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See Page 35

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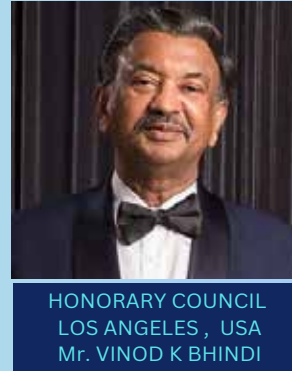
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THE US FIJI TIMES PROUD OF ITS SERVICE

The US Fiji Times is ranked as the top newspaper being published outside of Fiji for the Fiji American community and all over the world. The paper's popularity has grown immensely in recent years due to its critical approach in impressing the need for charitable organizations to rise up in all occasions to help Fiji and the people back home. Visitors from around the world have commended the paper on its stand to serve the community. The US Fiji Times understands that like in any other field, there is competition and competing with "The largest newspaper out of Fiji" has been a difficult task for newer publications. This is not because of its magnitude and coverage, but because of its stability and growth capabilities. The writers of the paper comprise some of Fiji's best. Even though they are not too visible in social functions, they are taking up their challenges very effectively. The marketing strategy handles by our CEO/Publisher Mr. Rocky Ali is the hallmark of the papers current strength. Despite lacking the front line journalist experience, he makes up for the deficiency with the sheer ability to jeep the media wagon rolling. His insatiable love to be involved with the community to cherish in this very noble cause is worthy of higher recommendation. We have a very vibrant community, so despite the paper being issued free, the expectation of the community is very high. The coverage of all the major events is a mist for the paper and we feel very proud to be associated with major organizations to see that their events are properly covered with pictures, stories and awareness via our social media platforms. The paper is being also sent to countries like Fiji, NZ, Australia, Canada, England and Sweden for Fijians abroad to also get the feel of the luxuries of USA. The feedback has been overwhelming in this regard and it has become a trend for many organizations to rely on US Fiji Times in reaching the desired success with adequate coverage. The paper will strive to serve the community with the best of its ability and assures the community that there will be quality reporting at all times.

Vinaka – Rocky Buksh

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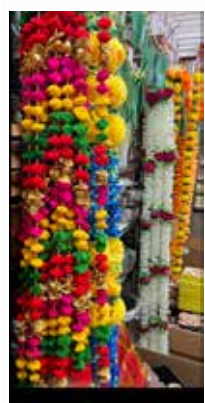
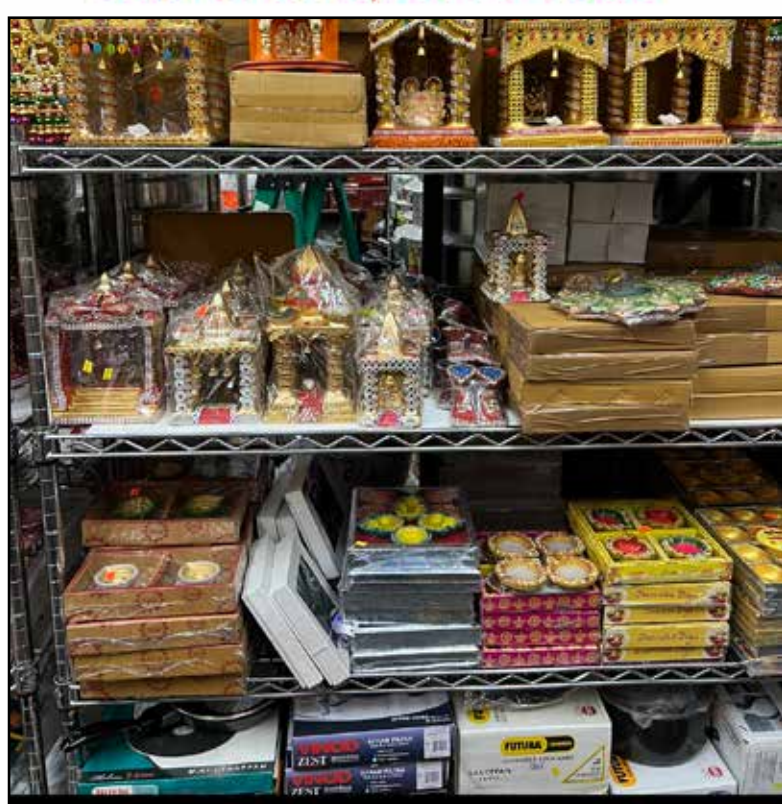


