



**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PARLIAMENT OF
THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC
OF GUYANA**

OFFICIAL REPORT

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRST SESSION (2020-2024) OF THE TWELFTH PARLIAMENT OF GUYANA UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA HELD IN THE DOME OF THE ARTHUR CHUNG CONFERENCE CENTRE, LILIENDAAL, GREATER GEORGETOWN

71ST Sitting

Monday, 15TH January, 2024

**PARLIAMENT OFFICE
HANSARD DIVISION**

The Assembly convened at 2.42 p.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (71)

Speaker (1)

*Hon. Manzoor Nadir, M.P.,
*Speaker of the National Assembly,
Parliament Office,
Public Buildings,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.*

MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT (38)

(i) MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S PROGRESSIVE PARTY/CIVIC (PPP/C) (38)

Prime Minister (1)

+ Hon. Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Anthony Phillips, M.S.S., M.P.,
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Prime Minister's Office,
Colgrain House,
205 Camp Street,
Georgetown.*

Vice-President (1)

+ Hon. Bharrat Jagdeo, M.P.,
*Vice-President,
Office of the President,
New Garden Street,
Georgetown.*

[Absent – on leave]

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (1)

+ Hon. Mohabir Anil Nandlall, M.P.,
*Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs,
Ministry of Legal Affairs,
Carmichael Street,
Georgetown.*

+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Speaker**

Senior Ministers (16)

+ Hon. Gail Teixeira, M.P.,
(Region No. 7 – Cuyuni/Mazaruni),
Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance,
Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance.
Government Chief Whip,
Office of the Presidency,
New Garden Street,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Hugh H. Todd, M.P.,
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Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation,
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+*Hon. Dr. Ashni K. Singh, M.P.,
Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance
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+ Hon. Bishop Juan A. Edghill, M.S., J.P., M.P.,
Minister of Public Works,
Ministry of Public Works,
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Kingston,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Dr. Frank C. S. Anthony, M.P.,
Minister of Health,
Ministry of Health,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Priya D. Manickchand, M.P.,
(Region No. 3 – Essequibo Islands/West Demerara),
Minister of Education,
Ministry of Education,
Lot 26 Brickdam,
Georgetown.

+ *Hon. Brindley H.R. Benn, M.P.,
Minister of Home Affairs,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Minister**

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Minister of Agriculture,
Ministry of Agriculture,
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Minister of Amerindian Affairs,
Ministry of Amerindian Affairs,
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South Cummingsburg,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Joseph L.F. Hamilton, M.P.,
Minister of Labour,
Ministry of Labour,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.

+ Hon. Vickram Outar Bharrat, M.P.,
Minister of Natural Resources,
Ministry of Natural Resources,
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+*Hon. Oneidge Walrond, M.P.,
Minister of Tourism, Industry and Commerce,
Ministry of Tourism, Industry and Commerce,
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+ Hon. Collin D. Croal, M.P.,
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Ministry of Housing and Water,
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Ministry of Human Services and Social Security,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

* **Non-Elected Minister**

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Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports,
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Hon. Deodat Indar, M.P.,
Minister within the Ministry of Public Works,
Ministry of Public Works,
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Hon. Anand Persaud, M.P.,
Minister within the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development,
Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development,
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Hon. Warren Kwame E. McCoy, M.P.,
Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister,
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+ **Cabinet Member**

Other Members (15)

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Hon. Mr. Sanjeev J. Datadin, M.P.,

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Mrs. Yvonne Pearson-Fredericks, M.P.,

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Hon. Dr. Jennifer R.A. Westford, M.P.,

55 AA Victoria Avenue,

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East Bank Demerara.

Hon. Mr. Faizal M. Jaffarally, M.P.,

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c/o Freedom House,

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East Bank Essequibo.

Hon. Mr. Lee G.H. Williams, M.P.,
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Hon. Mr. Roysdale A. Forde, S.C., M.P.,

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Hon. Ms. Catherine A. Hughes, M.P.,

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Hon. Ms. Geeta Chandan-Edmond, M.P.,

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Craig Milne,
Cove & John,
East Coast Demerara.

Hon. Mr. Vincent P. Henry, M.P.,
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Shulidnab Village,
South Central,
Rupununi.
(Culvert City Lethem)

Hon. Dr. Karen R.V. Cummings, M.P.,
Lot 2 Belfield Housing Scheme,
East Coast Demerara.

Hon. Ms. Tabitha J. Sarabo-Halley, M.P.,
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Hon. Ms. Annette N. Ferguson, M.P.,
Lot 842 Eccles,
East Bank Demerara.

Hon. Ms. Juretha V. Fernandes, M.P.,
Lot 1282 Block EE,
Eccles,
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Georgetown.

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(Region # 2 Essequibo Coast).*

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*Region No. 6 – East Berbice/Corentyne),
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Hon. Mr. Richard E. Sinclair, M.P.,
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Church Street Mahdia.
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*(Region No. 10 – Upper Demerara/Upper Berbice),
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Wismar, Linden.*

(ii) A New and United Guyana, Liberty and Justice Party and The New Movement (ANUG, LJP & TNM) (1)

Hon. Dr. Asha Kisooson, M.P.,
*Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly,
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Officers (2)

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Clerk of the National Assembly,
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Public Buildings,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.

Ms. Hermina Gilgeours,
Deputy Clerk of the National Assembly,
Parliament Office,
Public Buildings,
Brickdam,
Georgetown.

Hansard Division Officers (16)

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Ms. Shawnel Cudjoe,
Senior Editor

Ms. Carol Bess,
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Ms. Shevona Telford,
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Ms. Lushonn Bess,
Reporter

Ms. Eyoka Gibson,
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Mr. Tafari David,
Reporter (a.g.)

Mr. Daniel Allen,
Reporter (a.g.)

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Reporter (a.g.)

Mr. Parmanand Singh,
Pre –Press Technician

Mr. Saeed Umrao,
Audio Technician

Mr. Daison Horsham,
Audio Technician

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ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

New Year's Greetings

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, this being the first Sitting of the National Assembly, for this new year, I take this opportunity to extend to you and your families our good wishes for 2024. To the staff of the Parliament Office, the Arthur Chung Conference Centre (ACCC) and all those who provide support for us to continue with our work, I extend the same sentiments.

Acknowledgement of students and former Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly

First, let me recognise that there are students from the President's College, the New Guyana School, along with our former Deputy Speaker – welcome, Sir – and some other Members of Parliament (MPs).

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND REPORTS

The following Paper and Reports were laid:

- (1) Annual Report of the Supreme Court of Judicature for the Year 2022

[Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip]

- (2) Government Notice No. 1/2024, regarding Notification Receipts of all Petroleum Revenues Paid into the Natural Resource Fund during the period 1st October, 2023 to 31st December, 2023.

- (3) Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of Guyana for the Financial Year 2024.

[Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service]

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, there are several questions for written responses and oral replies. These have been directed to the Minister of Local Government and Regional Development, the Minister of Public Works and also the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance. These Ministers have asked that they be given some more time to provide the answers.

2.46 p.m.

Ms. Ferguson: Mr. Speaker...

Mr. Speaker: Yes, Hon. Member.

Ms. Ferguson: Thank you, very much, for recognising me, Mr. Speaker. Since I am on my feet, may I take this opportunity to join with you in extending best wishes to Members and their families of this House for a warm and prosperous 2024. I look forward to us working collectively for the people of this country. With that being said, I have heard what you said with regards to the questions. A few questions are standing in my name for the Hon. Minister, Bishop Juan Edghill. I am surprised that the Minister is requesting additional time to provide answers to the questions, taking into account that these questions were actually from *Budget 2023*. I find it very surprising...

Mr. Speaker: Thank you very much. The Minister sought leave from the Speaker and that was granted.

MOTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OR SITTINGS OF THE ASSEMBLY AND MOVED BY A MINISTER

Suspension of Standing Orders No. 10(2) and 38(9) (a)

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That Standing Orders Nos. 10(2) and 38(9)(a) be suspended to enable the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance to complete uninterrupted the reading of the Budget Speech for 2024 at the Sitting of the National Assembly on Monday, 15th January, 2024.”

[Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip]

Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance and Government Chief Whip [Ms. Teixeira]: I wish to bring the following motion to the House.

“BE IT RESOLVED:

That Standing Orders Nos. 10(2) and 38(9)(a) be suspended to enable the Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance to complete uninterrupted the reading of the Budget Speech for 2024 at the Sitting of the National Assembly on Monday, 15th January, 2024.”

Question put and carried.

Standing Orders suspended.

PUBLIC BUSINESS**GOVERNMENT'S BUSINESS****Motion**

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we have now come to the item Budget for 2024. Hon. Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service, you may proceed.

MOTION FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2024

WHEREAS the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana requires that Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for any financial year should be laid before the National Assembly and that, when the Estimates of Expenditure have been approved by the Assembly, an Appropriation Bill shall be introduced in the Assembly providing for the issue from the Consolidated Fund of the sums necessary to meet the expenditure;

AND WHEREAS the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana for the financial year 2024 have been prepared and laid before the Assembly on January 15, 2024, as summarised in the attached Schedule 1;

AND WHEREAS the Constitution requires that the expenditure of each of the Constitutional Agencies listed in the Third Schedule of the Constitution be financed as a direct charge on the Consolidated Fund determined as a lumpsum by way of an annual subvention approved by the National Assembly after a review and approval of the Constitutional Agency's annual budget as a part of the process of the determination of the national budget;

AND WHEREAS the Fiscal Management and Accountability Act, Cap. 73:02, requires that the annual lump sum subvention recommended by the Minister with Responsibility for Finance for each Constitutional Agency be included in the annual budget proposal for approval by the National Assembly;

AND WHEREAS the Minister with Responsibility for Finance recommends lump sum subventions for each Constitutional Agency for the financial year 2024 as summarised in the attached Schedule 2;

AND WHEREAS the Natural Resource Fund Act 2021 provides that the amount that the Minister with

Responsibility for Finance shall request the National Assembly to approve, and the amount that the National Assembly shall approve, as the withdrawal from the Fund for the next ensuing fiscal year shall be included in the annual budget proposal and shall not exceed for that year, the ceiling calculated in accordance with the said Act:

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2024, of a total sum of one trillion, eight billion, five hundred and eight million and six hundred and thirty-seven thousand, two hundred and nine dollars (\$1,080,508,637,209), excluding sixty five billion, three hundred and fifty four million, one hundred and twenty seven thousand and sixty-five dollars (\$65,354,127,065) which is chargeable by law, as detailed therein and summarised in Schedule 1, and agree that it is expedient to amend the law and make further provision in respect of finance:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That the National Assembly approves the recommended lumpsum subvention for each Constitutional Agency for the financial year 2024 as stated in Schedule 2, amounting to a total sum of thirteen billion, eight hundred and six million, five hundred and seventy-seven dollars (\$13,368,575,083) which is charged upon the Consolidated Fund by the Constitution and for the sums voted for the Constitutional Agencies to form part of the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditures of Guyana for the financial year 2024.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly approves the sum of \$240,059,1490,286 equivalent to US\$1,154,250,087, to be withdrawn from the Natural Resource Fund for the financial year 2024 in accordance with the Natural Resource Fund Act 2021.

[Senior Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service]

Introduction

Minister in the Office of the President with Responsibility for Finance and the Public Service [Dr. Singh]: Mr. Speaker, this afternoon, I rise to move the motion for the approval for the Estimates of the Public Sector and the Budget for the Financial Year 2024. In so doing, I wish to indicate that Cabinet has recommended that

the National Assembly proceed upon this motion, pursuant to article 171(2) of the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, one year ago almost to the day, I rose before this honourable House to present *Budget 20023* on behalf of our People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) Government. As I did so, I outlined the extraordinary testing circumstances that our Government inherited on assuming Office in August, 2020, and that we have confronted since.

It would be recalled that we came to Office amidst crippling, overlapping crisis. A governance crisis caused by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change's (APNU/AFC's) refusal to respect the results of both the December, 2018 no-confidence motion and the March 2020 Elections; a public health crisis caused by Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the unpreparedness of the public health system to cope with it at the time; and an economic crisis caused by both of the aforementioned situations compounding bad economic policy and woeful economic mismanagement from 2015 to 2020.

Additionally, we were affected by the global consequences and fall out of COVID-19, including sustained disruption to production and supply chains; the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the upheavals caused in commodity markets; the policy responses to rein in inflationary pressures, and the concomitant risk of recession; and, of course, the constant march of climate change and the erratic and extreme weather events which have become our new normal. Taken together, these interlocking and overlapping crisis have caused some to describe the current era as the era of the global polycrisis.

If these were not all test enough, the past 12 months challenged our country's resolve even further. To begin with, 2023 was the year in which we suffered two of the most tragic events in recent memory. First, in May, we suffered the heart wrenching loss of 20 innocent lives in the fire at the female dormitory of the Mahdia Secondary School, all of them children seeking to improve their lives and their communities by obtaining a better education. And second, in December, we lost the lives of five of our finest servicemen in the line of duty, some already at the peak of stellar military careers and others well on their way to highly successful lives in uniform. Both these tragedies shook us to the core.

On top of all of this, 2023 was the year when Venezuela chose to escalate their unlawful and baseless claim on Essequibo. Guyana's border with our neighbours to the west was concluded in a full, final and perfect settlement in 1899.

The most recent provocation visited upon us by the December referendum held by Venezuela, in defiance of the process currently underway at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), helped galvanised worldwide attention to this manufactured controversy, consolidated international and multilateral support for Guyana's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and mustered a renewed sense of domestic solidarity, including unanimity in this honourable House on this matter. Throughout this panoply of existential challenges, both domestic and external, our Government's leadership and stewardship remained steadfast and focused. Bolstered by the inherent resilience and enduring strength of the Guyanese people, we navigated crisis after crisis and overcame challenge after challenge to emerge a stronger, wiser and better Guyana.

Our democratic credentials were safeguarded, and our international credibility restored. We contained and overcame the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We reopened the economy, restored economic growth and renewed livelihoods across all 10 regions of our country. When the external threat was elevated, we secured supportive statements from capitals around the world, favourable provisional measures from the ICJ and the joint declaration of Argyle.

At the same time, we continued undistracted from our work to build a transformed and prosperous Guyana. To give just one example of the pace at which we are executing this work, during the past three and a half years, we began and completed a brand new four lane highway from the Sheriff/Mandela junction to Diamond. That new highway is already delivering relief to 45,000 commuters daily and is already saving over one million man-hours or person-hours monthly. We have commenced the Ogle to Diamond and the Diamond to Busby Dam four-lane highways. We have started building the new Demerara Bridge which will connect directly to these new highways, enabling commuters to travel from West Coast to East Coast Demerara bypassing Central Georgetown. The Linden to Mabura Road is under construction along with 45 concrete bridges on the road to Lethem, and we are currently procuring services to rehabilitate the Soesdyke to Linden Highway.

These examples are all drawn from the transport infrastructure sector alone and are only a subset of the work we are doing in that one sector. The same breathtaking speed of transformation is matched in every other part of the country and in every other sector. Given the dizzying pace at which we are delivering a new and modern Guyana, I consider it incumbent to pause and spend a few moments to

elaborate certain particular elements of our Government's vision on the model for national transformation in this unprecedented period in our country's economic history. In this regard, it is worthwhile to emphasise that we see this as a period to harness and consolidate national prosperity and, equally important, we see this as a period in which national prosperity will translate into community prosperity and, ultimately, into household prosperity.

First and foremost, we are building a Guyana where every single Guyanese family will be in a position to meet their most basic needs relative to a minimum threshold required to enjoy a decent life. I hasten to add that this threshold is not to be viewed through narrow and simplistic monetary and fixed income lenses, but instead is to be viewed from a multi-dimensional perspective.

3.01 p.m.

In this new and modern Guyana, every single Guyanese family should have access to decent housing, including the potential to own their own home; sufficient nutritious food to experience zero hunger; good quality health care from conception to old age; relevant educational and skills training opportunities to equip those of employable age for the world of work; potable water and sanitation; and recreational facilities to support healthy living. It will be noted that these necessities matter not only for current comfort but, even more importantly, for long-term economic empowerment. It goes without saying that our Government's entire policy agenda is built around ensuring that we put in place capability across the sectors to deliver on all of these expectations. The most cursory of glances at our 2020 Manifesto and our annual Budget, since we assumed Office, would make this abundantly clear.

Secondly, we are building a Guyana where the conditions are in place for every single Guyanese family to be able to create, build and accumulate household wealth through their own efforts. In this regard, we are creating an environment where opportunities for entrepreneurial activity abound across all sectors of economic endeavour, where the barriers to entry into those activities are lowered, and where appropriate support systems and services are available to enable those opportunities to be realised. In this regard, in this new Guyana, it will be imperative that our population becomes more entrepreneurial in outlook; equipped to both identify and, indeed, create opportunities; prepared to take calculated risks; and able to manage those risks and keep exposure within tolerable levels while maximising their returns.

Here again, it goes without saying that our Government's policy agenda has created more entrepreneurial opportunities than at any other time in our country's history. The rapid expansion of both public and private investment, creation of employment opportunities, and increases in disposable income have combined to grow demand for every single category of goods and services. And, needless to say, Sir, increased demand for goods and services means more business opportunity for both current and potential producers, and suppliers. Whether it be engineering and fabrication services, or carpentry and masonry services, heavy equipment operating and welding, legal and accounting or other advisory services, tailoring and dressmaking, accommodation and transportation services, tour guiding and local gastronomy, fresh fruit and vegetables or meat and seafood in the local markets – irrespective of which category of goods or services we speak of, the demand for more is there and plentifully so in today's Guyana. And, needless to say, unmet demand constitutes an opportunity to step forward, produce and supply.

On this note, I might add that as a result of deliberate Government policy, household wealth is being bolstered more rapidly than ever before through Government investment in public infrastructure and public services. Permit me, Sir, perhaps, to state the obvious, a family that gets a house lot through the Government housing programme is acquiring an asset that can be collateralised for the purposes of raising financing for a small business. We learnt recently that, in 2023, only 9,612 such house lots were allocated and over the past 3 years, 30,000 such house lots were allocated. That is 30,000 households that now have a collateralizable asset that they did not have before. Moreover, that asset value is further enhanced, and household wealth increased when our Government builds a new highway nearby to improve access to the area, or upgrades the streets and establishes recreational facilities in the community, or builds a school or a hospital in the vicinity. All of these investments translate immediately to increased asset value and balance sheet enhancement for all householders in the communities concerned. Put simply, these public investments enhanced private wealth across the length and breadth of Guyana.

The obvious implication is that the national transition into the modern world must be accompanied by individual transition in the manner in which we consider our own financial circumstances and our own financial well-being. Gone are the days when we – any of us – can afford to fixate only on narrow and simplistic metrics of wellbeing, rather

than our entire portfolio of potential wealth generating assets. And those who generate prosperity will be those who adopt a comprehensive approach to deploying all of the income generating potential on their entire household balance sheet.

This brings me to the third point I wish to make. In this new and modern Guyana that we are building, one cannot afford either at the national or the individual level to be insular, or parochial or oblivious to the economic laws by which the rest of the world operates. We are part of a global economic system, and international business operates by and adheres to certain norms and practices, including the laws of competitiveness, the need for transparency, compliance with global standards and quality, amongst others. If we wish to be a part of that system, we must adhere to those norms and practices too. This takes on even greater significance, if we wish to enter joint ventures and strategic partnerships with international counterparts, perhaps, to take advantage of local content opportunities or, indeed, to do business with anybody else, anywhere else in the world. That is the Guyana we are building, one in which basic needs are met for all, one where opportunities abound for wealth creation by all, and one where we are fully integrated in the global economic system in a manner that allows Guyanese nationals and Guyanese businesses to participate in and benefit from the economic opportunities that are emergent in this new era of Guyanese prosperity.

