB has embarked on several initiatives, and I will name a few:

- (1) Their new loan products for housing and business support and FDB has launched the FDB Choice Home Loan. Its application had opened in January 2026, offering unsecured loans of up to \$10,000, securing finance of up to \$500,000 with a repayment term of up to 30 years – aimed at first-time homeowners, young families, and reduces reliance on rentals and removes rental burdens. It also introduces revolving working capital term loan to support businesses' continuity and SME operations.

- (2) It has developed digital and innovative initiatives. In November 2025, the FDB launched its first AI-assisted credit assessment pilot, streamlining lending processes and improved efficiency. It has also signed an MOU with HFC for one-stop banking experience to enhance customer access. This is one of the most interesting initiatives that they have done.
- (3) Rural and maritime focus. Under its sustainable goals, FDB is implementing projects and supporting the Lau Seascape Project, in collaboration with Conservation International Fiji, to reduce regional disparities by prioritising lending in undeserved rural and maritime areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, the guarantee that the honourable Minister of Finance has asked of the House today is not only a standard mechanism for Government-backed development banks worldwide, to secure affordable funding and effective delivery on economic development objectives without relying solely on commercial viability, but it is our way - Parliament's way, of saying to the people of Fiji that access to development funding will continue to be supported.

I am given to understand that FDB has had a very strong performance in the last 12 months, and we look forward to receiving the Annual Report of the FDB, from one of Fiji's finest banking brains, the FDB CEO, Mr. Filimone Waqabaca. Mr. Speaker, I support the motion before the House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Minister for his motion and as alluded to earlier by honourable Koroilavesau, we are actually supporting the motion.

However, a word of caution, Mr. Speaker, I think this is something that ought to have or should have been divulged by the honourable Minister, and I will say it right at the outset. In the medium-term fiscal strategy for the years 2025-2026, 2026-2027 and 2027-2028 by the Ministry of Finance, there is a particular paragraph in there that probably needs to be vented, and everyone should know this.

I want to quote, Sir, it says, "with respect to contingent liabilities, it says that at the end of July 2024, the Government's total contingent liabilities stood at \$1,605.3 million which is equivalent to about 11.4 percent of GDP." Now, it says that this poses risks to public finances, as around 60.1 percent of contingent liabilities are Government guarantees of public corporation debt. Public corporations such as Fiji Sugar Corporation Limited and Fiji Development Bank have already been assessed as high risk. This poses substantial fiscal risk and cost to Government should the contingent liabilities materialise.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the FDB has done extremely well since its inception. It has not defaulted but that particular caution within its own document is something that everyone needs to and ought to know, so that we are mindful of what we sign and what we guarantee.

I understand that the increase is actually not a considerable amount, it is actually quite minimal, Mr. Speaker, but the question and maybe the honourable Minister might want to answer this in a Ministerial Statement later, that arises and he mentioned that this is specifically for MSMEs and essential sectors and also for Choice Home Loan and some of the ones that others mentioned as agricultural and rural sector.

Two issues that came up, he was talking about focus sector and non-focus sector. I think the honourable Prime Minister mentioned it correctly about the diversification area that needs to be addressed, and I am really hoping that this particular increase, the majority of it, will mean that it is actually heading towards the diversification sectors because it is sorely needed.

In light of what is happening around the world, we need to concentrate on what we can actually do in terms of diversifying, especially with respect to overreliance on the tourism sector. It is, as I have said, not a large amount, but I know the smaller MSMEs have been very successful in Fiji and continue to be so, and FDB is always there to help them out. It has been for quite a number of years, as the honourable Prime Minister rightfully pointed out.

I think it is important that we do support the FDB as we have always done, but always with some caution with respect to how we actually go about in doing this, so that we must always know the full information. Honourable Minister, hopefully, in your statement or your response at a later date, you can actually break it down and say, this is actually broken down into this particular parts of the sector.

However, all in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just in short, yes, we do support the motion for the guarantee.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Vosarogo and honourable colleagues from the Opposition have covered the issues extremely well. Honourable Vosarogo, provided all the reasons and rationale for the guarantees and what guarantees mean. I think that that was very important.

The point I want to make about Fiji Development Bank (FDB), Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that there is always this issue of high credit risks and as the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Vosarogo said, the role of FDB is to fill that very important gap that is left by commercial banks. Unfortunately, in my own experience over the years and having dealt with commercial banks, commercial banks in Fiji sometimes consider risks to be too high and basically do not fill that very important gap that many of the small and medium enterprises face.

What it means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the FDB takes a lot of risks and they quite frequently weigh against the high risks of lending, as well as maintaining financial stability, and as honourable Members have pointed out, over the years, FDB has done very well. In fact, if you look at the profit that FDB made in the last three years, in 2023, \$3.8 million, in 2024, \$5.6 million and 2025, \$14.2 million. I think that is an indication, as honourable Vosarogo said, of a very innovative and competent CEO, very innovative and competent Chairman of the Board and members of the Board.

I think FDB has shown that despite these risks, they have been able to do well. As we announced in the last Budget, housing loans is another innovation and an important step that the Bank is taking to actually fill those gaps, particularly rural housing, where commercial banks are very reluctant to lend. In that sense, when it comes to SMEs and globally, the statistics are very startling - 50 percent of SMEs fail within five years, so there is always this risk.