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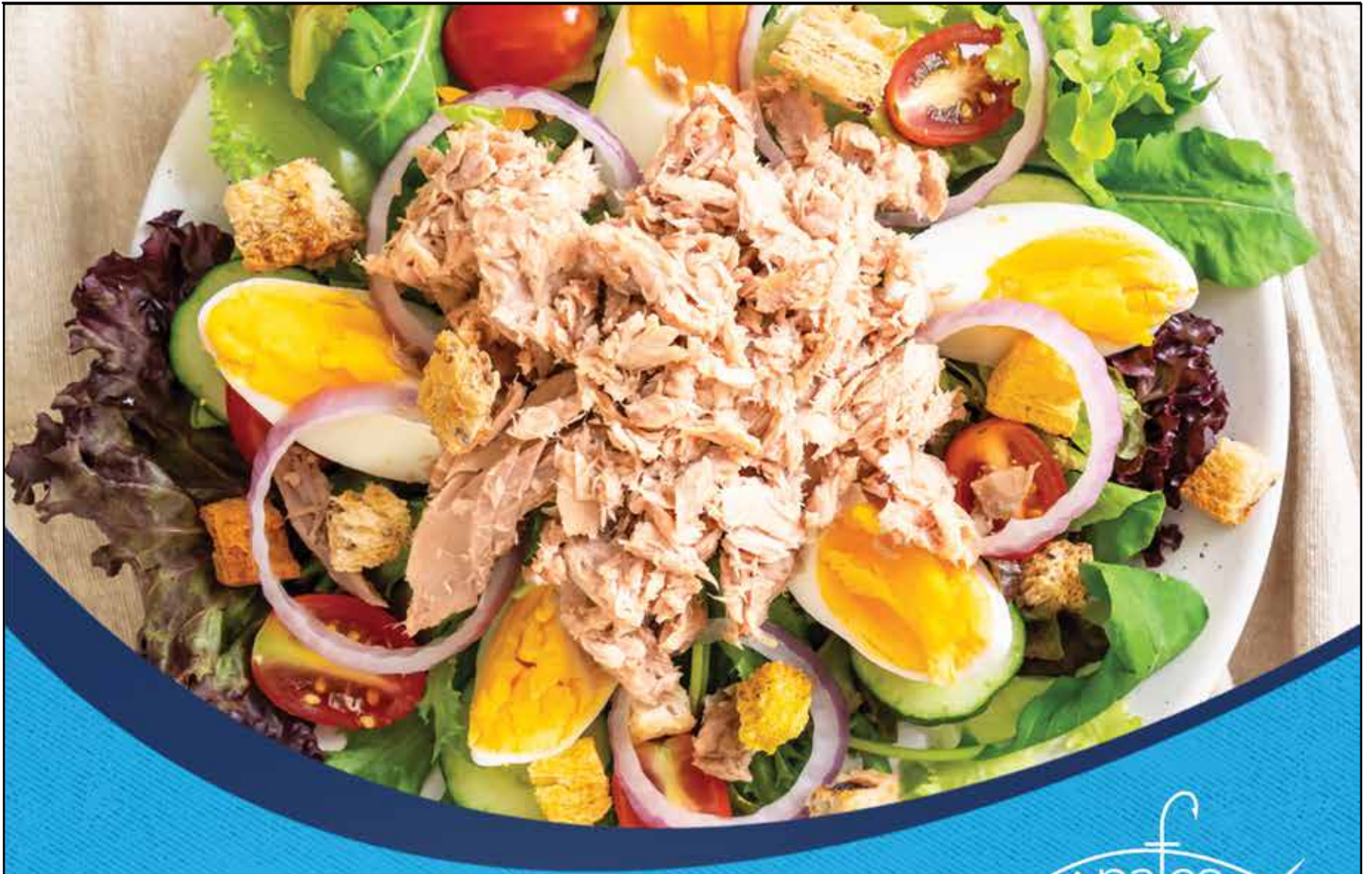
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Happy Diwali and a Prosperous New Year

MESSAGE From Bobby Naicker Fijian Honorary Consul



Bobby Naicker
Fijian Honorary Consul

Rejoice on this blessed occasion spreading joy with your friends and loved ones. I hope that all the light enters through the darkest rooms and brings the brightest of light into your life.