In order to ensure that these objectives are realised, a particular approach to policymaking and planning is required. This approach is one that is constantly mindful of the big picture, both globally and nationally but also the big picture as it relates to the economics of the household in Guyana. Additionally, this approach is one that needs to be informed by rigorous analysis, not just of the current situation, but also projecting well into the medium and longer term, bearing in mind that many of the outcomes being sought will, of necessity, only be evident in the future. Furthermore, it is an approach that requires, indispensably, an optimal balance between short term imperatives and longer-term considerations, and a willingness to eschew that which might have appeared popular or stir excitement in the short term, but which might in fact be unhelpful or even harmful to the greater good in the longer term. This requires competence, integrity, discipline, focus and candour as a Government, characteristics that successive People's Progressive Party/Civic Governments have always sought to embody and embrace, and characteristics that the Guyanese

people have always shown a strong recognition of and affinity for.

On that note, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the just completed 2023 was also an election year, with the local Government election (LGE) having been held in June. At the end of that election, we the People's Progressive Party secured 108,871 proportional representation (PR) votes. In contrast, the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC) secured 68,229. Of 80 Local Authority Areas (LAAs), we, the People's Progressive Party, won 66, the APNU/AFC won 14. Of the 66 LAAs we have won, 13 were won by virtue of a no contest because the APNU/AFC was simply unable to field a single candidate whatsoever in those LAAs. We won 906 seats in total, while the APNU/AFC won 274. Even where we did not win a majority on the council, we increased our representation significantly. In Georgetown, we increased the seats we have won, from seven to 11 and the APNU/AFC reduced their seats from 23 to 19. In New Amsterdam, we increased our seats from three, we doubled our seats from three to six and the APNU/AFC reduced their seats from 11 to eight.

3.16 p.m.

In Linden, we increased and doubled our seats from one to two and the APNU/AFC reduced their seats from 15 to 14. I will add that, in Linden, we may have won two seats, but we secured 2,464 PR votes, six times the number of PR votes we secured at the previous Local Government Elections. [Mr. Jones: How much you had before and how much you get now?] I believe it would be 2,464 divided by six, Hon Chief Whip on that side of the House. I believe it is fair to say that the results speak for themselves. If I might be permitted a brief repetition: competence, integrity, discipline, focus, and candour as a Government, characteristics the Guyanese people have always shown a strong recognition of and affinity for.

Our Government is committed to maintaining a policy framework aimed at achieving the objectives we have outlined and at delivering the commitments we made in our manifesto. We are committed to ensuring the preservation of policy predictability and stability, prerequisites that are essential for good decision-making by both businesses and households. We are guided constantly by strong underlying principles, and the conviction that every single policy choice and every single expenditure decision can be justified on the basis of promoting the national interest and national wellbeing. And we are committed to making the hard

decisions where these are needed in order to ensure that our country's potential for lasting prosperity is realised and that national prosperity, when realised, is translated into improved wellbeing for every single Guyanese household.

With this in mind, *Budget 2024* is presented under the theme *Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All*.

2. The Global and Regional Economic Context

I turn now to the Global and Regional Economic Context in which we find ourselves as a member of the global community of nations. The global economy remains in a precarious position amidst escalated geopolitical tensions, the fight against persistently high inflation in many parts of the world, and extreme climatic conditions including a protracted period of the *El Niño* phenomenon. These forces weighed heavily on global growth in 2023 and have dampened post pandemic recovery efforts. Against this backdrop, global growth is estimated at 2.6% for 2023, slower than the 3% in 2022. Growth in advanced economies is estimated to have decelerated to 1.5% in 2023 from 2.5% the previous year. This largely reflects a significant slowdown in the Euro Area, which is estimated to have grown by less than 1%. Conversely, growth of 2.5% was recorded in the United States (US) amidst favourable consumption and business sentiment. Meanwhile, growth in the emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs) is estimated at 4%, 0.3 of a percentage point above the growth rate observed in 2022.

In the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, economic growth is estimated to have moderated to 2.2% in 2023 from 3.9% in 2022. The Caribbean is projected to have expanded by 4.6% in 2023, slower than the 8.6% recorded one year prior. Excluding Guyana, the region is estimated to have expanded by 2.3%. Many of the same forces that subdued global growth in 2023 are expected to persist into 2024. As such, the global economy is forecasted to expand at a slightly slower rate of 2.4% in 2024. Growth in advanced economies is projected to decline by 0.3 of a percentage point in 2024 to 1.2%, while emerging market and developing economies and the LAC region are expected to grow by 3.9% and 2.3%, respectively.

In 2022, global inflation levels soared to multidecade highs amidst pandemic-related disruptions further amplified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although efforts to rein in rising prices through tighter financial conditions have shown some effectiveness, inflation remains above target in many countries. It is expected that global inflation decelerated to

6.9% at the end of 2023, 1.8 percentage points below the rate recorded at the end of 2022.

As a commodity exporter, Guyana remains susceptible to global developments that trigger shifts in commodity prices on the world market. Among our main exported commodities, sugar and rice prices rose 26.6% and 26.8%. Prices for logs declined by 6.8%; aluminium prices were down 16.6%; and gold prices were up 7.9%. Last year 2023, that is of course average, Brent crude oil prices retreated from their eight year high in 2022, falling some 18.4% to US\$82.6 per barrel.

Looking ahead, added inflationary pressures loom large as recent developments in the shipping industry in particular are expected and threaten freight and commodity prices. Already, freight costs have surged due to the *El Niño* induced drought in Panama and the surrounding war around the Red Sea and Suez. Resultantly, authorities have capped the number and weight of vessels that can pass through the Panama Canal, and due to the diversion of ships from the Suez Canal, the rate for a 40-foot container for example has more than doubled in some parts of the world. Against this background, global commodity markets are likely to remain volatile in 2024.

On the subject of commodity and other prices, it is apposite to note that the monetary policy response to global inflationary pressures has seen a significant increase in the pricing of credit. Interest rates, especially amongst advanced economies, have risen substantially since early 2022 as governments and central banks attempt to combat stubbornly high levels of inflation in many places. For example, the US Effective Federal Funds Rate stood at 5.3% at the end of last year, markedly above the 1.7% average or its 1.7% average, rather, in 2022. Similarly, the benchmark Secured Overnight Financing Rate popularly known as (SOFR), averaged 5% in 2023, up from 1.6% in 2022. This has had, and will continue to have, very severe implications for countries like Guyana that raise external financing that is priced on the basis of these benchmarks.

3. Developments in the Domestic Economy in 2023

A. Real Gross Domestic Product

I turn now Sir to Developments in the Domestic Economy in 2023. Mr. Speaker had the Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan, been paying attention, he would have heard when I spoke of Brent crude prices. I do not know if, perhaps, he is trying to figure out which portfolio he will be addressing during the

course of this Budget Debate. I see him whispering to the Hon. Leader of the Opposition in a somewhat quizzical manner.

I am now turning to the domestic economy. [An. Hon. Member (Opposition): (*Inaudible*)] You will hear shortly. [Interruption] Guyana's paper currency is currently being signed on the Government's behalf by the former President and the distinguished Vice-President of Guyana, Vice-President Bharrat Jagdeo, who as Opposition Leader, is largely responsible for consigning this APNU/AFC failure into the Opposition benches and will help and lead our efforts to keep them in Opposition for a very long time. [Interruption]

I turn now, Sir, to developments in the domestic economy. It would be recalled that we got down to the business of Government from 2nd August, 2020, and I returned to Guyana in November, 2020. We did not twiddle our thumbs for three months like they twiddled their thumbs for five years. I now turn ...The thumb twiddlers – the people who twiddled their thumbs for five years as they awaited their return to the Opposition benches. The perpetual thumb twiddlers, Sir. I now turn to developments...Yes, Sir, the perpetual thumb twiddlers spending five years in Government and doing not one single thing. Not a single accomplishment to speak of, having spent five years in Government. No wonder that in three years they could not get their own Members of Parliament (MPs) to vote for them and to keep them in a majority in the Parliament. No wonder it took a mere five years, after 23 years in Opposition, for the people of Guyana to send them back into the Opposition benches. No wonder, Sir – the perpetual thumb twiddlers.

3.31 p.m.

I now turn to development in the domestic economy. At the time of preparing *Budget 2023*, it was projected that real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would grow by 25.1%, with non-oil GDP expected to expand by 7.9%. I am now pleased to report that Guyana's real GDP is estimated to have grown by 33% overall in 2023. I am also pleased to report that the non-oil real economy grew by 11.7%. The expansion of the overall real economy can be largely attributed to continued strong growth in oil and gas activity, with the notable achievement of first oil at the new floating, production, storage and offloading (FPSO) vessel, Prosperity, in November. Additionally, growth in the non-oil economy was mainly driven by expansions in construction and services, agriculture, forestry and fishing and manufacturing, as well as in the other mining and quarrying subsector.

Our Government's policies continue to be focused on supporting growth in the traditional pillars of the economy while managing the oil and gas sector effectively.

B. Sectoral Performance

a. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing

The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is estimated to have expanded by 7% in 2023. This performance is attributed to increases across all subsectors and was despite the impact of the El Niño.

The sugar growing sector is estimated to have grown by 28% in 2023. The Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) produced 60,204 tonnes in 2023.

Similarly, the rice growing sector expanded by 7%. The Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) reported total rice production of 653,706 tonnes for 2023, above the 610,595 tons in 2022. This performance can be largely attributed to better yields, which improved from 5.9 tonnes per hectare in 2022 to an estimated 6.3 tonnes per hectare in 2023.

Growth in the other crops sector continued despite difficult weather conditions. It is estimated that the sector grew by 4.1 %, with significant growth recorded in the production of such crops as coconuts, vegetables, root crops and fruits, mainly on account of increased acreage cultivated and improved yields. Also, on the upside, the livestock industry is estimated to have expanded by 12.7% in 2023. It is expected that the production of eggs, poultry meat, pork and milk expanded by 30.9 %, 13%, 21.9% and 0.7%, respectively.

The fishing industry reversed its 2022 contraction to record growth of 37.8 % in 2023. This is attributed to better-than-expected marine production, with shrimp and fish production expanding by 61.1% and 24.4%, respectively. Notable improvements were observed in the production of artisanal finfish, red snapper, industrial and artisanal seabob shrimp, amongst others. We continue to see the fruitful results of Government's interventions to transform the aquaculture industry. It is estimated that aquaculture production expanded by a staggering 75% in 2023, with brackish water shrimp alone growing by 58.6%.

The forestry sector is estimated to have expanded by 5.4%.

b. Extractive Industries

The mining and quarrying sector is estimated to have expanded by 42.6% in 2023. As with recent years, the estimated growth is driven largely by an expansion in oil and gas and, of course, support services industry which, when combined with growth observed in the other mining industry, outweighs the declines that were observed in gold and bauxite mining.

It is estimated that the oil and gas sector expanded by 45.9 % last year – I believe this is what you are waiting for, Hon. Member, Mr. Ramjattan – with production of 142.9 million barrels of oil, compared with 101.4 million in 2022. This is the result of improved performance from the Liza Destiny and Unity FPSOs, along with the commencement of production from the Prosperity FPSO in November. In 2023, the Liza Destiny produced crude oil at a rate of approximately 142,000 barrels per day and the Liza Unity produced at a rate of 235,000 barrels per day.

Mr. Speaker, on the downside, the gold mining industry is estimated to have contracted by 11.2% in 2023, on account of lower output from the small and medium scale producers. Total gold declarations fell to 432,113 ounces last year. The single producing foreign operator recorded an estimated 7.8% in declarations, with 109,358 ounces declared. However, this was outweighed by lower declarations from the small and medium scale operators, whose output fell by an estimated 16.2% to 322,755 ounces.

Similarly, the bauxite mining industry is estimated to have contracted by 20.4% in 2023, as a result of reduced output from both producing operators. Bauxite production is estimated to have fallen to 525,000 tonnes last year, with output from the larger producer declining to an estimated 317,919 tonnes, and output from the smaller operator to 207,321 tonnes. Both producers attribute this performance to external market developments that have affected demand and prices.

On a more positive note, the other mining subsector – comprising sand, stone, diamonds, and manganese – is estimated to have grown by 22.7% in 2023. Stone and sand are estimated to have grown by 98% and 21%, respectively, with demand from construction activity and the public and private sectors continuing to grow. Manganese production also grew in 2023 by an estimated 13% to 314,538 tonnes. Conversely, diamond declarations are estimated to have fallen by 19.3% to 67,444 metric carats.

c. Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector is estimated to have expanded by 25% in 2023, with growth recorded in all three subcategories. Sugar and rice manufacturing are estimated to have expanded by 28% and 8.3%, respectively. [Mr. Norton: *(Inaudible)*] Let me repeat, Sir, for the benefit of the occasionally inattentive Leader of the Opposition. Sugar and rice manufacturing are estimated to have expanded by 28% and 8.3%, respectively, and other manufacturing by 31.8%. Within other manufacturing, growth was driven mainly by the manufacturing of fabricated metal products and non-metallic products.

d. Electricity and Water Supply and Sewerage

3.46 p.m.

The electricity and water supply sectors are estimated to have expanded by 15.5% and 9.9%, respectively, in 2023. Gross generation from the Guyana Power and Light Inc (GPL) expanded from 1,030,288 megawatt hours (MWh) in 2022 to an estimated 1,179,883 MWh in 2023. Despite this expansion in production, demand is estimated to have surpassed supply for most of 2023, reflecting strong growth in both commercial and residential consumption. Growth in water supply is the result of the commissioning of 23 new wells, while no wells were removed from the distribution line due to failure or damage.

e. Construction

The construction sector is estimated to have expanded by 26.8% in 2023, building on the growth of 26.3% observed in 2022. Growth in the sector continued to be driven by intensified activity in both the private and public sectors, with a strong construction component in the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP).

f. Services

The services sector is estimated to have expanded by 10.3% last year, with growth recorded across all of the service industries. The overall 2023 performance is attributed to growth recorded in administrative and support services, wholesale and retail trade and repairs, accommodation and food services, and transport and storage. These industries grew by 20.6%, 9%, 13% and 12.1%, respectively.

C. Balance of Payments

Mr. Speaker, the overall balance of payments recorded a modest estimated deficit of US\$34.2 million at the end of

2023, while the current account registered a surplus estimated at US\$1.98 billion.

Total export earnings grew by 16.9% to an estimated US\$13.182 billion, reflecting higher earnings from both the oil and non-oil sectors.

Total imports grew by 83.1% to an estimated US\$6.636 billion in 2023, largely due to the arrival in 2023 of the Prosperity FPSO, which contributed approximately 26.6% of total imports in 2023.

Net service payments are estimated to have grown by \$694.9 million to \$5.6 billion. Lastly, Sir, on the current account, transfers are estimated to have declined by US\$19.3 million.

I should have said, if I did not clarify, Sir, that throughout this balance of payment section, the currency to which I am referring is the US dollar. The deficit on the capital account declined by an estimated US\$1.6 billion, primarily on account of enhanced Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) with the arrival of the Prosperity FPSO.

Mr. Speaker, the modest balance of payments deficit was financed by a drawdown on the Bank of Guyana's (BOG's) foreign reserves to an estimated US\$898.2 million at the end of 2023, equivalent to 1.1 months of import cover.

D. Monetary Developments

Mr. Speaker, the money supply is estimated to have grown by 24.8% to \$840.1 billion at the end of 2023. This reflects our Government's commitment to maintaining an environment that is conducive both to mobilisation and intermediation of savings and to promoting easier and more affordable access to financing.

For the period ending December, 2023, net domestic credit was estimated at \$411.4 billion – these are Guyana dollars now in the monetary section – with strong growth in lending from both the private and public sectors.

Net credit to the private sector grew by an estimated 14.4%. Consistent with performance in the real sector, there was notable growth in credit to the services, manufacturing, and agriculture sectors of 12.9%, 15.8%, and 14.7%, respectively. The expansion in credit to the agriculture sector was largely as a result of an increase of \$2.4 billion in lending for paddy production.

Mr. Speaker, strong growth is also estimated in real estate mortgage loans of 22.5% to \$128.6 billion, largely on a count of borrowing for real estate purposes both industrial

and commercial, on the one hand, and private dwellings on the other.

Total reserves deposited with the Bank of Guyana increased by an estimated 2.6% to \$136 billion. Of this amount, excess deposits reduced by an estimated 14.7% to \$45.2 billion, consistent with the continued improved sentiment on our banking sector amidst increases in lending. Total liquid assets of commercial banks expanded by an estimated 26.3% to \$343.5 billion at the end of 2023.

E. Prices and Income

a. Inflation

Mr. Speaker, like the rest of the world, Guyana continues to grapple with imported inflationary pressures. As highlighted, the global economy saw inflation rates being contained but still above pre-pandemic levels for several countries. In Guyana, the 12-month inflation rate at the end of 2023 was estimated at 2%, significantly lower than the 7.2% recorded in 2022. This largely reflected more moderate increases in the average price of key commodities at the end of last year. Notably, Sir, food prices in the consumer basket increased by an estimated 3.8% at the end of 2023, substantially lower than the 14.1% increase recorded at the end of 2022.

It is crucial to recall Government's efforts to contain prices amidst boosting production and managing costs in such sectors as the poultry sector. These entailed having a continuous dialogue with key producers and working with commercial banks to reduce interest rates for loans to the sector. These evidently produced favourable results, as reported previously, regarding production and will be complemented both by the low interest rate facility agreed with the banking sector as well as the recent \$850 million allocated for purchasing fertiliser for farmers.

b. Interest Rates

Mr. Speaker, over the period, treasury bill rates trended downward with the 91-day, 182-day and 364-day treasury bill yields falling from 1.54%, 1% and 1.09% to an estimated 1.1% and 0.99% for the latter two. Moreover, though the commercial banks small savings rate was estimated to have been unchanged at 0.81%, the weighted average lending rate declined from 8.54% to an estimated 8.36%.

c. Income

I turn now, Sir, to incomes. As our Government continues to implement our development agenda, we remain resolute in

our commitment to improving the livelihoods of all Guyanese through a sustainable and holistic approach. In this regard, we implemented in 2023 a comprehensive suite of measures. These include:

As announced in *Budget 2023*, all workers benefited from the increase in the monthly income tax threshold from \$75,000 to \$85,000 monthly, providing an additional \$3.3 billion in disposable income to these workers, and removal of over 12,000 workers from the tax net.

In January, 2023, 5,000 health workers and almost 9,000 members of the Disciplined Services benefitted from salary adjustments, placing an additional \$3 billion in the hands of these categories of workers.

In December, 2023, teachers benefitted from several salary revisions.

All graduate teachers moved to the maximum of the scale applicable to their post at that time, benefitting 4,000 teachers at a cost of \$1 billion dollars annually.

Additionally, effective December, 2023, teachers received a monthly education allowance of \$10,000 for a Bachelor's Degree, \$20,000 for a Master's Degree and \$30,000 for a Doctorate Degree, to the benefit of over 4,500 teachers, at an additional annual cost of \$500 million.

The Remote Areas Incentive for teachers was also revised upwards to \$20,000 monthly, effective December, 2023, at an annual cost of \$260 million.

Mr. Speaker, as part of the \$5 billion cost of living allocation for 2023, public servants, teachers and members of the Disciplined Services, as well as staff of semi-autonomous agencies and public enterprises were paid a \$25,000 one-off tax-free cash grant in December, 2023 at a cost of \$1.7 billion.