What we find that the Board and the management have done, just to answer honourable Koroilavesau, you are absolutely right. I think that is coordination between agencies and recently I have noted that FDB has started doing that. They are actually out there in the community. They run programmes outreach and they are exploring a number of innovations where they could raise additional financing, despite the risks that lenders might feel towards FDB, but as honourable Vosarogo said, with the guarantee from the Government, that helps very well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank has also recently received awards as part of the Association of Development Financing Institutions in Asia and the Pacific (ADFIAP). So, it has carefully balanced the risk which also shows that they are able to navigate the objective of profitability with lending and that too at a lower interest rate, SMEs for example, attract interest rates from as low as 3.9 percent to 4.5 percent and that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, helps small and medium enterprises to carefully explore

these facilities offered by the Fiji Development Bank.

It is a bank that strengthens the backbone of the economy, and I know honourable Lal was talking about housing. This is one of the innovations that FDB has undertaken to support and fill that gap that is not being filled by commercial banks. So, it is a bank that provides space for our farmers, our small businesses and our rural communities.

I am very confident with the leadership of the Bank, the CEO, the Chairman of the Board and other Board members that FDB will do extremely well. I do not think there is any concern or even caution about the guarantee, honourable Koya as far as the FDB is concerned. However, I do take your point that there are entities that need to be on the drawing board all the time, that we need to be careful, and that we do not add more to our contingent liabilities as a percentage of GDP.

With that Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do join the other speakers who have spoken before me in showing my support to the Bill that is on the floor of Parliament this afternoon. I also join the honourable Prime Minister in acknowledging the Board and the senior management and staff of FDB for their fine performance in the last financial year and, of course, honourable Prasad has spoken about the two previous years as well. Congratulations to the Board, the management and staff of FDB.

I will not repeat what the others have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but again, to acknowledge that FDB has come a long way since 1967, and as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Lands, they have significantly contributed to Fiji's development and progress, particularly with the economic development of rural and agricultural sectors of the economy. Of course, very recently, the other essential sectors that have been added to that. This is why it is so important that the guarantee the honourable Minister of Finance is seeking today is given the necessary support from Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was going to raise the issue of contingent liability, as used to be questioned from this side of the House while we were on the other end. However, I thank honourable Koya for bringing it up and, of course, honourable Prasad has also alluded to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is only one thing that I, perhaps, wish to say which we would still agree that compared to the commercial banks, the main challenge in FDB is the cost of funds, which is still high compared to commercial banks. It does not give them flexibility when there are requests from clients, because of that very thin margin, because they are lending at a much higher rate as well. I think it is averaging at 6 percent and borrowing at around 5 percent or four point something percent.

The cost of funding is still high, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to FDB. So, the average lending rate is around 6 percent and FDB's margin is thin, as I have stated too, yet they strive to finance development. This can be addressed if FDB is allowed to accept savings deposits. Probably the former Minister of Finance would be aware that this issue was raised way back in 2024. There were discussions between FDB and the Reserve Bank of Fiji on the same issue. This is perhaps the request that is still coming from FDB. If this can be considered positively, it will really provide a lot of relief and, of course, give them that element of flexibility as well, so they can serve clients better.

As alluded to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they serve the most risky sectors but, again, the request that was raised in 2024 is for FDB to be allowed to accept savings deposits, as commercial banks do, at interest rates between 0.05 per cent and 1.5 per cent, for instance. That will mean that they make higher margins when they lend between 3 percent to 10 percent, just as an example.

If FDB is allowed to accept savings deposits, it will definitely reduce the cost of funds to allow them to finance more development and offer lower interest rates than is currently the case for their customers. I think in that regard, FDB will need the support of the Reserve Bank.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the essential sectors of the economy. Perhaps one area that I would just like to highlight, and probably if it can be given the attention as well, is on sustainable energies. We know how vulnerable we are when it comes to our import Bills and the risks that come with it, how they affect our foreign savings as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I think in the long term, we really need to look at sustainable energy projects. I know that previously, in one of the sittings late last year, we discussed EFL and how it is progressing, the committee that has been alluded to by the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, that special committee that is set up to look at how energy projects can be expedited. Of course, we acknowledge the board that runs independently as well.

The energy sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is perhaps an area that can be considered favourably because it is good for Fiji in the long term when it comes to sustainability and economically friendly activities as well. That is my contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and once again, we fully support the motion that is on the floor.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the speakers for their contributions. I can see and hear that they are fully in support of the motion. Your comments are available and noted on the performance and the need of FDB.

On the linkages, yes, FDB is willing to work with relevant Ministries, and they are willing to work under an MOU and also would like to see that the proposals are channelled to them. They can be the catalyst and are ready to assist. They have the expertise and the experience to monitor and support projects.

They are working with two Ministries, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, on the Northern Development Plan loans, together with the Ministry of Trade, and they are also willing to work with other Ministries in support of the rural and maritime development assistance.

As for the contingent liabilities concern, FDB is one of those that is performing well, as I have mentioned before. Even though the total guarantee provided is high, their liability balance is quite low. The FDB is also providing regular oversight at the Board level with the Ministry of Finance.

On Coastal Fund, the average lending is around 5.5 percent and the borrowing cost around 2.13 percent. That is a margin of 3.4 percent. It is quite favourable if you compare that with the other commercial banks, and also if you compare that with the risks that other commercial banks are taking.

However, taking a deposit is a proposal to be considered. We are aware that going to deposit with trading banks is a large endeavour, and then we will have a clear or good look at the proposal.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I again commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. Thank you all for your attendance and your attention to today's proceedings. Rest well. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.33 p.m.