As we prepare to celebrate this most holy of festivals let's keep in mind those that have suffered the most.

Let's reach out and help the most vulnerable in the spirit of

unity amongst all beings. Diwali or Deepawali is a

Hindu festival that is celebrated widely across India and the rest of the world. It is known as the festival of lights as people celebrate this popular festival by cleaning their households, lighting, and decorating their houses with lamps, candles, and Diya's. Diwali symbolizes the spiritual victory of light over darkness returning to good over evil or knowledge over ignorance.

I pray to God that in this festival the God may illumina-

te our minds, enlighten our hearts, and strengthen the human bonds to full strength and energy. May the warmth and splendor that are part of this auspicious occasion fill your life with happiness and bright cheer and bring you joy and prosperity for the whole year.

May the brightness of Diya's enlighten your world with endless hopes and inspirations. Happy Diwali from my family to yours.

Sincerely,

Bobby Naicker
Fijian Honourary Consul



DIWALI GREETINGS !

My dear family and friends, I extend my warmest greetings and best wishes to everyone celebrating Diwali, the Festival of Lights. Diwali is a celebration that is centuries old yet still manages to speak so clearly to modern times. Diwali is celebrated by millions of people around the globe. Diwali is a festival of distinctive significance, where people come together to celebrate light, life and goodness.

It is a special moment for people of many faiths to cherish the good times and the fond memories of celebration with friends on this auspicious occasion of Diwali.

The word Diwali was inspired from a Sanskrit word Deepavali which literally translates to a "row of lit diyas"; hence it is known as the Festival of Lights. Hindus consider it to be the holiest day of the lunar month Kartik and celebrate it with great

grandeur and excitement, with one of its core themes being joy over despair, triumph of light over darkness and victory of good over evil. It reaffirms our faith in the noble qualities that Lord Ram embodies.

According to our Hindu holy scriptures - the Ramayana, Diwali marks the return of the mythological God Rama, an avatar (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu, together with Goddess Sita, Lord Laxhman and Hanumanji to Ayodhya, their hometown, after spending 14 years exiled in the forest.

The people of Ayodhya welcomed Lord Rama and expressed their respect and joy by spotlessly cleaning their homes to welcome positivity. Lighting and decorating their homes with clay lamps known as diyas, that symbolize purity, good luck and power. It is believed that the presence of light drives away darkness and forces of evil.

Even today, the day begins with decorating our homes and offices with flowers, doing Rangoli – the colored patterns drawn on the ground with colorful rice powder, followed by doing prayers and rituals together and finally setting off firecrackers. Inviting the near and dear ones to their homes for a sumptuous feast is an integral part of the Diwali celebrations.

Goddess Laxmi the mother of wealth, prosperity, love, beauty in her many forms is a crucial part of Diwali. Every year, two days prior to Diwali, Dhanteras is celebrated with aplomb. Dhanteras also known as Dhantrayodashi, falls on the auspicious thirteenth lunar day of Krishna Paksha in the Hindu month of Kartik. It is a tradition to buy gold, silver, metal utensils and new clothes on this day, which symbolizes prosperity to welcome Goddess Laxmi. Dhanteras pooja also

has a special significance for every businessman, wherein the blessings of Goddess Laxmi are sought for yearlong success and prosperity. Diwali pooja follows Dhanteras and Goddess Laxmi is continuously worshipped, as it is believed that Goddess Laxmi visits each house and bestows her blessings with great wealth, prosperity love and beauty that the humans enjoy.

May the joy, cheer, mirth and merriment of this divine festival surround you all forever. May the happiness of this festive season brighten your lives, and hope that the year ahead brings you luck and fulfills all your deepest dreams.

Happy Diwali to everyone.