At the end of 2023, an across-the-board salary increase of 6.5% was paid retroactive to 1st January, 2023, to over 54,000 public servants, teachers, members of the Disciplined Services and Government pensioners, placing \$7.5 billion in the hands of these individuals. Notably, Sir, since coming into Office, the cumulative salary increase for these groups of employees is 23%.

4.01 p.m.

Members of the Disciplined Services also benefitted from the reinstated one-month tax-free bonus. For the first time ever, the civilian employees of the Guyana Defence Force

(GDF) also benefitted from the one-month tax-free bonus. This placed in the hands of 12,000 members of the Disciplined Services an additional \$1.5 billion. I might add that it would be recalled, painfully, that this is the very one-month tax free bonus which was so shamelessly and callously taken away from the members of the Disciplined Services by the A Partnership For National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC).

F. Fiscal Position

a. Non-Financial Public Sector

I turn now to the fiscal position. The total non-financial public sector deficit (after grants) was \$201.6 billion or 5.8% of GDP. The Central Government recorded a deficit of \$202.9 billion or 5.8% of GDP at the end of the year.

b. Central Government

Total Central Government current revenue, net of inflows from the Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund (GRIF), Carbon Credits, and the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) amounted to \$382.1 billion, 26.5% above the 2022 level. Tax collections totalled \$366.6 billion, aided by the strong real economic growth observed. Non-tax revenue totalled \$15.5 billion, an increase of \$5.7 billion. The Central Government expenditure totalled \$804.1 billion of which non-interest current expenditure amounted to \$370 billion.

The Government's Public Sector Investment Programme continued to expand with an investment of \$421.8 billion at the end of 2023. This was attributed to the Government's accelerated and heightened investments across all sectors, in particular in major sectors, as it aggressively implements its transformative development agenda in the infrastructure, education, health, agriculture, public safety and other sectors.

G. Public Debt Management

Our Government remains steadfast in its commitment to maintaining a strong debt sustainability position for our country. At the end of 2023, the total Public and Publicly Guaranteed (PPG) debt stood at US\$4.5 billion, up 23.4% from the position at the end of 2022. This was on account of new external and domestic borrowing. Nevertheless, we continue to maintain one of the lowest ratios of total public and publicly guaranteed debt to GDP in the Caribbean, with Guyana's public and publicly guaranteed debt to GDP standing at 27% at the end of 2023. This sustainable level reflects the Government's effective debt management

practices which have contributed to a steady decline in the country's debt ratios over a sustained period. Guyana's external debt amounted to US\$1.775 billion or 13% up from the end of 2022 on account of positive net flows from both bilateral and multilateral creditors. Domestic debt totalled US\$2.7 billion at the end of 2023, up from US\$2.1 billion at the end of 2022. The total public debt service payments amounted to US\$177.3 million, an increase from US\$150.2 million in 2022.

H. Natural Resource Fund

In 2023, there were 142 lifts of crude oil from Guyana's three producing FPSOs, 17 of which were for the Government – six from the Liza Destiny FPSO and 11 from the Liza Unity. The profit oil receipts recorded in 2023 correspond to two lifts that occurred in the last quarter of 2022, and 15 lifts that occurred in 2023. Two receipts related to 2023 are anticipated to be made this month and those relate to lifts that occurred late in the year, that is to say, in December 2023.

For the year 2023, the Fund received US\$1,398.9 million in profit oil, US\$576.6 million from Liza Destiny and US\$822.23 million from Liza Unity. With respect to royalty payments, US\$208.1 million was received from the Stabroek Block operator. In keeping with stipulations in the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) Act and with the approval granted by this honourable House as part of the budgetary consideration last year, an amount of US\$1,002 million was withdrawn to finance national development priorities. In 2023, US\$1,617 million in petroleum revenue was deposited into the Fund, and at the end of the year, the overall balance, inclusive of interest income, stood at US\$1,973.5 million.

4. Sectoral Developments and the Agenda for 2024

A. Introduction

I now turn to sectoral developments and the agenda for 2024. I referred earlier to the rapid pace of transformation being realised in every single sector in our country. I will now review some of the main developments in each sector and our plans going forward. Of necessity, these represent merely selected highlights of the work our Government is doing in each sector. But, even from these highlights only, the scale, scope and speed with which we are building out a transformed Guyana would be evident, as would the opportunities that this build-out presents for Guyanese of all walks of life.

B. The Low Carbon Development Strategy

I have, in previous budget speeches, elaborated extensively on the history of Guyana's Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS) or LCDS, as it is popularly known, 2030, including, of course, the visionary precursor, the original LCDS, which raised US\$212.6 million from our forest ecosystem services, of which US\$135 million sat languishing and remaining unutilised for the years that we were out of Office. One of our most immediate priorities, on our return to Office, was to ensure that the resources earned – those very resources that were sitting languishing prior to our return to Office – were deployed.

To this end, it would be recalled that our Government moved swiftly to start designing and implementing such programmes as the largest solar project in Guyana's history for 33 megawatts of power in Berbice, Linden and Essequibo at a value of US\$83.3 million; the flood adaptation project; support for the National Toshias Council's (NTC's) capacity to implement projects identified in the Village Sustainability Plans (VSPs) and others.

Secondly, we sought immediately to reclaim Guyana's leadership position in climate finance globally and to resume our position of being remunerated for the climate services provided by our forests. In this regard, we became the first country in the world to obtain jurisdiction scale certification of our carbon credits under the Architecture for REDD+ Transactions Environmental Excellence Standard (ART-TREES) mechanism. The first country in the world; small Guyana. We also concluded one of the largest transactions in the voluntary carbon market to have ever taken place, consisting of 2.5 million credits per year for each year, from 2016 to 2030, giving a total of 37.5 million REDD+ carbon credits for which we will be paid US\$750 million over a 15-year period.

In line with a commitment given in the LCDS, 15% of the revenues received for the sales of carbon credits are earmarked for Amerindian villages to finance bottom-up investments outlined in their Village Sustainability Plans. Villages follow local decision-making processes to participate in the benefit-sharing mechanism, and now all of Guyana's 242 villages have produced their village plans. As a result, a total of \$4.7 billion has been transferred to our Amerindian communities to finance over 500 projects. This focus is delivering tangible gains in terms of livelihoods, income generation, food security and social upliftment. The remaining 85% of earnings from the sale of carbon credits would be utilised to meet the most urgent priorities of the LCDS, including adaptation and mitigation interventions,

particularly flood risk management, with the replication of Hope-like canals for drainage and irrigation purposes.

Budget 2024 projects the deployment of \$6.8 billion of GRIF resources earned under the original LCDS and a further \$43.7 billion earned from the sale of carbon credits, both with the aim of advancing the low carbon initiatives outlined in the strategy.

C. A Diversified, Resilient and Competitive Productive Sector

a. Oil and Gas

In building a world class oil and gas sector, our stated objectives are to strengthen the sector's legal and regulatory framework; establish and strengthen institutional structures required by that framework; continue to promote accelerated exploration and production of the resources in the national interest; and maximise the positive spillovers of the sector into the non-oil economy.

Legal, Regulatory, and Institutional Framework

I reported last year on the operationalisation of the NRF Act and the Local Content Act, both of which have shaped the legal landscape for the oil and gas sector in our country.

In 2023, we enacted a new modern and state-of-the-art Petroleum Activities Act which introduced, among other things, a regulatory foundation for licensing operations and storage, comprehensive provisions on decommissioning, stronger and more up to date penalties for non-compliance, *et cetera*.

4.16 p.m.

Secondly, our work on revising the production sharing agreement, or PSA as it is popularly known, resulted in the development of, as I indicated earlier, a model PSA for deep water and shallow water blocks in 2023. The model PSA now contains clearer and more expansive provisions on data and its confidentiality, more defined timelines on steps between discovery or after discovery, provision for retention fee where licensees want to hold on to certain resources, and strong penalties for failure to comply with work programmes. On the institutional side, the main coordinating and oversight agencies within Government have implemented systems that allow both physical and remote monitoring of the offshore activities in real-time.

Petroleum Exploration

Mr. Speaker, on exploration, and in line with our commitment to competitively auction oil blocks, the country's inaugural licensing round was completed in 2023. We reviewed the global best practice mechanism on making block sizes attractive for investments while simultaneously promoting an accelerated rate of implementation and development. Fourteen such blocks were then determined and offered both within our shallow and deep-water areas.

During the bidding round, eight blocks were shortlisted based on the bidder's ability to meet the criteria of the expected work programme as well as required financial commitments. These included two blocks to a local company and the remaining six to companies from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and North America. Negotiations with all identified bidders started in the fourth quarter of 2023. Awards and exploration activities and the issuing of licenses are expected to begin in 2024. Meanwhile, other advances in exploration include three new oil discoveries, two in Stabroek and one in Corentyne – those are the respective offshore blocks of course – as a consequence of which the total number of discoveries increased to 40 in the Stabroek Block and 46 for all explored blocks.

Production of Oil

Mr. Speaker, encouraging accelerated production is integral to ensuring we optimise on our resource potential in a net zero environment as well to securing revenue from the sector to accelerate our development agenda and to improve the wellbeing of our people. The year 2023 saw a ramp up in volumes from the Destiny and Unity production platforms, while the Prosperity floating production storage and offloading (FPSO) achieved first oil, as I indicated earlier, in November. More advances in development are expected later this year on the Yellow Tail project. There were also strides in relation to the development of the Uaru project amidst commencement of the hull and topside fabrication of the FPSO that will be working in that location. Whiptail is progressing as the Government has started to review the field development plan submitted last year. Collectively, production could climb well over 1.3 million barrels per day beyond 2027, making Guyana the single largest non-Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) contributor to global supplies.

Harnessing Our Gas Reserves

Mr. Speaker, with the objective of developing a national gas strategy, Government drafted and presented a discussion paper last year, for import from our citizens, that received

103 comments. The feedback will be incorporated in the finalisation of the country's national gas plan along with the request for proposals to design, finance, construct and operate the required gas infrastructure to support upstream developments. And it would be recalled, in fact, that the request for proposal (RFP) for private investors to submit proposals for the development of this infrastructure was announced just yesterday.

Additionally, it would be recalled that in *Budget 2023* I highlighted the gas to energy project that is already underway. This investment is a major cornerstone for our nation's economic development and growth in coming years. I am happy to report that progress has allowed the project to remain on track for a start-up by the end of this year.

Promoting Value-Added Production

Mr. Speaker, in response to a Government call, we received nine proposals from interested parties vying to construct a refinery in the Berbice region and five were shortlisted. These proposals are currently being evaluated and the final ranking is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2024. Following this, a top ranked contender will undertake an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) at Crab Island for a facility designed to process at least 30,000 barrels of oil per day. The investment commitment from these shortlisted firms is expected to exceed one million United States (US) dollars.

Promoting Local Content.

Mr. Speaker, in the area of local content, the Local Content Act of 2021 continues to bear fruit, and the Government will continue to implement strategies that promote opportunities for Guyanese nationals and Guyanese companies. Since January, 2022 to now, contractors, sub-contractors and licensees reporting to the Local Content Secretariat have recorded 3,938 local hires. Of those, 824 Guyanese were employed as plant and machine operators; 1,203 as professionals such as accountants, lawyers, engineers, *et cetera*; and another 485 as technicians. This brings the total number of Guyanese persons employed in the sector to more than six thousand persons.

In accordance with the act, five-year master plans detailing employment, procurement and capacity development from 33 companies have been received. These project significant growth in activity in the coming years. Also, in keeping with the Act, annual procurement plans received from contractors, sub-contractors and licensees amount to an estimated

US\$721 million in the procurement of goods, services and training. Current estimates suggest that US\$518 million will be procured from Guyanese suppliers providing goods and services in 2023. Of this amount US\$15.8 million, US\$5.5 million and US\$130 million will be spent on accommodation services, catering, and lay-down yard facilities respectively. Other major expenditure includes the provision of manpower and the crewing services and ground transportation at \$74.6 and \$13.6 million, respectively.

Implementation of the Local Content Act has proven to be a catalyst for numerous partnerships between foreign and local companies fostering a collaborative environment in the nations burgeoning oil industry. Notable alliances include joined ventures and partnerships to provide shore base facilities, offshore support vessel services, offshore helicopter services, offshore catering services, machining and fabrication services, and hazardous waste management, all comprising partnership with Guyanese companies employing Guyanese nationals.

Transparency in the Sector

Mr. Speaker, our Government's commitment to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) along with industry and civil society representation continues to ensure the maintenance of the highest standards of transparency in the sector. As a consequence of not submitting in 2020, Guyana was temporarily suspended from the EITI. Mr. Speaker, once the 2020 report was published and shared with the Secretariat our status as a compliant member was restored. Subsequently, our Government and the Guyana EITI multi-stakeholder group worked to ensure that Guyana's EITI Report for 2021 was published in December, 2023, and we have already started the procurement process for the selection of the administrator to prepare the country's 2022 report.

Additionally, the Natural Resource Fund (NRF) Act provides a comprehensive framework to ensure transparency in the operation of the Fund. The annual budget estimates continue to include projections of inflows into the Fund and corresponding withdrawals. As required by the Act, notifications of petroleum receipts are published in the Official Gazette and tabled in the National Assembly. And, in fact, it was only earlier today that I tabled the most recent of such notification.

The Bank of Guyana (BOG) publishes monthly a summary of the financial position and performance of the Fund. Here

again detailing inflows and outflows. The Bank also publishes quarterly NRF reports.

b. Other Extractives

Mr. Speaker, despite the emergence of the oil and gas sector, our traditional non-oil extractive sector remains extremely important to overall economic well-being.

i. Gold

Mr. Speaker, gold mining operations continue to offer profitable opportunities for both international and domestic investors, and prospects for gold remain positive both at the large-scale level as well as the small- and the medium-scale level.

At the large-scale end of the spectrum, exploration activities continue to indicate very strong resource potential of over eight million ounces with ongoing investments in Eagle Mountain, Marudi, Oko West and Omai, with large scale operations anticipated to start in these locations as early as 2026. The Toroparu area remains under active consideration with private investors expected to determine final timelines very shortly. Additionally, production continues to grow at Aurora, with equipment and assets arriving to facilitate full commencement of the underground mining operation and works planned for a 15-megawatt solar farm in support of the mills in 2024.

4.31 p.m.

ii. Bauxite

I turn now to bauxite. The bauxite sector, similarly, continues to occupy a position of strategic importance for the long term. The two major producers of bauxite together contributed approximately 5% of non-oil export earnings in 2023. Despite very challenging market conditions during the year, active steps are being taken to reduce cost, broaden the product range and increase production.

The recent addition of reserves in Kara Kara of 3.5 million tonnes is expected to increase production by over 250,000 tonnes in 2024 and by 400,000 tonnes in 2025. These reserves will supply the existing kilns, as well as the new Kiln 15. This particular kiln – Kiln 15 – will operate for a full year in 2024, having been commissioned in 2023. It is the first new kiln installed in Linden since the 1970s, and it represents a US\$120 million investment in Linden. Already, \$30 million has been invested in the company to procure mobile equipment.

The launching of the metallurgic-grade bauxite project, or MAZ project, will see the installation of significant capital investments, a nine-kilometre conveyor system, self-propelled barges, and the solar farm to which I alluded earlier, all of which will result in a very significant increase in production. In particular, this investment alone is set to deliver 1,000,000 tonnes by the end of 2024 and a peak 4.5 million tonnes a year. As a result of this project, 500 additional persons will be employed in Linden in 2024 and another 500 by the first half of 2025.

iii. Sand and Stone

In 2023, sand extraction was conducted at 31 legal operations producing 7.8 million tonnes per year, a substantial increase from the 18 operations in 2020 which produced at the time less than 700,000 tonnes. Operations have expanded to include strategic stockpiles and ramping up of barging capability to serve the intensified demand for sand.

On quarry material, over the last three years, quarry capacity has moved from six at the end of 2020 to 10 functioning quarries in 2023, and more than doubling the amount being shipped from quarry sites. Four of the 10 existing producers expanded capacity in 2023 and the other six are in the process of expanding. Over US\$20 million has been invested by the private sector in both small and large barges, tugs, pontoons, crushers, trucks, and cranes to increase capacity. Two major companies were able to move, in 2023, from a licence to exploration stage, or from the stage of licence to explore, to a stage of actual production. This achievement within a year was unprecedented but it signals private sector determination to participate in the ongoing construction boom.

iv. Manganese

Manganese is expected to continue to grow. As I alluded earlier, production and stockpiling will continue to ensure readiness to increase exports in 2024 even as the company actively works to address ongoing challenges. Meanwhile, the company continues to employ over 280 persons currently.

c. Forestry

Building on the strong recovery that the forestry sector has been able to demonstrate since our Government took Office, we will continue to support sustainable forest management and utilisation. Work has continued on Guyana's Timber Legality Assurance System and is on track to qualify for

certification under the European Union (EU) Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Programme.

During 2023, an additional 22 claims were issued bringing the total to 550 small foresters, along with 22 medium scale foresters who occupy 2.7 million hectares.

In 2024, two large scale investments totalling 250,000 hectares will be issued for expanded production and value added.

d. Agriculture and Food Security

Since 2020, the agriculture sector has been experiencing a rapid transformation, evolving from neglected small scale, rural based, subsistence-level farming enterprises – as it was during 2015 to 2020 – to dynamic large-scale, plantation-scale industries. Agriculture and agri-business enterprises are taking their rightful places as major producers and exporters, poised to meet the challenges of food self-sufficiency and food security in Guyana and across the Caribbean. In 2023, we expended the sum of \$60.4 billion to stimulate and invigorate the agriculture sector.

Consistent with the undertakings committed in *Budget 2023*, arrangements were concluded to commence construction of the Regional Food Hub on the Linden to Soesdyke Highway. Over 200 shade houses were procured; hydroponics projects benefitting 300 youths from Regions 2, 5 and 10 were launched; and a wide array of planting materials, agricultural equipment, shade house and fencing materials, livestock and poultry were distributed to develop agriculture, particularly in the hinterland and intermediate savannahs.

In 2024, we will continue to promote investments in large-scale agriculture by opening up new lands, developing high-yielding, pest-resistant and climate-resilient crop varieties; encouraging the establishment of modern farms to facilitate the use of technology and more efficient farm practices; promoting increased aquaculture and shrimp farming; cultivating new crops and expanding livestock production; and modernising, upgrading and strengthening both our drainage and irrigation and farm to market infrastructure and support services. Furthermore, we will commission a tissue culture laboratory which is expected to produce 1,000,000 plantlets per year. This increased production will facilitate the ready availability and easy access of planting material.

i. Sugar

In 2024, \$97.6 billion is budgeted to advance and catalyse agriculture development. We promised to revive the sugar

industry and reenergise local communities which were devastated by the unconscionable decision of the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change (APNU/AFC) to decommission and close several grinding estates. In just under three years, we have reopened the Rose Hall Estate which commenced operations in September. Through retooling and mechanisation, we achieved the conversion of 2,740 hectares of land for mechanical harvesting at Rose Hall, Albion and Blairmont. Since September, 2020, we invested in the rehabilitation and modernisation of factories and cane fields. Over 4,600 workers were rehired, bringing the total employment to over 8,100 employees across the industry. There are 8,100 persons who are working, many of whom, if not the majority of whom, were callously put out of work and put out of an income by the unconscionable actions of our friends on that side of the House.

It is expected that the conversion of land for mechanised harvesting will continue in 2024, targeting an additional 7,100 hectares. Additional works will be completed on the Albion and Blairmont Packaging Plants. The installation of a sugar dryer at Blairmont Estate and the rehabilitation of heavy and light duty revetments across the industry, will strengthen the drainage system to allow timely delivery of harvested canes to the factories.

The budget for 2024 will contribute \$6 billion to the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) to further improve production and operational efficiencies of the industry.

ii. Rice

Turning to rice, our aim is to expand and develop the rice industry. We are introducing new, high yielding varieties; providing adequately for improved drainage and irrigation systems and farm to market roads; and securing new markets and introducing new technologies. *[Interruption]* I hear, Sir, our friends on that side of the House heckling that these are the same objectives as there were last year. If you are on the right path, you do precisely that; you stay on that path until you arrive at the destination. If on the other hand you are wandering and meandering blindly as they did for five years when they were in Government, then you change direction randomly, whimsically, and fancifully; month after month and week after week changing your direction, changing your objectives, and changing your plans.

In 2024, we will continue to invest in improving the quality and quantity of seed paddy available to the rice farmers. We will provide enhanced best practices in the cultivation of

paddy. We will continue to research and develop high yielding varieties with good milling and cooking qualities, and varieties that are salt resistant and resistant to major rice diseases. We will evaluate the new G14-10 high-yielding variety in farmers' fields in 2024.

4.46 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to drainage and irrigation, which I will address shortly, the sum of \$1.3 billion will be expended by the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) to support increased production and productivity of the rice industry.

iii. Other Crops

Our Government's commitment to diversify non-traditional agriculture has seen emerging transformation of the sub-sector, with the expanded cultivation of corn, soya bean, citrus, spices, coconuts and high-value crops such as broccoli, cauliflower, bell peppers, romaine lettuce and carrots among others. To buttress the expanded production of non-traditional crops, we have invested in supporting infrastructure, we have invested in laboratory and extension services, and we are opening up new market opportunities. In 2023, a sum of \$1.9 billion was expended to support other crop interventions. In 2024, a sum of \$2.6 billion will support the other crops sector.

Corn and Soya Bean

Mr. Speaker, Government's collaboration with the private sector to roll out a development programme for corn and soya bean has been very successful. Over the last three years, we invested over \$1.4 billion to develop the infrastructure within the Tacama area to support the cultivation and production targets. This saw the completion of the access road to Tacama, complemented by the now operational and very impressive drying and storage facility. Work has started on an access wharf at Tacama and is slated for completion in 2024. A sum of \$967.8 million is budgeted to improve the capacity of the Tacama facility.

Coconuts

Mr. Speaker, since returning to office, we have accelerated the development of the coconut industry bringing 31,500 acres into cultivation and establishing 10 additional coconut nurseries around the country to develop support services. In 2023, 40,000 seedlings were produced, and 13,000 high yielding coconut seed nuts were imported to improve coconut productivity across the country; 1,274 additional acres of coconuts were cultivated; and 297 farmers

benefitted from training. In 2024, Government will continue to accelerate coconut production by investing in 39,000 high yielding seed nuts, targeting 500 additional farmers. We will continue to pursue the conversion of coconut waste into value-added products. For this purpose, a sum of \$78 million is budgeted to support the coconut sector.

Citrus and Spices

In 2023, we distributed over 51,000 kilogrammes (kg) of planting materials for spices and 133,000 plantlets for citrus. Additionally, we invested in improving the processing capacity at Hosororo, Parika and Port Kaituma; these are slated for completion in 2024. We will distribute over 58,000 kg of planting materials for spices and 25,000 plantlets for citrus in 2024. Moreover, we will be introducing, for the first time, the distribution of planting materials for spices such as nutmeg, black pepper, and cinnamon. A sum of \$100 million is budgeted for these interventions.

High Value Crops

Mr. Speaker, in 2023, we procured an additional 200 shade houses as part of the Agriculture and Innovation Entrepreneurship Programme. These shade houses will benefit young agri-entrepreneurs and increase production of high value crops.

iv. Agro-Processing

Mr. Speaker, our Government's objective is to support the development of the agro-processing industry, including value-chain development and market expansion for our products, while creating opportunities for sustained livelihood for small entrepreneurs and communities.

In 2023, two refrigerated trucks were procured, the Orealla processing facility was rehabilitated; equipment was installed in agro-processing facilities at Mabaruma, Parika and Sophia; solar dyers were established at Crabwood Creek and Nappi; and new processing facilities were completed at Charity and White-Water Creek; additional works were advanced on the construction of a cold storage facility at Bartica; and solar dryers in Baracara, Cozier Canal and Kamarang; these are scheduled for completion in 2024. A sum of \$180 million was expended in 2023 to support activities in connection with agro-processing.

In 2024, we will continue to support the agro-processing industry. We will provide training to farmers and agro processors on a large scale. We will support postharvest management through storage facilities; we will help to

expand market opportunities including the establishment of 60 new Guyana Shop locations throughout the country. A sum of \$527.4 million is budgeted to support agro-processing.

v. Livestock

In livestock, in 2024, we aim to improve our services to the poultry industry through decentralised support facilities and production zones, the establishment of a modular duck processing facility, the development of 65-acre plots for pastures to enhance sheep production, and the upgrading of quarantine stations to prevent the entry of exotic animal diseases into the country. To this end, a sum of \$1.5 billion is budgeted.

vi. Fisheries and Aquaculture

In fisheries, we will continue to invest in the growth of brackish-water and vannamei shrimp production as well as propel the development of cage culture for tambaqui. A fish feed mill will be established at Mon Repos. This facility will support the production of both floating and sinking feed for fish and shrimp. The projected production capacity of the feed mill is currently two tons per hour to meet both current demand and future needs. A sum of \$1.2 billion has been allocated for fisheries and aquaculture development initiatives in 2024. **[Mr. Holder: Black belly sheep.]** You will hear about the blackbelly sheep. Sir, there is so much to be said within the agriculture sector that when my honourable leader... *[Interruption]* Might I remind you, Sir, that the distinguished Minister of Agriculture is the Executive Secretary of the People's Progressive Party; a man I am proud to call one of my leaders; a man that I am proud to call and serve as one of my Party's leaders. My colleague, the distinguished Minister of Agriculture, one of the distinguished leaders of the People's Progressive Party, will address you next week on the remarkable and exciting developments in every sub-sector of the agriculture sector, a sector that the APNU/AFC not only neglected, but actively endeavoured to destroy as an act of political vindictiveness. Not only has the People's Progressive Party/Civic Government resuscitated the agriculture sector and breathe life into it again, but today the agriculture sector is alive and well and growing and thriving and prospering.

vii. Drainage and Irrigation

Mr. Speaker, in 2024, on drainage and irrigation... *[Interruption]* I like it when they get agitated. I like it when they get restless and agitated. It is a sign of their resignation

to perpetual defeat. When they get agitated, they know they have no answer for this People's Progressive Party/Civic Government. In 2024, we will continue to invest in drainage and irrigation. We will purchase 40 mobile pumps to augment the other interventions we are implementing. We will begin work on at least two of the three Hope-like canal structures, bringing lasting relief to the citizens and farmers of Regions 5 and 6. **[Mr. Holder: Yuh ain't do it yet? In four years, yuh ain't do it yet?]** Sir, we built the Hope Canal in Region 4, but you would not be acquainted with that.

Mr. Speaker, for the two major investments to which I just alluded, for the purchase of 40 mobile pumps and for the work on the two Hope-like canals, sums totalling \$29.4 billion have been budgeted. In 2024, we will continue work on several other pump stations like at A-Line sluice, Belle Vue, Canal No. 1, Charity, Cottage, Cozier, Jimbo Grove, Letter Kenny, and Meten-Meer-Zorg; we will also invest in pump stations at Chesney, Farm and Grove South.

In 2024, we will continue to rehabilitate canals throughout the country, including areas such as: Big Baiboo, Brickery, Bushy Park and Coverden amongst others. A sum of \$72.3 billion is budgeted to upgrade and maintain the national drainage and irrigation network.

5.01 p.m.

e. Sustainable Tourism

Tourism has always been a sector in which we enjoy a comparative advantage with a world class product, but that sector has struggled over the years to realise its potential because of a few very specific constraints. Finally, those constraints are being overcome and the sector is poised for a dramatic takeoff. It is expected, in 2024, we will witness a truly historic year in relation to developments in the tourism sector for reasons I will shortly outline.

Before I do so, it is worthwhile to note that the number of arrivals in 2023 amounted to 319,056 visitors – the highest number ever. And amounting... **[Mr. Norton: It is Guyanese who are coming.]** Of course, it is Guyanese who are coming because they are coming now; during 2015 to 2020 they were going. Of course, it is Guyanese coming. **[Mr. Mahipaul: You went.]** My point precisely; I did go and I went on self-impose political exile because of the political persecution. I was a victim of political persecution by the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC). I will tell you this, I may have been a single

prominent person... [An Hon. Member (Opposition): You did not have the courage. You were weak. You ran away.] I cannot help it Hon. Member Mr. Duncan if you are unemployable anywhere in the world. You were unemployable at the Guyana Chronicle when APNU/AFC was in government. Sir, I cannot help it if I am employable in the world. I, Sir, have the good fortune that when my mother sent me to school I went to school. I am employable anywhere in the world. You are not even employable at the Guyana Chronicle when your own Government was in Office. Where is this young lady, Ms. Chandan-Edmond? Ms. Chandan-Edmond fired you; Ms. Chandan-Edmond fired him under APNU/AFC Government. [Mr. Duncan: You were weak.] Very good, Sir. Sir, I am hearing the heckles being led by a man who was fired for fraud by his own APNU/AFC Government. Let the record reflect that Ms. Chandan-Edmond fired him at the Guyana Chronicle – fired him for fraud at the Guyana Chronicle. He has the audacity to come here to heckle me.

Imagine, the Hon. Member Mr. Duncan fired by Ms. Chandan-Edmond when they were in Government for fraud at the Guyana Chronicle. Did you pay back the Guyana Chronicle money as yet? Did he pay back Chronicle yet? Where is Ms. Chandan-Edmond? [Mr. Duncan: You are weak.] Did Mr. Duncan pay back the Guyana Chronicle as yet? [Mr. Duncan: (Inaudible)] I am still there. You did not have the courage. I am still here. [Interruption]

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Mr. Speaker, I will also say this, this is how I will digress for a moment. This is how democracies work. Democracies work in the following manner; when an election either one proceeds to opposition or exits politics and do something else. One does not hold on to power with fingernails clinging for months. [Interruption]

[Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.]

Mr. Speaker, I will also say this, this is how I will digress for a moment. This is how democracies work. Democracies work in the following manner; when an election either one proceeds to opposition or exits politics and do something else. One does not hold on to power with fingernails clinging for months. [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, please, we owe it to the person on the floor to listen to him/her.

Dr. Singh: [Mr. Duncan: You did not steal anything, and they cannot promote you.] Apparently, the reminder of how Ms Chandan-Edmond disposed of him has agitated him a lot. Anyway, moving swiftly on to the tourism sector. As I indicated earlier, tourism is poised for an incredibly exciting takeoff in 2024 for the following reasons. The volume and cost of airlift into Guyana... [An Hon. Member (Opposition): (Inaudible)] You, Sir, would know this better than most because you were once a Minister of Tourism. ... has historically been one of the key factors

constraining growth in the tourism sector. In order to ensure the expansion of airline routes and seats volumes, our Government has maintained efforts to improve connectivity between Guyana and the rest of the world with new services and routes. Notably, in March, 2023, British Airways introduced a twice weekly service from London *via* St. Lucia; in September, 2023, Canada Jetlines in collaboration with Fly Always improve access to the Canadian market by introducing its twice weekly service to Toronto; and in December, 2023, Suriname Airways introduced a Bridgetown-Georgetown-Paramaribo Service. These new services as well as additional flights put on by current carriers together added 150,234 seats or 14% more than in 2022.

Looking ahead, United Airlines (UA) has announced the introduction of a service from Houston to Georgetown four times weekly to commence from April, 2024. This provides yet another route into the United States of America (USA) with improve connectivity to third cities in the USA and beyond and will ease the pressure and increase availability on existing Miami and New York Services. In June, 2024, American Airlines (AA) will expand its services with an additional daily flight between Miami and Georgetown. The new services by UA and AA will add 137,268 new seats to the market in 2024. These will make a huge impact on seat availability, pricing and commuter options and convenience.

Alongside airlift, hotel room capacity is also poised for a significant increase thereby addressing the second major constraint, that of the availability and cost of the international standard rooms. In this regard, our Government has actively worked to attract private investment in the industry, and I am happy to report that over 1,000 world class rooms will be added to the stock by the end of 2024. Importantly, many of these are from internationally recognised chains including an Aiden Best Western in Georgetown, expected to open its doors by May and add 150 rooms; a Marriot Courtyard at Timehri expected to open by August adding another 150 rooms; a Four Points Sheraton at Providence poised for completion by December adding 172 new rooms; an AC Marriott at Ogle expected to open its doors by December adding 152 new rooms; and a Hyatt Place at Providence on the East Bank of Demerara expected to open by December and adding 160 rooms and construction will continue on several other hotel properties.

In addition, we have trained over 6,000 persons in the sector in 2023. We will continue that training and work will commence in 2024 on the long-awaited tourism and hospitality institute. To this end, a sum of \$530 million is

allocated. [Mr. Norton: You said that last year.] I am well aware that I said that last year, which is why we undertook the procure... [Mr. Duncan: Promises; promises.] It is not like how you say... Sir, I should not allow myself to be distracted unduly but, of course, I said it last year. We do not change our tune every time we speak, unlike the Leader of the Opposition. [Mr. Ramson: ...or our name.] ...or our name.

f. Business Process Outsourcing

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is a major employer, which creates more jobs than most other sectors in the country and, in particular, jobs that are especially popular with the female work force and jobs that provides an important entry point into the world of work in a technology-based environment. Reflecting the sector's job creation potential our Government will continue to support the development and expansion of the sector in Guyana.

Since the liberalisation and creation of a competitive telecommunications sector, mere months after we resumed Office in 2020, we have seen an extremely significant reduction in the cost of bandwidth allowing for the expansion of the call centre industry and the promise of job creation. In 2019, call centres paid US\$950 per megabit of data, today that price is US\$50 megabit of data or lower. That is approximately 95% lower than it was in 2019. It has made communication cost in Guyana amongst the most competitive in the call centre industry small wonder then sir that the BPO industry has created almost 2,000 jobs since we returned in Office.

In 2023, in line with our Government's agenda to ensure development and job creation across the geographic spread, we have built four new call centre shells – two in Essequibo and two in Berbice – with all of these facilities expected to be operational in 2024.

5.16 p.m.

This direct intervention by Government has the potential to create 800 additional jobs within the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector, with the potential to scale up to 1,600. Facilities at Enmore and Tuschen are also being upgraded with each having the capacity to employ an additional 300 persons.

In 2024, our Government will construct two new call centres in Region 5, with a capacity to create an additional 800 jobs. We will continue to work with the industry to position Guyana as a preferred BPO destination.

g. Small Business Support

In addition to all of the investments that we are making in infrastructure such as energy infrastructure to reduce the cost of electricity and in order to position small businesses to take advantage of the opportunities that abound the following initiatives are being pursued: we are constructing, rehabilitating and upgrading industrial estates across the country. To this end we will commence industrial development in Wales and advance works in Regions 2 and 10 for which \$3.3 billion is allocated. We will support the availability of easy credit and grant support including through the provision of start-up grants and the operationalisation of the collateral guarantee programme to stimulate the growth of small businesses. A sum of \$450 million is allocated for the replenishment of the Small Business Development Fund and \$331 million for the Small Business Bureau for initiatives that will contribute to small and micro business development. We will continue to train small business owners. An additional 2,800 business owners will be trained in specialised business development programmes particularly in five key sectors: apiculture, farming, livestock, poultry rearing and microenterprise.

In addition, a number of other initiatives that we are implementing that will benefit small businesses include: the Electronic Single Window for Trade Transactions for which the sum of \$600 million is budgeted; the National Quality Infrastructure Laboratory currently under construction for which a sum of \$1.25 billion is budgeted; and the construction of the Food and Drug Laboratory for which a sum of \$500 million is budgeted.

D. Transformational Infrastructure

a. Energy Expansion and Diversification

Our objectives in this sector are to meet our short-term energy needs; invest in doubling our generating capacity for the medium term; advance the transition towards cleaner and more renewable energy; rebuild our transmission and distribution (T&D) network to offtake the projected increases in generating capacity; invest in mini-grid systems for remote communities; and deploy household level solutions for the less densely populated communities.

Some of our main initiatives are as follows: an additional 28.9 megawatts of emergency power which was procured last year at a cost of \$5.9 billion and is being installed at the Columbia substation to add to our baseload generating capacity will become fully operational by February, 2024;

works advanced on the construction of the flagship 300 megawatts gas-to-energy project. To facilitate this, the marine offloading facility was completed, and 26 kilometres (km) of onshore pipelines installed. This year, the gas-to-energy project will benefit from a budgetary allocation of \$80 billion to advance this project and its associated infrastructure.

Sustainable power from the 165 megawatts Amaila Falls Hydropower Project (AFHP) will augment our energy mix. In this regard, we went out for a Revised Request For Proposals (RFP) where 25 firms registered for the project of which four submitted pre-qualification documentations. These are currently being evaluated.

Work on the mini-hydropower facilities in Kumu and Moco-Moco were substantially advanced. This year, \$1.3 billion is budgeted to complete these facilities.

To prepare our offtake capacity for increased generation from multiple sources, we are replacing transformers, installing new distribution feeders and commenced works on a new 69 kilovolt (KV) transmission line from Kingston to Sophia. In relation to increasing solar power generating capacity a 1.5-megawatt solar farm was commissioned in Bartica. Work advanced on a 0.6-megawatt solar farm in Mahdia which will be completed in the first quarter of this year. Work will commence on a 10 megawatts solar farm in Berbice and eight megawatts solar farm in Essequibo and a 0.6 megawatt solar farm in Leguan. An amount of \$4.8 billion has been budgeted to finance these initiatives. Solar photovoltaic (PV) mini grids were installed in 21 communities, including such areas as: Baramita, Capoey, Kwebana, Orealla and Siparuta. These mini grids now supply renewable energy to 285 public and community buildings. The sum of \$350 million has been budgeted for new mini grid systems in a number of other locations. At the household level, in the off-grid hinterland and riverain communities, 26,398 solar panels were delivered bringing electricity to many of these homes for the very first time. In 2024, a further 3,602 solar panels will be distributed. To improve reliability, by reducing the voltage drop and network losses and also to improve access to electricity, \$180 million is also budgeted to upgrade the primary distribution networks at Ituni, Kumaka and Kwakwani.

Mr. Speaker, once these projects are all completed and many of them, as you know, including the larger ones are already in progress, we will be generating and delivering adequate electricity to meet our needs. We will be able to bring the cost of electricity down to half of what it currently is. With

these, in mind, a sum of \$95.7 billion is budgeted for the energy sector in 2024.

- b. Transport Infrastructure
- i. Roads and Bridges

Let me mention some of the major highlights in this sector, starting perhaps from the east and moving westwards and then southwards: In collaboration with our Surinamese counterparts, we advanced the procurement process for the new Corentyne River Bridge in 2023. We expect a contract will be signed and construction commenced in 2024. That is the Corentyne River Bridge.

On the Corentyne Highway, we are planning and budgeting for that road to be converted into a four-lane highway. Work has already commenced on the reconstruction of 99 structures and the removal of utilities from the right-of-way.

Across the Berbice River, despite the stellar service provided by the Berbice River Bridge since its completion by a previous People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) Government in collaboration with private partners, the demand for movement of goods particularly over the river is already exceeding the capacity for this bridge. Constantly, work has commenced to examine the possibility of a new high span bridge across the Berbice River.