Navi Saal Subh Aur Mangal Me Ho



Vinod K Bhindi

Consul General for The Republic of Fiji in Los Angeles

CEO Bhindi Jewelers

Diwali Greeting from CEO/Publisher -Rocky Buksh

I would like to extend my hearty greeting to all the sponsors and readers on this Diwali

This period reminds me of the wonderful ways Diwali is celebrated in Fiji. This is by far the most looked forward day for all our Hindu friends. Family gathering and tea sessions are held

when the lights are lit with neighbors, families and friends. The business communities in taking

full advantage of the heavy pockets provides all that good-

ies to see that every Diwali become a memorable one.

The US Fiji Times in serving the community shares the feeling we are accustomed to. Naturally

we Fijians have a totally different way in bonding with each other when it comes to sharing and

enjoying religious festivals. Our feelings and flashbacks send us back to our mood irrespective of

our current habitat. So let us

feel free to enjoy this wonderful occasion with friends and families

and not to forget to send our share of love and gifts to our families back home and to donate

generously to the needy so that we feel the blessings of the almighty during this happy period also.

It is hope that in seeing this paper you do have get the 'dejavu' of true feeling of Fiji style celebration being carried out

at your back yard and send us pictures to give it memorable make

over with the compliments of your largest Newspaper published outside Fiji islands- THE US

FIJI TIMES.

On behalf of the Executive staff and all reporters I would like to extend a very Happy Diwali to

all our reads here and all over the world.



Rocky Ali Buksh
CEO / Publisher

Diwali Message



I wish to extend my greetings and best wishes to all on the auspicious occasion of Diwali to all those who are celebrating the festival of lights here in the United States, Fiji and around the world. For Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, lighting of the lamp—the diya—is a chance

to remember, even amid darkness, that light will ultimately prevail. Knowledge will defeat ignorance, and compassion will triumph over despair. Diwali is the festival of victory of good over evil and light over darkness. Let us all together, celebrate this festival in a

clean and safe way and take a pledge to contribute to protecting the environment. The light of the lamp gives light to all without any discrimination - this is the message of Diwali. May Diwali be among your loved ones and may it connect everyone's hearts.

So, to all the families gathering this Diwali to reflect on all the blessings of the past year, my hope that this festival of lights brings happiness, prosperity and good fortune in your life. Wishing everyone a very Happy, Joyous Diwali and Prosperous New Year!

*Jay Singh – Honorary Consul Fiji
(Based In San Francisco, CA)*

Diwali Message from Pramesh Sharma - United States FIJI Golf Association



In honor of this year's Diwali, I would like to extend a heartfelt greeting to all on behalf of myself and my wife. This period reminds me of the wonderful ways in which Diwali is celebrated throughout Fiji.

Diwali is a very colorful event, literally and figuratively, that celebrates our culture's diversity. Each candle we burn and each of the sweets we consume signify love within our lives. Our prayers bring to the forefront the purity embedded in our daily lives.

So let us feel free to enjoy this wonderful occasion with friends and family. Do not take for granted the love and blessings we share. Please continue to extend that warmth and kindness generously to those in need, so all may feel the Almighty's blessings on this occasion.

Happy Diwali to All!

Message from the Narendra Narayan



I am pleased to send you my warm greetings and best wishes on the spectacular, auspicious and joyous occasion of Diwali.

Diwali has been celebrated from time immemorial, and on a grand scale, not only in India but also throughout the world.

Many legends have been associated with Diwali, and because of India's geographical and cultural diversity, the legends and practices have varied. However, the central theme of victory of light over

darkness is common to Diwali celebrations everywhere.

Religious festivals, like Diwali, help to make our lives more meaningful and act as the medium for promoting goodwill, harmony and happiness. They have been a positive force in integrating people of diverse cultures and backgrounds and in narrowing down differences and divisions.

In the midst of the festivities and celebrations we cannot fail to remember and pay tribute to our beloved family

members and friends who are no longer with us. We will always be grateful to them for the role they played in our lives.

This Festival is also a good time to take stock of our lives and reflect on how much we care and do for the less fortunate members of our family and the community. Let us continue to help the needy and bring happiness to everyone, including those who are suffering.

Wish you all an enjoyable time at Diwali, and let's

spread the spirit and happiness of the Festival as widely as possible.

May the Divine Light of Diwali Shine in our Hearts and Lives to Eternity and bring Peace, Progress and Prosperity.
Happy Diwali!