On the East Coast Demerara to West Berbice corridor, we have already started upgrading the Railway Embankment Road into a four-lane highway, from Sheriff Street to Orange Nassau and continuing to the Mahaica River bridge. In 2024, a sum of \$10.5 billion is budgeted to continue these roads.

Continuing westwards, construction of the New Demerara River Bridge progressed significantly in 2023. *Budget 2024* includes a sum of \$19.7 billion to advance construction of this bridge.

On West Demerara and moving towards East Bank Berbice, works advanced on the construction of a new four-lane highway from Meer-Zorgen to Schoonord and from Schoonord to Crane. In the first half of this year, the Schoonord to Crane section of the highway will be completed. An amount of \$9 billion is budgeted to advance these works in 2024.

We are also developing the Parika to Goshen route and the Sand Hills to Makouria link which will facilitate movement from the Essequibo River to the Demerara River. Works

continue on clearing this alignment. An amount of \$1.5 billion has been budgeted to advance these works.

Returning to Demerara and looking southwards, works were completed on the Diamond to Grove bypass road to facilitate the upgrading of the East Bank Highway from Good Success to Timehri. An amount of \$4.1 billion has been allocated to advance this work.

As I mentioned earlier, works also continued on the construction of the East Coast to East Bank Road linkage from Ogle to Eccles. An amount of \$15.5 billion has been budgeted to advance that road.

We commissioned a new four-lane road as I mentioned earlier from Sheriff/Mandela all the way to Diamond. This year, we will continue the construction of the Diamond to Busby Dam Highway that will ultimately connect to the Busby Dam to Timehri's four-lane highway. An amount of \$8 billion is budgeted for this work to continue.

Additionally, rehabilitation of the Linden-Soesdyke Highway is expected to begin in 2024. The procurement process has already been launched and a sum of \$10 billion has been allocated to commence works in 2024. [Mr.

Norton: Is it two lanes?] I heard the Leader of the Opposition enquiring whether it is two lanes. I am tempted to ask him how many lanes the APNU/AFC built for the people of Linden between 2015 and 2020? How many lanes did the APNU/AFC build for five years, claiming to love the people of Linden? How many lanes were built by the APNU/AFC for the people of Linden in the five years they sat in Office? How many lanes of a bridge did they build by Wismar? How many lanes? Not even half of a lane. They did not build half of a lane. They did not build a bicycle bridge at Wismar. They claim to love the people of Linden. The Leader of the Opposition likes to claim to love the people of Linden. I know he did not have a real job for the five years between 2015 and 2020. I do not know why Brigadier (Ret'd) Granger exercised that judgement. I know the Leader of the Opposition, during 2015 to 2020 and during the Brigadier (Ret'd) Granger's presidency did not really have a real job. The Party with which he is associated while they were in Government – I know that he did not particularly have any influential position in the Government – and the party of which he was once the General Secretary, did not build even a bicycle bridge at Wismar.

5.31 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, when one loses an election, one demits office gracefully and one moves on sometimes to other pursuits in life. That is what people do in a democracy. Look around the world, when one believes in democracy and loses an election, the person demits office gracefully and moves on to do something else in life. One does not cling to government because of being incapable of doing anything else. Some of us exited Office gracefully in 2015. [Mr. Duncan: They run away. They are weak.] You tried to rig the elections to hold on to power because you were hoping to get back your Guyana chronicle work, just as you are hoping that Ms. Chandan-Edmond would have reversed the dismissal. That is why you were holding on and rigging. Some of us demitted Office in 2015; all of us demitted Office in the People's Progressive Party/Civic gracefully. Some of us returned to Parliament and some of us moved on to other pursuits. That is what people do; that is what people do in a democracy.

Moving swiftly on, when we lost the elections in 2015 – I want to place this on record in this National Assembly – I demitted Office and exited politics. I was living my life quietly, earning a living quietly as a private citizen. Mr. Speaker, do you know who brought me back to Guyana? The A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance For Change brought me back to Guyana. When they did that and imposed political persecution against me, I vowed to them that I will devote the rest of my life to keep them out of Office and so I will do. I was happily and quietly living my life. They brought me back. [Mr. Duncan: Shame.] You brought me back and I will spend the rest of my life keeping you there. [Mr. Duncan: You can run away again.] You brought me back. I left quietly. [Mr. Duncan: You ran away.] I left quietly, while minding my own business. They brought me back. Now that they have brought me back, I will stay here and I will keep them out of government for the rest of my life.

Do not worry, Sir, he does not need me, some of them do not need me to keep them out of government. Ms. Chandan-Edmond put him out of government. Ms. Chandan-Edmond and Lt. (Ret'd) Harmon put him out of government. [Mr. Duncan: Yet, I am here, Dr. Singh. I did not run away. I am still standing toe to toe with the PPP/C.] Anyway, moving swiftly on. [Mr. Duncan: You do not have the courage, Dr. Singh. You are weak. You do not have the testicular fortitude, Dr. Singh. You are weak and you ran away. Bishop Edghill stayed; Ms. Manickchand stayed and you ran away. You are weak. You are half of a man.] I will move swiftly on, Sir. [Mr. Duncan: You have to stand like a man. He is a weak man.] I never knew that the

termination by Ms. Chandan-Edmond was such a sore point for the Hon. Member. I never knew it was such a sore point, but it is useful to know that it is such a sore point. Perhaps, I should look into this matter more closely to understand fully why it is such a sore point.

Moving swiftly on, construction of the new Wismar Bridge, the very bridge to which I referred to a few minutes ago, is expected to begin in 2024 for which we have budgeted a sum of \$4.2 billion.

In addition to those major highways and bridges, we have been upgrading community roads and streets in every village. In 2023, we spent \$60.7 billion on community roads. In 2024, we have budgeted a further sum of \$73.2 billion for community roads. This will see hundreds of community roads rehabilitated in each region, totalling thousands along the length and breadth of coastal Guyana.

In 2024, we will continue our investments on hinterland roads for which a sum of \$5.5 billion is budgeted.

In 2024, also given the upgrades that are being done to our roads network. Recognising that the vast upgrades that are being done to our roads network, raised the issue of road safety. This year our Government will be implementing a robust road safety and traffic management plan. This plan includes the implementation of information technology solutions to manage traffic, including the development of a new radar system and new and supportive laws and regulations. These interventions are, of course, aimed at improving discipline and reducing carnage on our roadways.

With all of these objectives and major projects in mind to upgrade our roads and bridges network, a total of \$204.1 billion has been allocated.

ii. Air Transport

In 2024, \$2.3 billion has been allocated towards completion of a number of airstrips on which we have already commenced work, as well as rehabilitation and maintenance of several others. These include Imbaimadai, Kaieteur, Kaikan and Matthew's Ridge.

iii. River Transport

In 2023, we spent a sum of \$8 billion on our river transport facilities. Some of the key initiatives undertaken in 2023 and budgeted for in 2024 are as follows: the commissioning of course of the Ma Lisha which is now already plying the route; works on the ML Thompson, ML David P. Seamang

and Splitbarge and dry docking of the MV Sandaka were all completed. This year, rehabilitation works on the MV Malali, Makouria and Barima will be done for which \$405 million has been budgeted; a number of stelling are already underway and additional rehabilitation works on locations such as Parika, Supenaam and Wakenaam will be undertaken, for which purpose \$2.7 billion has been budgeted; in 2023, we completed the procurement of a tug where that vessel is expected to arrive shortly and will enhance our navigation services; and we will also construct and rehabilitate navigational aids. A sum of \$950 million has been allocated to support navigational aid interventions.

Also, *Budget 2024* includes \$8.1 billion to improve river transportation.

c. Sea and River Defence

It needs no elaboration that rise in sea levels pose a threat to our coastal plain. In response to this, we have embarked on a multi-faceted approach to reinforced coastal resistance. In 2024, a sum of \$6.9 billion is budgeted towards enhancing the resilience of our sea defence structures. Works will commence on such areas as Bygeval, Cane Garden, Fairfield, Grove, La Resource, Springlands, Uitvlugt, Leguan and Wakenaam, amongst others.

E. Investing in Our People

a. Health

As is the case with every other sector, the health sector is currently undergoing a major transformation.

Facilities, Equipment and Drugs

With the aim of expanding and upgrading health facilities and diagnostic capabilities, key initiatives include: the construction of a world class paediatric and maternal hospital in Ogle has commenced and will continue in 2024 for which a sum of \$10.3 billion has been budgeted; I believe last weekend, if I am not mistaken on Sunday the ground was just broken for a new world class hospital at New Amsterdam for which \$6.2 billion has been budgeted; construction has commenced and is being advanced on six Regional Hospitals at Bath, De Kendren, Diamond, Enmore, Lima and Number 75 Village and will continue in 2024 and \$15.5 billion has been provided in 2024; Bartica, Suddie and West Demerara Hospitals will be upgraded at an estimated cost of \$10 billion; hospitals will be constructed at Kamarang, Kato, Moruca, as well as the upgrade of the Lethem Regional Hospital, at a cost of \$1.5 billion in 2024

and the retrofitting of health centres, health posts and other health facilities and rehabilitation will continue countrywide, and \$5 billion has been budgeted to finance these interventions.

To ensure adequate capabilities in terms of medical and non-medical equipment, the sum of \$2.9 billion has been budgeted for expansion of our equipment inventory.

Human Resource Capacity

Like many developing countries around the world, Guyana continues to be challenged by competition for the services of our healthcare professionals, especially the nurses. As we would all know, many of the major metropolises are actively recruiting nurses from jurisdictions, such as ours and we are not immune from that global phenomenon. In relation to our healthcare professionals, we are investing heavily in the training of healthcare professionals, including nurses with the construction of two new health science training facilities – one at Suddie and one at New Amsterdam. I believe the one at Suddie also recently had a breaking of the ground or turning of the sod just a couple days ago. I saw my Colleague, the distinguished Minister of Health, leading that activity.

In 2023, there was an intake of over 2,000 students to the medical services programme and in 2024 a cohort of over 3,500 students of which approximately 2,000 relate to persons enrolled in the nursing programme. We have said publicly, anybody who has the qualifications and wishes to be trained as a nurse need only to apply, will be accepted and will be trained by the Government to become a nurse, as anybody suitably qualified who meets the entry requirements.

5.46 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I will say this, Sir, even if we are training for exports, they are Guyanese people and we the People's Progressive Party will train them. APNU/AFC refused to train them because you do not want to lose them. They are Guyanese and we will train them. They may be employable in Guyana or they may be employable somewhere else, but they are Guyanese, and we will not deny them the training opportunity. We have also increased the number of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals under several bilateral agreements and arrangements, including our arrangement with the Cuban Medical Brigade who have provided excellent service to Guyana over the years, from 192 in 2023 to a projected 500 in 2024.

Chronic Diseases

Under chronic diseases, we have a comprehensive agenda addressing a number of diseases, including diabetes and the full rollout of the Lusignan Centre, including of course, that we have ramped up screening for non-communicable diseases. In 2023, we screened over 54,000 persons, in 2024, we are planning to reach as much as 70,000 persons to be screened. I want, in particular, to mention that we will be ramping up, significantly, screening for cervical cancer amongst our women folk, including expanding services to include Human Papillomavirus (HPV) testing. I wish to announce that an amount of \$3.8 billion has been allocated in this year's budget for a dedicated intervention to ramp up capabilities to detect and fight cervical cancer – \$3.8 billion.

Communicable Diseases

We continue to execute programmes which seek to mitigate the spread of transmissible diseases, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), tuberculosis, leprosy, filaria and Hepatitis C, including the rollout of programmes for treatment of viral Hepatitis C; the distribution of long-lasting insecticidal mosquito nets as protection against Malaria. We anticipate a mass distribution of insecticidal nets, and anti-malarial insecticidal nets. In 2024, we anticipate over 130,000 persons will benefit in Regions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Maternal and Child Health

Apart from the maternal and child hospital, to which I have just alluded, which of course constitutes the major investment in this sub-sector, we continue our school's health programme to screen and provide the relevant follow-up for nursery school students. To date, 11,205 students have been screened with 350 accessing post-services, in 2024, we will expand this service to primary schools and we are hoping to reach 87,000 students. We have also introduced such initiatives as maternal waiting homes, as well as training of traditional birth attendants which has led to a reduction in maternal mortality in Regions 1 and 8, which, in fact, recorded 0 deaths in 2023.

Mr. Speaker for the continued transformation of the health sector into one which ultimately meets world class standards, in 2024, we have provided a budgetary allocation of \$129.8 billion.

b. Education

I turn now, Sir, to education. It goes without saying that education is absolutely critical to the realisation of our

national objectives. Not only ensuring that every single Guyanese person of working age has an adequate opportunity to acquire the skills that are needed to participate meaningfully in the world of work but, also, ensuring that the new and emergent economy has an adequate supply of skilled labour and labour with relevant skills. In 2023, the sum of \$105 billion was spent by the education sector. I wish to address some of the main interventions under the following broad categories.

Ensuring Access by Upgrading and Expanding Schools Infrastructure

We have set ourselves an objective to achieve and maintain. I believe, in relation to primary, we have achieved and in secondary we are well on our way to achieving universal access to education. This requires, at a minimum, adequate places in the school system across our national geography, bearing in mind, of course, the geographic distribution of our population. We will, we have been, and we will continue to invest in adequate schools' infrastructure to ensure that every single child has a comfortable place in nursery, primary and secondary education. The key interventions are as follows:

In 2023, we completed several new secondary schools countrywide, including Abram Zuil, Good Hope, Yarrowkabra and St. Roses High and annexes at the Bishop's High and Queen's College, amongst others. We advanced works at Christ Church, Hosororo, Karasabai, North Ruimveldt, North West, St. Mary's and Tuschen secondary schools, as well as St. George's High, amongst others. We will continue works on all of these buildings in 2024, and we will begin secondary schools at other locations, including Aishalton, Christianburg, Jawalla, Kopinang and Micobie, amongst others. Sums totalling more than \$16 billion, have been allocated for secondary school buildings.

Primary schools were completed at Arthurville on the Wakenaam Island and in Tuschen in 2023. In 2024, construction will begin at Augsbury, Kuribrong, Lake Mainstay, Pennack, Red Creek, amongst others. Over \$3.1 billion has been budgeted for primary school buildings in 2024.

In 2023 Providence and St. Gabriel's nursery schools were completed. In 2024, construction will begin at other locations that include Foulis, Mibicuri and Tuschen. Over \$3 billion has been budgeted for nursery school buildings.

Further, of course, rehabilitative work will be done on dormitories and teachers living quarters.

Mr Speaker, [**Mr. Norton: (Inaudible)**] I am not sure, Sir. The Leader of the Opposition is anxious for me to stay the course because he would not want me to repeat what I think I just heard him say. The Leader of the Opposition very quickly said to me, 'stay the course' because he does not want me to repeat what I believe I heard him say. Hon. Leader of the Opposition, because you are the Leader of the Opposition, I will stay the course, Sir, and return to my speech. Sir, notwithstanding that we might be on opposite sides of the House, those of us on this side of the House are still capable of displaying some amount of respect, and you are the Leader of the Opposition, Sir, so, I will pretend that I did not hear what you said and move on. [*Interruption*] Very well, Hon. Leader of the Opposition. Towards the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of school buildings and educational facilities, a total of \$28.7 billion has been budgeted.

Promoting Attendance and Attentiveness through Cash Transfers and School Feeding

In 2023, the Because We Care cash grant and uniform grant benefited over 201,000 public and private school students at a cost of \$8.1 billion. Distribution of those grants will continue in 2024, and we expect some 205,000 students will benefit.

In 2023, we introduced school grants for schools to purchase supplies for their classrooms at a cost of \$898.2 million, benefitting 182,672 children. In 2024, the sum of \$3.1 billion is budgeted for the distribution of school grants.

The National School Feeding programme in 2023 benefitted 85,000 children at a cost of \$2.6 billion. In 2024, Sir, a sum of \$4.9 billion is budgeted to continue rollout and to expand that programme to provide juice, biscuits, breakfast and hot meals to some 126,000 children.

Improving Availability of Textbooks

Mr. Speaker, to support our Government's efforts towards world class education, we have mandated that all students have access to the required textbooks for all subjects. In this regard, in 2023, a total of 619,060 textbooks were procured for the primary and secondary levels at a total of \$3.3 billion. In 2024, an additional 502,072 more textbooks will be purchased at a cost of \$3 billion.

Tertiary Education

The University of Guyana

Mr. Speaker, the University of Guyana continues to be our national university graduating in 2023 a total of 3,520 students amongst whose graduates over 70% were employed at the time of graduation. In 2024, they will offer new programmes in a number of areas. We are, Sir, currently investing in major new health sciences education building, critical for the preservation of the certification of the medical school, and by extension the certification of the doctors we've produced at that school. In 2024, a sum of \$4.1 billion is budgeted to support UG's operations.

Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL)

Also, recognising, Sir, that not every student or potential student in Guyana has access to the bricks and mortar campuses at Turkeyen and at Tain, it would be known that we implemented the Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) Scholarship programme that has brought university level education into the homes of Guyanese families throughout the length and breadth of our country. In 2023, a total of 7,752 scholarships were granted, bringing the total since the programme started, to 21,442, exceeding our Manifesto target of 20,000. Over the last 3 years, 3,431 persons graduated from GOAL. We will introduce 160 new programmes in general and vocational, bachelor's and master's degrees. In 2024, an amount of \$4 billion is allocated for GOAL to support 6,000 new students and 3,967 continuing students.

6.01 p.m.

Strategic partnership with international providers

A bulk licensing arrangement has been concluded with international provider COURSERA. This will allow us to train up to 450,000 persons in a wide range of areas where skills gaps exist, especially in the public sector, including such areas as childcare and protection, human resources management, mental health, psychology, procurement and customer service. An amount of \$350 million has been budgeted for this purpose.

We will also train 1,000 persons in relevant aspects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to take up high value outsourcing ICT-based nearshore jobs. This initiative will cost an estimated \$735 million over a two-year period. Budgetary provisions have been made in 2024 to commence the first batch of training.

Technical and Vocational Training

Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) becomes a much higher priority to bridge the skills gap in the labour market and to increase employability in Guyana's economy of today. Some of the critical TVET interventions include:

Training of persons under the Board of Industrial Training (BIT). In 2023, we trained 4,439 persons. In 2024, we will train another 7,890 persons in such areas as electrical installation, plumbing, furniture making, general building construction, heavy-duty equipment operation, *et cetera*. A sum of \$500 million has been budgeted to provide this training.

We will expand the number of training programmes offered for Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs) from 88 to 111. The TVET online platform will be implemented in seven secondary schools. A new TVET policy for the medium term will be developed to define and govern skills development systems for post-secondary, tertiary, formal, non-formal and informal sectors.

Most importantly, in 2024, phase 1 of the Guyana Technical Training College (G TTC) at Port Mourant, which will include the national oil and institute, will be operationalised. A total of 25 students will form the first cohort and will commence specialised factor simulation training in mechanical, electrical and instrumentation. When completed in six months, these students will be ready to take up employment in the oil and gas industry. The second batch will be recruited in August, and we will add to their curriculum building and construction technology... [An Hon. Member: [(Inaudible)... year.] ...To begin with. Several other technical institutions will be rehabilitated, upgraded, and equipped. A total of \$2.3 billion has been allocated to support technical and vocational interventions.

The education sector, in 2024, with the aim of realising our vision of world class education right here in Guyana and throughout the length and breadth of Guyana, has been allocated [Ms. McDonald: Stay the course.] The Hon. Member, Ms. Coretta McDonald, realised that she just made a statement about the people she is supposed to represent, but I will stay the course, on your advice. Your comment Mr. Leader of the Opposition applies and is ... Let me not say what I want to say. To realise our vision of world class education, our Government will invest, in 2024, \$135.2 billion.

c. Housing

I turn now to housing and water. Yet another sector that is going through a meteoric transformation coming back from its non-existence during 2015 to 2020 and resuming the People's Progressive Party/Civic's previous outstanding work in developing new housing areas, allocating house lots and providing support for home ownership. Over 30,000 house lots were allocated since we took Office, and we are well on our way to exceeding our target of 50,000 lots during our first term in Office. We delivered, ask, what is her name again, Ms. Annette Ferguson.

We delivered 6,822 land titles and transports to residents since we took Office in 2020. We will deliver another 5,000 in 2024.

We are continuing to build affordable homes to support all income categories. Since assuming Office, we completed 1,165 homes. Works are ongoing for the construction of 1,134.

For low-income earners, we have completed 706 homes in a number of areas such as, Anna Catherina, Edinburg, Great Diamond, Leonora, Lethem, Nappi, Ordnance Fortlands, *et cetera*. Works are in progress on another 487 homes in other locations.

For moderate-income earners, 370 houses were completed at Amelia's Ward, Cummings Lodge and Little Diamond, and works are ongoing for the construction of another 222.

For young professionals, 89 homes were completed, while works are in progress for the construction of 425 additional homes at La Bonne Intention (LBI), Little Diamond, Prospect and Providence.

Under the Lethem Housing Support Initiative, 320 persons prequalified for loans, 100 loan applications were approved, 12 homes were completed, and 36 homes are currently being constructed.

Infrastructural works will continue to be done in several areas, including, again Amelia's Ward, Balthyock, Burma, Charity, De Kinderen, Golden Grove, Good Hope, Great Diamond, Hope and others.

We also launched our supporting housing assistance programme by distributing vouchers. Over 962 vouchers were issued to date at the value of \$131.6 million.

The single-window approval system for building permits will also assist this Information Technology (IT) platform,

once completed, will aid with the efficiency of the approval process for construction permits.

In 2023, the sum of \$52.7 billion was spent for the construction of roads, drains and bridges in the respective housing areas. In 2024, the sum of \$78 billion is allocated to further develop housing infrastructure country wide.

d. Water and Sanitation

Since taking Office, our Government has made significant investments in the water sector to improve water quality and supply systems across the country.

Access to Potable Water

Extension of the transmission and distribution (TD) networks were completed in several unserved areas. Works are continuing on the TD mains at Annandale, Cotton Tree, El Dorado, Fellowship, New Amsterdam and Providence to benefit approximately 72,000 residents. In 2024, works will advance on the drilling of wells in a number of locations, including Bamia, Caledonia, Lima and Onderneeming and will commence at Fellowship, Timehri and Vergenoegen.

Mr. Speaker, you will receive a written speech with all of this fleshed out in abundant detail in keeping with the People's Progressive Party/Civic's governance long and rich tradition of transparency in Government. To further improve the hinterland water supply, the following are key interventions: A total of 31 new wells were drilled in 2023.

Works on the upgrade and extension of water supply systems were completed in a number of areas: Kumu, Moco Moco, Mountain Foot, *et cetera*.

Works are ongoing and progressing at Kara... I am going to skip that one because I think I have a typographical mistake and it is misspelled and I do not want to call the wrong location.

At the end of 2023, hinterland water coverage stood at 82% compared to 46% at the end of 2020. We have raised it from 46% to 82% in the space of three years. To further improve hinterland water supply systems in 2024, we have allocated \$1.5 billion to install systems at a number of locations such as Baracara, Kimbia, Santa Cruz, Santa Mission, St. Ignatius and others.

Water Quality and Service

In 2023, works advanced on the upgrading of 12 existing water treatment plants. These will now be completed in

2024. Construction commenced on seven new water treatment plants which will be substantially completed in 2024. Procurement has been launched to construct another five water treatment plants at Adventure, Bath, Leguan, Maria's Delight and Wakenaam. For these and other interventions aimed at improving water quality, a sum of \$14 billion has been budgeted.

Sanitation

We recognise, of course, the importance of solid waste management. We have invested heavily to ensure timely collection and disposal of garbage. In 2023, a total of \$1.9 billion was expended towards infrastructural developments, including the construction of an access road at the Blairmont Sanitary Landfill Site facility, upgrade of the landfill site at Bon Success, completion of the storm water ponds and landfill gas management system at Haags Bosch, amongst others.

In 2024, we have budgeted \$2.6 billion to further advance our Government's efforts to upgrade solid waste infrastructure and other initiatives which include: \$1.3 billion for infrastructural, environmental, and capacity building support and the continued operation of landfill sites. \$572 million for the continued upgrade of the Haags Bosch Sanitary Landfill Site, including the completion of a semi-aerobic cell. Upgrade of landfill sites at several areas and the procurement of waste management equipment, including such equipment as a tyre shredder, water and air quality testing equipment and stationary compactor bins.

e. Culture and Arts

I turn now to culture and the arts. We believe that we must actively work to harness the collective energies of our people, imbued with national pride in our rich and comparable natural and beautifully diverse cultural heritage. In that regard, the provision of adequate financial resources for the promotion of the arts, culture and heritage and the preservation of our monuments and historic sites is a commitment that guides this Government's initiatives within this area.

Mr. Speaker, 2023 saw major initiatives in our culture and arts sector. We spent over \$130 million on restoring major sites, monuments, forts and historic buildings. We hosted, at the Caribbean Premier League (CPL), a cricket carnival half time show. Over 86 local artistes had the opportunity to showcase their talents for the world to see. A number of persons benefitted from the Cultural and Creative Industries

Grant – 30 persons in 2023 and another 30 in 2024. We held culture camps across all our regions where 400 young people were exposed to techniques in music, *et cetera*.

In 2024, we have budgeted \$2.7 billion for the continuous development of culture and arts, including provision for a new art gallery and museum, outfitting of community spaces for cultural performances and continuing the ongoing initiatives mentioned earlier. Of this amount, a sum of \$100 million has been budgeted to support activities associated with the observance of the International Decade for People of African Descent.

6.16 p.m.

f. Sports

Mr. Speaker, like in so many other sectors, our sports infrastructure, which is so critical to our young people, is undergoing its sharpest and greatest transformation in the history of our country. More is being invested to ensure that our citizens and, in particular, our young people have access to world-class sporting facilities. Some of the main initiatives in the sector include:

Under strategic partnerships with international and corporate partners, we are constructing two major international stadiums at Palymra in Region 6 and at Crane in Region 3. Work has already commenced at Palmyra.

We have resurfaced the Leonora Track and Field Centre, completed synthetic track in Region 10, while the synthetic track in Region 6 is expected to be completed in 2024.

We have installed international standard floodlights at Anna Regina Multipurpose facility, Uitvlugt Community Ground and Synthetic Tracks in Regions 6 and 10, while installation at Bayroc will be completed in 2024.

We have also been upgrading grounds throughout the country, with \$1.2 billion already expended on over 250 grounds across the 10 regions of Guyana. In 2024, a further \$1 billion has been allocated to continue this work on upgrading our grounds. *Budget 2024* allocates \$4.6 billion for the advancement of sports in our country.

g. Youth

I turn now to youth – our young people. They are of course the backbone of our country, the future – our future. We continue to place the highest level of emphasis on training, capacity building, creation of opportunities for our young men and women across every sector, whether it be education

and the educational and skills training opportunities that we are providing our young people and on which I have already elaborated extensively.

On top of those initiatives in education, ICT, tourism, health, human services and Amerindian Affairs, *Budget 2024* provides a sum of \$1.1 billion to advance specific youth development initiatives nationwide. These include the continuation of the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CTVET) accredited training programmes in areas such as Carpentry, Electrical Installation, Masonry and Plumbing at the Georgetown Training College; the establishment of robotic hubs and training of trainers in robotics; the holding of the National Youth Science Fair and Exhibition; and, importantly, participation in the President's Youth Award Programme.

In order to provide additional technical and vocational options for our youths, we will continue to upgrade such centres such as the Coldingen Training Centre, Kuru-Kuru Training Centre, Georgetown Training Centre, Vryman's Erven Training Centre and Smyth Field Drop-In Centre, amongst others.

h. Children

Mr. Speaker, here again, in addition to the interventions that have already been outlined in the education sector, a number of other specific targeted interventions are planned and budgeted for in 2024. We have provided a sum of \$1.4 billion in 2024 to pursue such ongoing and new initiatives as the following:

Creation of safe spaces and better care facilities for the children of working parents through the construction of day and night care centres in Regions 3 and 4 and the rehabilitation and upgrade of the Sophia Car Centre and the Mahaica Children's Home. A sum of \$287 million is budgeted for these interventions.

We are developing, upgrading and licensing childcare facilities to operate within approved standards. In that regard, 308 daycare facilities were licensed and in 2023. In 2024, an additional 123 facilities will be licensed.

We are training women in early childhood development and in childcare, having already trained 253 and 922 in those two areas, respectively.

We are providing childcare subsidies to the most vulnerable benefitting 460 children. In 2024, we anticipate that this initiative will benefit another 700 children.

In relation to the prevention of child abuse, we have intensified the Every Child Safe campaigns which provided parental training and psycho-social and other social support for abused children.

i. Senior citizens

I have already elaborated the investments we are making in such areas as the public health care system, which provides critical care to all our citizens not least our elderly. A number of specific interventions are being implemented. I will mention just some of these. We continue to pay the Old Age Pension (OAP) to some 73,000 pensioners with the total pension payout amounting, in 2023, to some \$27.1 billion. We continue to provide subsidised water charges to our pensioners. We provided home-based care to 6,167 elderly persons. We anticipate in 2024, 8,500 individuals will benefit from this service. We trained 736 persons under the Women's Innovation and Investment Network (WIIN) Programme to provide care services to the senior citizens population in all 10 regions.

Mr. Speaker, in 2024, construction of a new care home for senior citizens at Enmore is expected to commence, for which \$172 million has been budgeted.

j. Women and Gender

In addition to the 5,731 women awarded scholarships for academic training through the Guyana Online Academy of Learning, another 4,562 were trained under WIIN and Board of Industrial Training (BIT) programmes. We expect an additional 10,900 women to be trained in 2024 in a wide range of areas.

In 2023, 225 women were provided support to register their business, an additional 700 are expected to benefit in 2024. Furthermore, Sir, start-up business kits will be provided to new entrepreneurs.

k. Persons with Disabilities

A Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Support Unit was established within the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security in 2023 for the development of policies, and the coordination and monitoring of related programmes. Registration of persons with disabilities will continue countrywide so that we can provide the requisite services to all eligible persons. Over 19,000 permanently disabled persons benefitted from the \$16,000 per month public assistance social transfer as well as the one-off cash grant of \$35,000 each.

In 2023, 98 persons with disabilities received training in the job access with speech programme and computer skills at the newly constructed Mahaica Disability Complex and, in 2024, an additional 396 persons with disabilities will receive this training.

Four hundred and sixty-five persons received assistive aids, another 600 will receive those aids in 2024. Nine buses were procured in 2023 and will be delivered in 2024 to facilitate transportation of persons with disabilities, Sir.

Mr. Speaker in 2023, 797 children received special needs services and 2,299 teachers were trained in Special Education Needs/Disabilities at the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE). This will continue in 2024. These represent, Sir, only a selection of the interventions that we are implementing.

1. Victims of Domestic Violence

We continue to stand resolutely against domestic violence, improving access to legal aid services, strengthening and enforcing legislation on trafficking in persons (TIP), amongst other interventions. We have been updating the legal framework to provide strengthened safeguards against domestic violence and trafficking in persons. In this regard, the Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act, which was passed in 2023, provides comprehensive measures to combat TIP. A Family Violence Bill and a Protection from Harassment Bill have been drafted and will be placed for consideration on the legislative agenda.

Two domestic violence shelters were upgraded and expanded in Regions 2 and 6. Over 10,500 persons were trained and sensitised on sexual offences and domestic violence prevention, amongst other interventions including, of course, our collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGO).

Notably, Guyana maintained Tier 1 ranking in the 2023 United States (US) State Department Human Trafficking Report.

Mr. Speaker in 2023, Government expended the sum of \$38.2 billion to pursue initiatives in human and social services. In 2024, a sum of \$48.3 billion is budgeted to continue ongoing and new initiatives.

m. Amerindian and Hinterland Development

Mr. Speaker, we remain unwavering in our commitment to our Amerindian brothers and sisters and to delivering

development in every single community in our country, irrespective of how far away that community may be or how isolated that community may be from the coastland. In pursuit of these objectives, some of our principal interventions include:

Supporting the governance structures, including the National Toshaos Council (NTC). It will be recalled that we completed the NTC Secretariat building last year at a total cost of \$147.8 million. This beautiful edifice now provides the council with a suitable venue to convene and discuss key matters. We support the NTC in convening their annual conference and in providing close Government engagement with the elected leaders of our Amerindian villages during their conference. An amount of \$100 million is provided in 2024 to support the hosting of the National Toshaos Conference.

Our Amerindian brothers and sisters, having spent five years from 2015 to 2020 languishing without a land titling programme that had been abandoned although the resources had already been mobilised under the original Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS), happily, Sir, the land titling programme, financed under the Guyana Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) Initiative and the original Low Carbon Development Strategy, was resumed when we returned to Office. Mr. Speaker in 2023, this important and critical land titling programme spent \$111 million and in 2024, we are projecting to spend \$800 million.

6.31 p.m.

In pursuit of sustainable village economies, Presidential Grants continue to be delivered to each Amerindian community, and support provided for various economic initiatives. We have budgeted sums totalling \$3.4 billion for these projects in our Amerindian villages.

Direct employment and skills training opportunities are provided through the Community Service Officers, popularly known as the CSO Programme. It would be recalled that more than 1000 CSOs were callously terminated by the APNU/AFC. We restored the programme immediately upon returning to Office. In 2024, an amount of \$1.2 billion is budgeted for this programme which is expected to benefit over 2600 persons – our bright, young CSOs in our Amerindian villages.

Under our Low Carbon development Strategy, 15% of the proceeds of the sale of our carbon credits is earmarked for

Amerindian villages, in particular, to finance their Village Sustainability Plans (VSPs) – as it is abbreviated – developed by the villages. In 2023, support was provided for every village to develop a VSP and open its own bank account. In 2023, amounts totalling \$4.7 billion, representing 15% of the carbon credit sales receipts to date, were transferred to bank accounts owned by these Amerindian villages. [Mr. Duncan: It is not controlled by a lot of them.] Owned and controlled. In 2024, a further amount of \$2.7 billion is expected to be transferred from our carbon credit sales to our Amerindian villages. In total... [Interruption]

I hear the Hon. Member whose name I am trying to... My eyes are not as good as they used to be. Is that the Hon. Member...? Usually, I hear the name *Kazak*, but I am not sure if that is his real name. The Hon. Member, who is called *Kazak* and whose name I must admit I do not know or recall, is asking about more. I am interested to enquire how much was delivered to the Amerindian villages when he was entrusted with the task of delivering grants to communities that never received them. The track record is there for all to see how much was delivered during 2015 to 2020 to our Amerindian villages, compared to how much we are now delivering to our Amerindian brothers and sisters – whether it be Presidential Grants, the sale of carbon credits or our other national programmes. [An. Hon. Member: I want to hear about the Amerindian Hostel in Georgetown. It is in total disarray.] I do not know if this is the gentleman who was rumoured to be involved in the Sustainable Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Development (SLED) programme in Region 9. Is it the same individual? Anyway, let us move on. If this is the same individual, who is rumoured to be responsible for the SLED programme in Region 9... [Mr. Duncan: I thought you just said that you do not know the fellow.] I do not know his name, but they call him *Kazak*. I wonder if it is the Member of Parliament (MP) who answers to the name *Kazak*. [An. Hon. Member: It is Hon. Kazak.] I wonder if it is the Hon. Kazak who was responsible for the SLED programme in Region 9 who has the audacity to come in this House and ask about what is being done for Amerindian villages. [Interruption]

In total, including the carbon credit sales.... [An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] I do not know why they call the man *Kazak*. I do not even know what *Kazak* is, to be frank with you. I do not know why they call the man *Kazak*. Moving swiftly on, Sir... [An. Hon. Member: (Inaudible)] Must ask Mr. Ramjattan about that night. You are smiling. Mr. Ramjattan, must tell them about that night. I

see that you are smiling. [Mr. Duncan: He helped you out.] That is what you think. Why do you not ask him privately? [Mr. Duncan: He helped you out.] Why do you not ask him privately? [Mr. Duncan: He helped you out; we know.] You should ask Mr. Ramjattan privately about that night. I am moving on, though. Mr. Ramjattan, I will move on. I will move on. In total, including the carbon credit sales just referred to, an amount of \$9 billion is allocated for Amerindian development programmes.

F. Improved Governance and Institutional Reforms

a. Governance

I turn now to improved governance and institutional reforms. This Government's hallmark has been to consistently embrace democracy, constitutionality, rule of law, transparency and accountability, inclusion, and participation. We champion these principles within the context of a united people, *One Guyana*, and the oneness of our nation.

We have established the national coordinating committee with regards to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption and the United Nations (UN) Convention against Corruption, which is headed at a ministerial level and comprises 17 agencies. The committee reviews anti-corruption methodologies, laws, practices, and the conventions and examines the recommendations to strengthen anti-corruption framework and practices. We have also established a national mechanism for reporting and following up on obligations under international conventions with respect to human rights with representation from 16 Government agencies. Later this year, we will launch an international certificate programme on international human rights law which will be conducted under a hybrid model.

Developing mechanisms for collaboration between ministries and agencies, particularly those dealing with governance, human rights and anti-corruption, will continue to be a primary focus. We firmly believe in engaging with all multistakeholder groups on an ongoing basis. We have had four engagements with the National Stakeholders Forum in 2023 regarding a range of issues so that people would be better informed.

We continue to monitor and support the functionality and operation of the constitutional agencies and saw the appointment, in 2023, of members of the service commissions – the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), the Public Service Commission (PSC) – as well as the Ethnic

Relations Commission (ERC). Capacity building sessions were conducted with all agencies on human rights-based approaches to deliver on their mandates and the sensitisation and obligations regarding disabilities and migrant workers. These and other initiatives will continue apace in 2024.

b. Justice Sector Strengthening

We continue to prioritise the timely provision of justice for all Guyanese. In this regard, investments in this sector have targeted the modernisation of the legal architecture of the State, promoting better access to justice for all and constitutional and law reform. To this end, in 2023, we invested \$5.3 billion for the strengthening of the sector. *Budget 2024* allocates some additional \$6.8 billion. Justice.

Expanding and Upgrading the Physical Infrastructure of the Court System

To facilitate and expand access to justice across Guyana: We completed construction and commissioned the new Magistrates Court and living quarters at Vigilance and advanced work on the Magistrates Courts and living quarters at Anna Regina, Cove and John, Friendship, Mabaruma, Mahaicony, Mahdia, Port Kaituma and Timehri, as well as the extension of the Court of Appeal building in Kingston. In 2023, a sum of \$1.3 billion was spent on these facilities and \$1.7 billion is budgeted in 2024 to complete these works.

Building on the Restorative Justice Act passed in late 2023, we established the Restorative Justice Centre in Region 4. We appointed key technical personnel and trained officials, including prominent persons from within the community on the principles of restorative justice. The objective of this initiative is the reduction of recidivism, through provision for rehabilitation of victims and offenders and, in turn, ease overreliance on custodial sentences. To this end, \$257.4 million was expended in 2023. A further \$291 million is budgeted for these in 2024.

Strengthening Technical Capacity

Similarly, in improving technical capacity and promoting adequate human resources, an amendment to the Court of Appeal Act in 2023 now allows for not less than five and not more than nine Judges to sit in the Court of Appeal, compared to two and five previously. This intervention is aimed at having two sittings of the Court of Appeal simultaneously or consecutively, to reduce the backlog in cases.