*Happy Diwali!
Narendra Narayan
President/CEO, Innovative
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Fiji News

JAPAN-FIJI FINANCE DIALOGUE

On October 26, 2023, the Fijian Ministry of Finance and the Japanese Ministry of Finance held the Japan-Fiji Finance Dialogue in Suva, Fiji. At the dialogue, Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics headed the Fijian side, and Mr. Kanda, Vice Minister of Finance for International Affairs, Japan, led the Japanese side. At the dialogue, both sides exchanged views on the performance of both the global and Fijian economies, Fiji's policy challenges, and cooperation between the two countries. Japan welcomed Fiji's recovery efforts post COVID-19 pandemic and its commitment on fiscal consolidation through the Coalition Government's well balanced 2023-2024 National Budget to strengthen debt sustainability with the aim of ensuring sustainable and inclusive growth. Japan committed to expanding capacity development activities for strengthening Fiji's revenue collection capacity, including customs operations. Both sides discussed the importance of enhancing financial integrity in the region to promote integration into the global financial system, thereby advancing financial inclusion. Japan, as a next co-chair of the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG), the Financial Action Task Force style regional body for the Asia-Pacific region, is supporting capacity development in the Pacific region through

the APG. Both sides discussed how climate change has been threatening Fiji, and Pacific Island States more generally, and highlighted the important role of disaster risk financing in ensuring rapid recovery from natural disasters. In this regard, Japan welcomed Fiji's progress toward contracting parametric insurance covering for Tropical Cyclone and Excess Rainfall with Pacific Catastrophic Risk Insurance Company (PCRIC) under the Pacific Catastrophe Risk Assessment and Financing Initiative (PCRAFI). In addition, both sides concurred to explore the possibility of formulating Stand-by Loan for Disaster Recovery and Rehabilitation Phase 2. Both sides agreed on holding continued close communication for further strengthening bilateral relations between the two nations. Vice Minister Kanda also had a meeting with Honourable Manoa Kamikamica, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications. On October 26, 2023, the Fijian Ministry of Finance and the Japanese Ministry of Finance held the Japan-Fiji Finance Dialogue in Suva, Fiji. At the dialogue, Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics headed the Fijian side, and Mr. Kanda, Vice Minister of Finance for International Affairs, Japan, led the Japanese



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Fijian British Army soldier guilty of assaulting four police officers and security guard

A 25-year-old Fijian soldier serving in the British Army has been sentenced for assaulting four police officers and a security guard in Wood St, Swindon. According to a report on wiltshire999s.co.uk, Elizabeth Vesikula pleaded guilty to five counts of assault on October 19 at the Salisbury Magistrate's Court in England. It is understood Vesikula had beaten four emergency workers and was arrested on the suspicion

of being drunk and disorderly. Prosecutor Kerry Richardson said Vesikula was screaming and shouting on Wood Street after being refused entry to a pub. "Police officers were beckoned over to the incident as Vesikula fell over and was lying on the road," the report said. Vesikula was also reported to have forcibly grabbed the genitals of a police officer which left him fearing the worst. The officer wrote in his victim statement,

which was read out in court, that he was yet to start a family and there was a possibility that it would not happen after the incident. Vesikula also spat on security guard Emma Anderson and police constables Terrett and Pugh. "The spittle landed in the mouth of Ms Anderson and on the lip of PC Pugh. PC Wilmott was also hit by spittle, but not targeted directly." Defence lawyer Paul Jones told the court Vesikula "drank a signifi-

cant amount" after learning her mother, whom she hasn't seen since 2016, was suffering from a life-threatening illness. He said the accused "apologises unreservedly to the officers" and that she has "no recollection of the events of that night". Mr Jones said she would "get a double whammy," meaning that the British Army would also have to serve a separate punishment. He also said Vesikula had already lost a promotion that came with

an £8000 (\$F19,355) annual wage increase, and she could lose her job. A 12-month community order with 150 hours of unpaid labour and 25 days of rehabilitation activities was given to Vesikula of Battalion Delhi Barracks in Tidworth. She is also required to reimburse Ms Anderson, PC Dean, PC Terrett, and PC Pugh each with £100 (\$F241) apart from PC Wilmott.