With the reconstitution of the JSC, Government has already begun the process to fill critical vacancies in the Judiciary, including Justices of Appeal, Magistrates and Puisne Judges. Advertisements have already gone out and are under consideration for the recruitment of new Magistrates.

In 2023, 32 Special Prosecutors were trained to prosecute cases in the Magistrates Courts on behalf of the state, thereby strengthening the prosecutorial arm of the justice system in Regions 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10. In 2024, an additional 9 Special Prosecutors will join the existing cohort.

Other initiatives include other technological transformation of the justice system, Smart courts with the use of video conferencing and digital recording systems and the rollout of the Court Case Management System, contributing to greater efficiency. For all these initiatives, *Budget 2024* includes financial provisions to roll out all of them.

Legal Education and Other Initiatives

In keeping with our vision of not only having domestic capability to train our legal professionals but also becoming an offshore educational centre for legal education in the region, we are now one step closer to realising our own regional law school with the anticipated tabling of the feasibility study for the Guyana Law Council to the Council of Legal Education (CLE) later this year. This is quite unlike what was done by Mr. Nandlall's predecessor who launched a beautiful building – I understand – without even having approached or having obtained the approval of the CLE. I believe there were pictures in the newspapers.

6.46 p.m.

The building was even named after a distinguished Jurist, Justice JOF Haynes. The law school that never was. **[Hon. Members: (Opposition): (Inaudible)]** Sir, I can see that those on the opposite side of the House are thoroughly enjoying this presentation and are desirous of detaining me so that I can extend it for longer.

c. Labour Market Considerations

Our overriding philosophy regarding our labour force is to ensure that every Guyanese of working age is employable – has the necessary skills, competencies and opportunities to be employed. The reality is that there are a number of mismatches in our labour market. In some instances, there are skills mismatches. The skills that are required by the employers in a particular area are often times not necessarily the skills that are possessed by those who are looking for

work in those areas. Sometimes there are geographic mismatches. The jobs are being created in one area, and persons are looking for work in other areas. I believe you, Mr. Speaker, even addressed this matter at the last Sitting in response to a question that was posed, also yourself having served as a distinguished Minister of Labour. [An. Hon.

Member: Geographic?] There are geographic mismatches in the labour market. We will first ramp up training, whether it be through the Guyana Technical Training College or the national tourism and hospitality institute or our Technical Institutes throughout the length and breadth of our country. We will work with the private sector to better communicate to potential applicants the jobs that are available. A number of companies, increasingly, have been hosting targeted job fairs throughout the length and breadth of the country with tremendous success, including companies in the oil and gas sector. We will partner with the private sector to hold these job fairs. We will strengthen the Labour Market Information System, developing a more integrated labour market information system, better at communicating job opportunities as well as job applicants.

d. Strengthening Local Government

Local governance forms a main pillar of a strong democracy. We will continue to provide support to all of our municipalities and Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs). To support these objectives, we continue to provide direct cash assistance, through subventions, to our Local Democratic Organs (LDOs). In 2024, an amount of \$1 billion is budgeted to be transferred as subventions.

Mr. Speaker, in support of upgrading... [Mr. Norton: (inaudible)] We are providing it again. We are not like the APNU/AFC, provide it with one hand and take it back with the other; tell the people you are cutting taxes then you put on 100 more taxes. The APNU/AFC is puzzled by the fact that we are putting back the same thing as last year. They are more accustomed to giving something and then taking it back with the other hand. That is the *modus operandi* of the APNU/AFC. They are confused when you give and continue to give. They are confused when you give and continue to give because all they know is to give with one hand and take back with another.

[Mr. Speaker left the Chair.]

[Mr. Seeraj, Presiding Member, assumed the Chair.]

In support of upgrading community infrastructure and, in particular, community markets, which are often the centre of community economic life, \$417.2 million was expended last year to advance works and rehabilitate five community markets. We have started work at locations like: Charity, Hydronie, Leonora, *et cetera*. It was to rehabilitate and to rebuild in some cases such as Parika. [An. Hon. Member: (inaudible)] Precisely what I said. In 2024, a sum of \$1.2 billion is budgeted to complete these markets and to rehabilitate Corriverton, Kumaka and Suddie markets.

With the specific objective of providing support for routine maintenance of community infrastructure, 2,381 persons were employed under the Community Enhancement Workers Programme to complement our LDOs and help upgrade the aesthetics of our communities. In 2023, \$1.5 billion was expended. In 2024, \$1.5 billion will be budgeted.

Nearly 16,000 persons were recruited through the National Pathway Workers Project at a cost of \$6.4 billion in 2023. A sum of \$10 billion is budgeted in 2024 to advance the National Pathway Workers Project.

e. Financial Sector Reform

Mr. Speaker, we will continue our work to maintain financial sector stability while ensuring that the sector contributes optimally to economic growth.

f. Payment Systems

Building on the enhancements already made to the National Payment System, we will be moving ahead, this year, with an Instant Payments System to further support and enhance our current payment and settlement infrastructure, which includes the Real Time Gross Settlement as well as Central Securities Depository, better enabling electronic settlement of transactions.

i. Revenue Management

Mr. Speaker, we continue to modernise our tax administration and reduce gaps in tax compliance.

We have invested in information communication and technology (ICT) infrastructure to allow taxpayers to utilise online payments. In 2023, payments from taxpayers using our online facility totalled \$59 billion and \$33,000 persons filed their tax returns for the various tax types using the e-filing platform – the deployment of digital solutions in government.

We have completed upgraded infrastructure for a number of installations of the Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA) – the new licensing office at Princess and Smyth Streets, a new branch office at in Onverwagt which allowed citizens of West Coast Berbice (WCB), for the first time, to have a wide range of services that previously they had to commute to either Georgetown or New Amsterdam to access. Previously, I referred to the development of the widow system.

ii. Digital Solutions in Government

Digital solutions in Government, more broadly beyond tax administration. We will be undertaking a structured digitalisation masterplan that will allow 70 processes to be digitised in a phased manner – the implementation of the national electronic identification (e-ID) project which began in March 2023; the implementation of SAFE Country, an extension of Safe City; Safe Road Intelligent System (SRIS) to improve safety and reduce accidents; the roll out of telemedicine in the health sector; the development of an electronic medical records (EMR) system; and Education Management Information System (EMIS). To support the ongoing digitalisation roll out, we have distributed very-small-aperture terminal (VSAT) and other wireless communication to 165 hinterland and remote communities, benefitting 50,000 residents.

iii. National Insurance Scheme

Mr. Speaker, the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) provides invaluable service to its many contributors and pensioners and for many of them is the only source of any form of social security. [**Mr. Norton:** The PPP/C (*inaudible*). He is too young to know.] I must admit that predates me, sir. It does predate me, I must admit. The NIS provides invaluable service to its many contributors and pensioners and for many of them is the only source of any form of social security. [**An. Hon. Member:** (*inaudible*)] The investment in the Berbice Bridge Company Incorporated was one of NIS's most lucrative investments. That is a fact. I will repeat what I said. The NIS investment in the Berbice Bridge Company Incorporated was one of the Scheme's most lucrative investments.

With the aim of addressing long outstanding complaints and other concerns of citizens, in 2023, the NIS conducted a series of nationwide outreaches and one overseas diaspora outreach in New York, listening to and addressing the issues raised by contributors and resolving thousands of them. Twelve sessions were held in Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 and over 1,300 persons benefitted from these sessions, many of

them receiving their NIS pension after years of waiting. Cumulatively, 14,000 claims that were pending as of August, 2020 have been resolved to date.

With the aim of addressing the 1,488 matters awaiting consideration by the NIS Appeals Tribunal, in 2023, Government appointed 12 legal practitioners to chair and convene tribunals in Georgetown and elsewhere in the country in order to expedite consideration of pending appeals. Since making that appointment, 252 matters have been resolved of which 156 have been concluded, 96 are ongoing, and 1,236 will commence shortly along with new matters submitted since the tribunals were appointed.

The Scheme has commenced its 10th Actuarial Review, and draft report was recently completed and is being considered. Once completed, we will examine its findings and recommendations. Suffice it to say that our Government remains firmly committed to taking all necessary steps to ensure the financial sustainability and viability of the National Insurance Scheme.

iv. Procurement

Mr. Speaker, over the past years, the National Procurement and Tender Administration Board (NPTAB) has been dedicated to the restoration of credibility, confidence, accountability, and transparency. To this end, they worked continuously on strengthening the institutional framework and enhancing transparency and efficiency in the bidding process.

[*Mr. Speaker assumed the Chair.*]

They pursued the revision of the Standard Bidding Documents, conducted in-field training in regions, appointed a technical non-scoring member from procuring entity to assist with technical bids, introduced a bidders register, amongst other important initiatives. They will focus on digitalisation of records to establish a full and functional registry, create a documentation centre and commence instillation of the new management information system (MIS).

7.01 p.m.

v. Data System Strengthening

I turn to data system strengthening. Guyana's National Population and Household Census commenced on 15th September, 2022. This matter was the subject, in fact, some questions asked in this honourable House not so long ago.

Like many of our brothers and sisters in the Caribbean, the census in Guyana has been significantly delayed, whether it be inclement weather, challenging terrain, attrition of field staff, respondent apathy or unavailability, competing national events, *et cetera*. Suffice it to say, as I have previously advised this House, our team at the Bureau of Statistics continues to work diligently to complete this very important exercise which we anticipate in 2024.

G. Foreign relations and the Diaspora

a. Foreign relations

The preservation of Guyana's sovereignty and territorial integrity remains paramount and our Government will remain vigilant in the diplomatic defence of our patrimony. We were all consumed by the actions of Venezuela in recent months and their decision in September, 2023 to conduct and their subsequent conduct in December, 2023 of a referendum that is openly defiant of the ongoing process of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This proposal caused us, as I mentioned earlier, to apply to the ICJ. We obtained provisional measures. We obtained the Joint Declaration of Argyle for dialogue and peace between Guyana and Venezuela. I wish to reiterate that we remain firmly committed that the ICJ... I said it in my introduction, and I am repeating it now in the relevant section of my report. We remain firm that the ICJ is the path to a final and peaceful settlement, and we will continue to adhere to the rule of international law.

On 1st January, we proudly took up our seats as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the period 2024 to 2025. Mr. Speaker, this year in February, we will be assuming the Chairmanship of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). His Excellency the President will be assuming the Chairmanship. He will be hosting in February the 46th Regular Meeting of Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government right here in Georgetown. We will host... [Hon. Member:

(inaudible)] No, sir, but with deference to the importance that we attach to the regional project and the regional enterprise, we consider it mention-worthy the fact that Guyana, this year, will be hosting CARICOM Heads. We will also be hosting the 38th Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Regional Conference. We will also be hosting the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) Pre-Caribbean Governors Annual General Meeting (AGM). We will also be hosting the Caribbean Development Bank's (CDB's) Meeting of Contributors to the Banks Special

Development Fund. The point is that 2024 will be a very busy year on the international and regional relations front.

b. Diaspora

Mr. speaker, in relation to the diaspora, we have maintained a close engagement with the diaspora by conducting several outreaches, webinars, conferences and other programmes, including to areas that previously were underserve and unserved, including areas like the Middle East. Indeed, particularly in those unserved and underserved areas, it was extremely gratifying to see the response of our diaspora who had never or who had not for a number of years had the opportunity to meet and interact with some senior Members of Government.

H. Public Safety and Security

In recognising that a vibrant security sector is a result of well-planned and strategic initiatives, we have committed to investing heavily in the provision of expanded facilities, expanded mobility and updated equipment, better use of technology and training, and the promotion of greater accountability for law enforcement personnel, amongst other initiatives. In 2023, a sum of \$72.6 billion was expended by the sector. In 2024, the Guyana Police Force (GPF) benefitted from a total sum of \$28.6 billion which was expended towards addressing the infrastructural deficiencies and enhancing the Force's capacity.

We expended in 2023 a sum of \$2.9 billion to upgrade and expand infrastructural locations countrywide, including Baramita, Den Amstel, Eteringbang, Imbaimadai, Karasabai, Rose Hall and Tuschen. We established command centres in Regions 2, 3, 5, 6 and 10. We commenced, and works are continuing on police stations at Annai, Ekereku, Lethem, Mocha, Monkey Mountain and others. In 2024, we will advance the construction/rehabilitation of all these locations, and reconstruct critical police stations at Kitty, Mahaicony, San Souci and Weldaad as well as the construction of the Regional Division Headquarters in Region 6.

Notably, the Force's infrastructure will be transformed as we commence the construction of the state-of-the art twelve storey Brickdam Police Station. To this end, \$5.4 billion is earmarked to advance infrastructural works in 2024.

Transport Fleet

To further complement the transport fleet, we have budgeted \$1 billion to expand the Force's land and water fleet with the

purchase of additional vehicles, boats and engines to augment those that were purchased last year.

Community Policing

We have budgeted \$152.1 million for community policing.

Technology

We are rolling out the use of technology, including a budgetary allocation of \$2 billion to further roll out the Safe Country Initiative to improve national courage, particularly in the heavily populated areas on our coasts.

Training

We plan to further improve the forensic and investigative capabilities by conducting training, both locally and regionally, with an amount of \$250 million budgeted for police training. We will also partner with strategic institutions, like the New York Police Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), in advancing major training reform initiatives. Mr. Speaker, a total of \$30.3 billion has been allocated to the Guyana Police Force in 2024.

b. Guyana Prison Service

The Guyana Prison Service (GPS), in pursuit of its strategic plan, is moving to consolidate its correctional facility at Lusignan with satellite facilities at New Amsterdam, Mazaruni and possibly Timehri. In 2024, infrastructural improvement would continue as we anticipate the completion of works at Lusignan access way and the provision of additional electricity supply at Mazaruni amongst other works. A sum of \$2.8 billion is earmarked to advance prison infrastructural works in 2024. On training, a sum of \$140.2 million will be used to train both prison officers and inmates in several relevant areas. *Budget 2024* provides for a sum of \$6.5 billion for the Guyana Prison Service.

c. Guyana Fire Service

More recently, we have noted a spate of fires. To ensure that we have a fire service that is adequately equipped to discharge its important mandate, we are pursuing a number of very important initiatives. We are upgrading the physical facilities of the Guyana Fire Service (GFS), having started work at Leonora, Ogle, Wales as well as the Fire Service Headquarters at Durban Park.

In 2024, we aim to complete the Diamond Fire Station, additional fire stations at Charity, Parika, Soesdyke and Wisburg as well as extension of fire stations at Linden, Rose Hall and Timehri. A sum of \$572.8 million has been budgeted in 2024 for this and related purposes.

In 2023, we spent \$3.3 billion to acquire additional equipment, including 16 water bowsers, eight water tenders, one telescopic boom and six ambulances. We also advanced procurement for 40 light firefighting and quick responses vehicles which will be stationed across the country, thereby enhancing the responsiveness of the service. *Budget 2024* provides an additional \$500 million to boost the Guyana Fire Service's capability. We will advance the Fire Hydrants Programme. We will continue to train our Fire Officers. In pursuit of our objective, for the security sector as a whole, we have allocated a total of \$90.6 billion in *Budget 2024*.

5. Targets for 2024

A. Real Gross Domestic Product

I now turn to our macroeconomic targets for 2024. The Guyanese economy is set to expand at an even faster pace in 2024, and the real economy is projected to expand at a rate of 34.3%. Once realised, this will represent the 5th consecutive year in which our economy will be growing at more than 20%, and it will result in Guyana growing at an annual average of 38.8% over that five-year period.

Importantly, the non-oil economy is projected to grow by 11.9% this year, driven by consistent expansion in all subsectors in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, construction and services as well as a recovery in bauxite and gold mining. Once realised, the non-oil economy will have recorded four years of consecutive growth, at an average growth rate of 9.9% annually since its 7.3% contraction in 2020.

7.16 p.m.

a. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing

I am speaking here of targets and projections for 2024. I understand that the numerically challenged APNU/AFC will have some difficulty understanding what we are speaking of. The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector are projected to grow by 10.4%.

The sugar growing subsector is projected to accelerate its recovery with strong growth of 66.1% aided by anticipated production of 100,000 metric tonnes in 2024.

The rice growing sector is projected to grow by 6.2% with production anticipated to be 710,000 metric tonnes.

The other crops subsector is projected to grow at 11.6%, reflecting strong growth in corn, soya bean and other crops like coconuts, root crops and spices, *et cetera*. Livestock and fishery are expected to expand by 6.6% and 15%.

Mr. Speaker, it appears that my colleagues on that side of the House are incapable of comprehending a report on what transpired in 2023 from a projection of what is anticipated to take place in 2024. The forestry sector is projected to record growth of 3.9%.

b. Extractive Industries

Mining and quarrying is projected to grow by 43.6%.

The three FPSOs in the Stabroek Block are projected to realise production of crude oil of more than 550,000 barrels of oil per day in 2024, with an expected ramp up to over 600,000 barrels of oil per day in the latter part of the year. As such, the subsector is anticipated to grow by an estimated 44.7%.

The other mining and quarrying subsector, comprising sand, stone, diamonds and manganese, is anticipated to continue its momentum in 2024, with projected growth of 19.3%.

The gold and bauxite mining subsectors are expected to reverse their contractions in 2023 and grow by 15.7% and 57.2% respectively. Gold is anticipated to recover supported by higher declarations from the large operator, as well as the small- and medium-scale operators, while bauxite is expected to record higher production from both operators, particularly given the investments made in the sector, and in particular in Linden in connection with the MAZ project to which I referred earlier.

c. Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector is projected to grow by 16%.

d. Construction

Construction is projected to grow by 23.4%

e. Services

The services sector is projected to grow by 6.9% with notable expansions under wholesale and retail trade, administrative and support services, information and communications and transport and storage.

B. Monetary Policy and Inflation

Monetary policy in 2024 will remain focused on containing prices and maintaining stable exchange rates. This will be done in an environment that encourages continued and sustained growth in private sector credit and economic activity. Inflation is projected to accelerate slightly to 2.5%, reflecting mostly global developments, as domestic production is ramped up to meet the growing demand pressures.

C. Balance of Payments

On the balance of payment, the overall balance of payments is expected to record a surplus of \$120 million in 2024, largely attributed to an anticipated expansion of the current account surplus. The current account is anticipated to register a higher surplus of US\$7.853. million.

The capital account is forecasted to record a higher deficit of US\$7.7 million, largely due to an anticipated moderation of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows, given that we do not expect a new FPSO to be deployed in 2024 as one was deployed in 2023, hence the comparison between the 2024 and 2023 numbers.

D. Targets for the Non-Financial Public Sector

a. Central Government Operations

The current revenue of the central Government, before Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund (GRIF), carbon credit, and NRF flows, on which I reported earlier in relation to 2023's outturn, and on which I am now reporting on our projection for 2024, is expected to rise by 11.8% to \$427.3 billion this year. Tax revenues will make up \$408.5 billion, or 95.6% of this total. Internal revenue collection is anticipated to grow to \$258.1 billion, or 33.1% above the level last year.

Central Government's overall spending is projected to increase by 39.4% in 2024. This is largely as a result of continued expansion of the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) supporting Government's accelerated developmental agenda in and across all of the sectors, to which I would have alluded earlier. As discussed, major PSIP investments include projects in the health, education, infrastructure, security and other sectors. The PSIP is projected to grow by 57.9% this year to \$666.2 billion, while non-interest current expenditure is expected to grow by 17.5% to reach \$434.8 billion.

Mr. Speaker, against this background, the overall deficit after grants for the central Government is projected at \$395.9 billion, or 8.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Again, entirely financed by no new taxes, *Budget 2024* is 46.6% larger than *Budget 2023* and totals \$1.146 trillion, the biggest budget ever and exceeding the trillion-dollar mark for the very first time in our country's history.

E. Natural Resource Fund

This year, with three production platforms operationalised, it is projected that there will be 202 lifts of crude oil from the Stabroek Block, 22 of which are estimated for Government. Consequently, earnings from the Government's share of profit oil are estimated at US\$2,078.9 million in 2024, while royalty payments for the year are projected at US\$319.9 million. Additionally, based on 2023 deposits, an estimated US\$1.154 billion or G\$240.1 billion can be withdrawn from the NRF in 2024 and transferred to the Consolidated Fund to support the country's development programme.

F. Optimising the Financing Mix

I wish to turn to the question of optimising the financing mix. Our Government is firmly committed to safeguarding the gains we have made in achieving fiscal sustainability and in managing the public finances prudently. In this regard, in a global environment where interest rates have climbed by over 500 basis points in the last three years, it is imperative that we maintain a flexible approach to financing the accelerated transformation agenda, which includes a ramped-up PSIP and accelerated delivery of social services and social safety nets to improve the lives of all Guyanese. These circumstances require an optimal and dynamic financing mix, taking into consideration the volume of financing to be mobilised with the cost of that financing. With this in mind, our Government will be proposing the following at the appropriate time for consideration and approval by this honourable House:

An increase in the domestic and external debt ceilings, which will provide the flexibility needed to optimise on the financing mix while at the same time safeguarding our debt sustainability.

A revision to the NRF withdrawal rule which, once approved, will result in an upward revision to the NRF withdrawal amount to take effect from this fiscal year. The revised withdrawal rule will retain the important feature that, as production and revenue ramp up further, an increasing share of the inflows into the NRF will be saved relative to

the share transferred to the Consolidated Fund to finance national development priorities.

6. Measures

I now turn, Sir, to measures. Our Government remains firmly committed to implementing sustainable measures that will aid the continued development and expansion of the productive sectors, while also bringing relief and improving wellbeing at the household and individual levels. The measures proposed in *Budget 2024* are all aimed at improving the welfare of our citizens, creating opportunities for our citizens, but facilitating and promoting job creation and income generation.

a. Easing the Cost of Living

i. Containing the Cost of Fuel

As global fuel prices remain relatively elevated, our Government has maintained 0% excise tax on petroleum products since March, 2022. As world market fuel prices remain volatile, we remain responsive to absorbing the impact of elevated fuel prices as a means of mitigating the transfer of higher fuel cost to the Guyanese people and to the Guyanese productive sector. This measure will be kept in place while fuel prices remain elevated. At current prices, this measure results in our Government foregoing an estimated \$40 billion annually.

ii. Reduction in Freight Charges

In August, 2021, our Government had adjusted freight charges to the pre-pandemic levels for the purposes of computing import taxes and in order to combat the increase in shipping costs which were passed on to consumers by importers. The measure was initially implemented for a six-month period from 1st August, 2021 to 31st January, 2022. It was subsequently extended to 31st December, 2023. Recently, we have seen an increase in freight prices associated with bottlenecks in both the Panama and Suez Canals. In order to mitigate transmission of escalation of freight prices, I wish to announce an extension of this measure for a further 12-month period to 31st December, 2024, at a cost of \$6 billion.

7.31 p.m.

iii. Expansion of Part-time Job Programme

It would be recalled that Government launched the Part-time Job programme in 2022, in which one person per household was able to earn \$40,000 by working 10 days per month in

public offices in close proximity to their homes. In 2023, over 15,000 persons were employed through the programme, placing over \$6 billion in disposable income into these households. In 2024, this programme will continue and will be expanded with \$10 billion budgeted. I add that the beneficiaries of this programme are encouraged to acquire further skills and qualifications to satisfy the skills gap in the labour market and ultimately transition to full-time employment.

iv. Other Cost of Living Measures

Over the past year, key food producing countries have been terribly impacted by the effects of the El Niño phenomenon. Here at home, we have not been spared. The Government has provided significant support in drainage and irrigation (D&I), along with the distribution of fertilizers to farmers to maintain production, while also aiding in mitigating price increases to the customers. In this regard, *Budget 2024* allocates \$7 billion for measures to be determined after consultations with stakeholders, aimed at containing and cushioning the impact of price increases.

v. Support to Small Businesses

Small and medium sized enterprises are an extremely important segment of our economy and they play a crucial role in economic growth and job creation. In support of the development and expansion of small and medium enterprises [*Interruption*]. There is much more to be said. I have to exercise tremendous self-censorship.

In support to the development and expansion of small and medium enterprises, particularly as it relates to the cost of financing for their small businesses, Government will partner with the commercial banks to lower the interest rates on loans up to \$5 million, thereby reducing the cost of financing for our smallest businesses.

vi. Removal of Duty and VAT on Sports Equipment and Technology

In recognition of the importance of sports and technology to human and economic development, and in particular to our young people, our Government has been investing significantly, as I mentioned earlier, in sporting facilities, in access to and training in information communication technology (ICT), *et cetera*. It would be recalled that we removed value-added tax (VAT) on data for residential and individual use. We removed VAT on applicable taxes on cell phones. In order to further promote access to both sports and technology for our young people, we will remove VAT and

duty on sports equipment and we will remove VAT and duty on essential sports accessories such as chargers, charging cables, and headphones, *et cetera*, along with cell phone components for repairs and the net.

b. Supporting the Vulnerable

i. Increase in Old Age Pension

Since the resumption of Office by this People's Progressive Party/Civic Government, Old Age Pension has been increased from \$20,500 to \$33,000 last year. [**Mr. Mahipaul:** You had left it at \$13,000 and we carry it...] *Yuh* must examine what you promised in your Manifesto and what you delivered. That is what you need to examine. You must examine what the APNU/AFC promised in their Manifesto and what they delivered. [**An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)**] Do not worry, it will come up in the debate. We remain committed to improving the benefits received by our pensioners, and in this regard, with effect from 1st January, 2024, Old Age Pension will be increased from \$33,000 to \$36,000 per month. This reflects a 75% increase in Old Age Pension since we resumed office in 2020, and it will benefit 76,000 persons, placing an additional \$2.7 billion in the hands of our senior citizens.

ii. Public Assistance

It would be recalled that the recipients of Public Assistance have benefitted from successive increases from \$9,000 from 2020 to \$16,000 monthly, last year. In 2022, Government stated that all persons with a disability will be registered automatically to receive monthly public assistance. I wish now to announce an increase in Public Assistance from \$16,000 monthly to \$19,000 monthly, with effect from 1st January, 2024, more than doubling the Public Assistance since we resumed Office. This will place \$1.2 billion in additional disposable income in the hands of over 35,000 persons.

iii. Supporting Eye Care for School Children and Pensioners

Our Government has continued to invest significantly in improving access to health services for all our citizens, including our children, and in the area of promoting eye care... [**An Hon. Member: (Inaudible)**] We have been building schools. I am not sure that you could claim to have done that. In the area of promoting eyecare for school children and pensioners, our Government will provide the following:

Eye Test – A \$3,000 voucher will be provided to every child to assist in meeting the cost of an eye test, for over 205,000 school children and for 76,000 pensioners at a cost of over \$840 million, in order to determine whether the person tested requires spectacles to aid their vision.

Spectacles – furthermore, for those who require spectacles, both children and pensioners, a \$15,000 voucher towards the cost of the spectacles will be provided. This measure is estimated to cost a further \$955 million.

I should add that in the case of school children and pensioners living in the hinterland where testing and prescription facilities might not be readily or easily available or accessible, an alternative arrangement will be put in place, somewhat akin to the arrangement that we have already started to implement in relation to testing and prescribing teams being deployed to these various communities. The total cost of this intervention aggregates to \$1.8 billion.

iv. Support for Cervical Cancer Testing

Cervical cancer is one of the most pressing health problems facing our women folk. In order to encourage testing for cervical cancer, Government will provide a voucher of \$8,000 for women between the ages of 21 and 65 – all women between the ages of 21 and 65 – to meet the cost of cervical cancer testing. This intervention will cost an estimated \$2.8 billion. I mentioned earlier that we will be ramping up capabilities to address this particularly important public health problem.

c. Removal of Duty and VAT on firefighting Equipment

I mentioned earlier the work we are doing to ramp up the capabilities of the Guyana Fire Service. As I mentioned earlier, we have indeed witnessed a surge in fire incidents in recent times, resulting in a tragic loss of lives in some instances and of valuable property in others. We have been investing, as I elaborated earlier, significantly in boosting the firefighting capability and responsiveness of the Guyana Fire Service. In order to promote household fire prevention capabilities, we propose the removal of VAT and duty on fire extinguishers and smoke alarms.

d. National Insurance Scheme

i. Minimum Pension

The current minimum pension paid by the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) is \$35,000 monthly. I wish to announce that with effect from 1st January, 2024, the new minimum NIS pension will be \$43,075, which will result in a \$2.6 billion transfer of additional disposable income to the benefit of over 27,000 persons.

ii. Survivor's Pension

Relatedly, Sir, survivor's benefit is payable to the dependents of a deceased insured person subject to certain... This is the NIS pension to which we are referring. Survival pension is payable to the dependents of a deceased injured person – insured person, sorry. Let me start again, survivor's benefit is paid to the dependents of a deceased insured person, an insured person who has passed away, who has died, subject to certain qualifying conditions. The current minimum pension paid to survivors by NIS is \$17,500. I now wish to announce that with effect from 1st January, 2024, the new minimum pension paid to survivors will be \$21,537, which will make an additional \$800 million of disposable income available to over 12,000 persons.

iii. Invalidity Pension

Mr. Speaker, invalidity pension is paid to an insured person who is incapable of work otherwise than as a result of employment injury and has been so incapable for a period of not less than 26 weeks and likely to be permanently so incapable subject, of course, to the laws and regulations of the scheme. The current minimum invalidity pension paid by NIS is \$35,000 monthly. I now wish to announce with effect from 1st January, 2024, the new minimum invalidity pension paid will be \$43,075. This will make an additional \$24 million of disposable income available to over 200 persons.

iv. One-Off Grant

Mr. Speaker, the NIS continually engages with persons who have attained the age of 60 and have not met the minimum requirement of 750 contributions to qualify for the receipt of an old-aged pension. In many instances the previous employers have gone out of business or have closed down, rendering it impossible for alternative means of verification that deductions were made and paid over to the NIS. In the interest of bringing these matters to closure, we will offer eligible persons with contributions ranging from 700–49 – it will be recalled that the qualifying number for pensions is 750 – an option to accept as full and final settlement a one-off grant depending on the year in which their last contribution was made. We expect that this intervention can

benefit over 3,800 persons at a cost of \$550 million. The NIS, nevertheless, remains committed to working diligently to resolving all pending claims.

e. Increasing Disposable Income

i. Because We Care Student Grant

The 'Because We Care' student grant was restored by the People's Progressive Party/ Civic Government after it was callously and unconscionably taken away from the children of Guyana. Having restored this grant, it will be recalled that we increased it to \$35,000 last year. I now wish to announce a further increase of the student grant, 'Because We Care', to \$40,000 per child. This will benefit over 205,000 school children in the public and private school system, placing an additional \$1 billion in the hands of their parents. In addition, along with the 'Because We Care' grant, the uniform voucher allowance of \$5,000 will continue to be paid. This result, taken together the \$40,000 'Because We Care' grant and the uniform allowance of \$5,000, which obviously totals \$45,000 per child – will see parents of over 205,000 school children receiving aggregate grants, the two grants, totalling \$9.2 billion. [Mr. Mahipaul: Private students getting it too?] Private schools too.

ii. Support to University of Guyana Graduates

In our 2020 Manifesto we promised a pathway for debt write-offs for persons with outstanding student loans. In this regard, I now wish to announce that we will commence the first phase of eliminating outstanding loans owed by graduates of the University of Guyana, on condition that these graduates can demonstrate proof of being employed or self-employed in Guyana after their graduation for a minimum period to be specified.

iii. Reducing the Cost of Life and Medical Insurance

Mr. Speaker, it will be recalled that in 2022 measures were introduced to encourage citizens to obtain life and medical insurance policies. These measures allowed taxpayers a deduction from their chargeable income for premiums paid for life and medical insurance up to a maximum of 10% of their income or \$30,000 monthly, whichever is lower. To further incentivize citizens to protect themselves and their families with life and medical insurance, I wish to announce an increase in deductible ceiling from \$30,000 to \$50,000 monthly or 10% of their income, whichever is lower. This intervention will reduce the taxable income and

consequently the tax payable by the taxpayer and facilitate greater access to coverage both life and medical insurance, and make both life and medical insurance more affordable.

iv. Income Tax Threshold

Mr. Speaker, the income tax threshold was increased from \$65,000 to \$75,000 monthly in 2022 and then to \$85,000 last year. I now wish to announce an increase of the threshold to \$100,000 monthly, with effect from year of income 2024. As a result of adjusting the income tax threshold to \$100,000, 13,000 persons will be removed from paying income taxes and will result in \$4.8 billion being transferred to the disposable incomes of workers. These measures will provide over \$70 billion of relief to businesses and individuals as we continue to contain the impact of imported price increases, provide relief to the most vulnerable, and promote the expansion of productive activity and job creation, and thereby create opportunity for every single Guyanese citizen.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, I will conclude... [Mr. Norton: (Inaudible)] Apparently, Sir, from the Leader of the Opposition I heard a murmur of disappointment when I said I will now conclude. I will now conclude. Let me rephrase that, Sir. I will now begin to conclude by returning to the note on which I began. This People's Progressive Party/Civic *Budget 2024* comes to this honourable House against the backdrop of very challenging circumstances for our country and for the global economy of which we are very much a part. As I indicated when I began – and we cannot be serious policy makers and be oblivious to the world in which we live – we live in a world today that is often being characterized as going through an era. The word that I used at the start, the word that is being bandied around these days, is the age of the polycrisis.

Notwithstanding the interlocking and overlapping global crises we face, given the bold agenda that our Government is implementing to create opportunity for every single Guyanese person, as I have just outlined in *Budget 2024*, I believe it is fair to say that we in Guyana are also living in what could validly be described as the age of opportunity. This is not by accident, despite the difficult and unpredictable global environment in which we operate. At home in Guyana, this PPP/C Government has remained firm in our resolve to ensure that we navigate these testing times, containing as far as we possibly can any adverse domestic fallout from the global setting, while also ensuring that the transformation of our country continues apace and the

improvement of the well-being of the Guyanese people is realised in the shortest possible time.

Mr. Speaker, what does this age of opportunity look like in Guyana? It almost doesn't matter where we look. In today's rapidly growing Guyana, we need more specialist doctors, and we need more nurses, we need more electricians, and we need more mechanics, we need more masons, and we need more plumbers.

8.01 p.m.

We need more chefs. We need more mixologists. We need more truck drivers. We need more excavator operators. We need more programmers and we need more engineers. We need more banksmen and we need more crane operators. [Mr. Duncan: We need another Government.] It does not matter. The list goes on. In every one of these categories and many more, our Government is providing free or heavily subsidised training to every single Guyanese person interested and qualified to receive that training.

Much the same can be said about demand for goods and services. We, almost, cannot produce as much as any category of goods and services given the pace at which demand is growing. It does not matter, irrespective of which category of goods or services we look at, we cannot build-out fast enough of the hotel rooms and restaurant square footage that we needed right now. We cannot build-out warehouses or roll out the transportation services at the pace at which we need. There are unmet demands in our domestic and export markets for almost every category of fruits and vegetables we grow and for almost every category of meat and seafood we produce. It does not matter which category of goods or services is considered, despite the rapid growth in all of our economic sectors including, importantly, agriculture. Demand is there and, as a result, opportunity is there. The bottom line is that job opportunities abound and business opportunities abound, and plentifully so. This is Guyana in the age of opportunity.

Budget 2024 continues this Government's work to build out this very Guyana, where every single Guyanese family, as I said at the beginning is able to meet their basic needs. Beyond meeting their basic needs is able to avail themselves of these opportunities that I outlined earlier and many others to build and accumulate household value, and wealth through their own effort. That is why since 2020, we have distributed 30,000 house lots – household wealth; that is why we have given over 21,000 Guyana Online Academy of Learning (GOAL) scholarships – enhancing employability;

that is why we have trained nearly 3,200 teachers and almost 700 nurses – enhancing employability and income earning potential; that is why we are building the Guyana Technical Training College and the hospitality institute; that is why we enacted the Local Content Act and that is why we set up the local content secretariat – to enable and equip every single Guyanese person to step up and take advantage of the opportunities that exists in Guyana's age of opportunity. In the face of an onslaught of challenges, *Budget 2024* stays the course and paves the way for prosperity to be built by all and for all.

If we were to dissect *Budget 2024*, it comprises: allocations totalling \$121.4 billion for wages and salaries for central government employees including a salary increase that will be announced later in the year; it includes an allocation of \$40.7 billion for old age pensioners and public assistance beneficiaries; it includes an allocation of \$135.2 billion for our education system to ensure every single child receives a good education, incidentally, that includes over \$9 billion worth of Because We Care and uniform cash grants alone; it includes an allocation of \$129.8 billion for the health sector, including the build out of several hospitals and telemedicine centres in communities that are currently unserved or underserved and in our hinterland; it includes an allocation of \$204.1 billion to upgrade and expand our roads, bridges and transport infrastructure, laying the foundation for long term economic growth while also bringing relief to commuters and residents today; it includes an allocation of \$95.7 billion for the energy sector, in order to ensure that we could double our electricity production, reduce the cost of electricity by half and make backouts finally an artifact of the past; it includes an allocation of \$78 billion to roll out our national housing programme and ensure that every single Guyanese family can ultimately own their own home; and it includes an allocation of \$72.3 billion to finance the upgrade of our Drainage and Irrigation (DI) infrastructure, so that we can grow sufficient food and reduce the risk of flooding both in farms and in homes.

This is *Budget 2024*. It is a budget that will improve the lives of each and every single Guyanese citizen; a budget that addresses today's priorities and that also importantly sets the stage for tomorrow. This is *Budget 2024*, a budget most worthy of the unanimous support of this honourable House. This is *Budget 2024: Staying the Course: Building Prosperity for All Guyanese*.

I continue my conclusion by thanking my Cabinet Colleagues and their staff for their valuable inputs. I thank also the many stakeholders who made suggestions and sent

submissions. As always, I reserve the heartiest thanks for my own Ministry of Finance team who – many of whom are here but not all – continue to display time and time again why they are the special forces of Guyana’s public service. They are ready, able, and willing, motivated and committed, a best-in-class team that I am singularly proud and singularly privileged to have an opportunity to lead and to work with.

On behalf of this People’s Progressive Party/Civic Government, I commend *Budget 2024* to this honourable House. I look forward full of anticipation and expectation that it will win the unanimous approbation of this House. I, thank you very much, Sir. [*Applause*]

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Minister.

Motion proposed.

ADJOURNMENT

BE IT RESOLVED:

“That this National Assembly stands adjourned to 10.00 a.m. on Monday, 22nd January, 2024.”

Prime Minister [Brigadier (Ret’d) Phillips]: Mr. Speaker, may I join in commending my Colleague for the biggest budget ever in the history of Guyana and the people-centred budget for the people of Guyana. It is not too late to wish you a happy New Year and a happy 2024. With that, I move the adjournment of the Assembly to 10 o’clock on Monday 22nd January, 2024.

Motion put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, Hon. Members. The Assembly stands adjourned to 10.00 a.m. on 22nd January.

Adjourned accordingly at 8.12 p.m.