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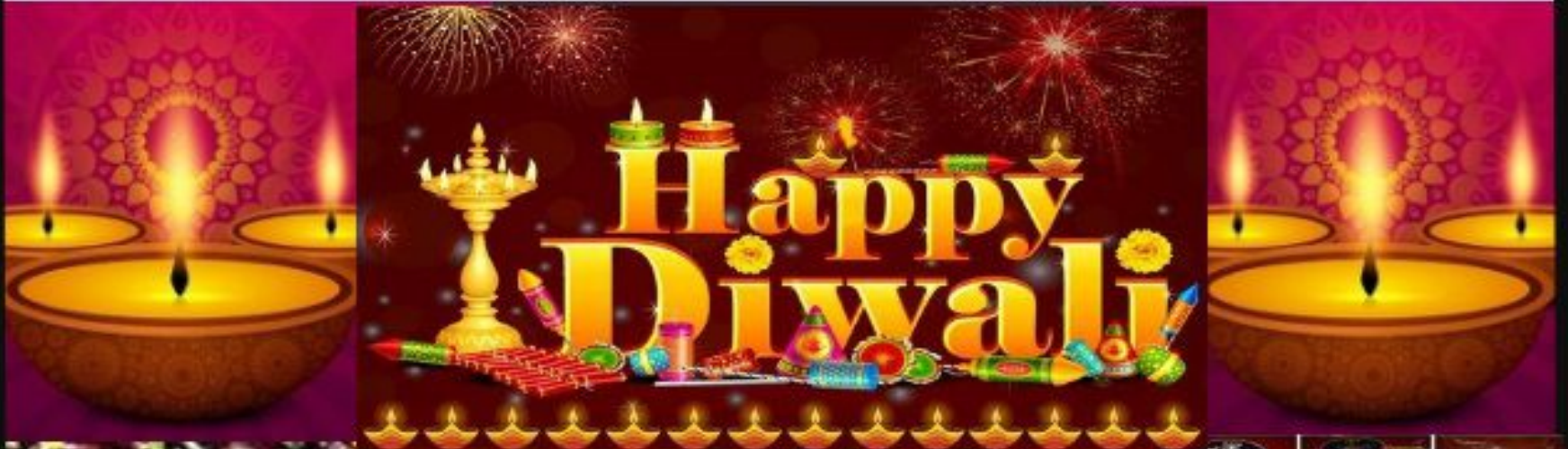
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Fiji News

EMPOWERING TAILEVU: NAVIGATING A NEW ERA THROUGH UNITY, LEADERSHIP, AND VISION

The Tailevu Provincial Council commenced today at Nasautoka Village in Wainibuka, marking the first meeting of its kind in the Tikina. This event held special significance for the province as it marked the inaugural provincial council meeting officiated by His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere. Representatives from all 22 districts of Tailevu attended the solemn opening ceremony, which also marked their first provincial council meeting under the Coalition Government. In his address, His Excellency acknowledged Matanitu Kubuna for installing the Vunivalu na Tui Kaba after more than 30 years and recognized the province's role in reconvening the Great Council of Chiefs on the Chiefly Island of Bau. "That, in itself, represents a significant stride in reaffirming the relationship among the three confederacies – Kubuna, Burebasaga, and Tovata," remarked His Excellency. "We can affirm that it marked the dawn of a new day for Fiji and the commencement of a new era," said His Excellency. "We should celebrate this moment, as it lays the foundation for strong and effective leadership that will propel our country forward," President Katonivere emphasized. However, President Katonivere acknowledged the prevalent challenge of numerous vacant leadership positions in many provinces and urged not only the province of Tailevu but also the other 13 provinces



in the country to expedite the appointment of the rightful holders for the vacant chiefly positions. His Excellency also highlighted that a total of \$2.1 million is allocated for Turagani-Koro, with their monthly allowance increased from \$100 to \$150. Additionally, allowances for Mata-ni-Tikina have been raised to \$150, and \$0.8 million has been allocated for all Turaga-Ni-Yavusas' monthly allowance. "These increases are aimed at supporting the efficient performance of the respective Liuliu ni Yavusa's and Turaga ni Koro's in serving their communities," stated President Katonivere. "To bolster iTaukei administration and provincial

councils, a grant of \$10.8 million is allocated, covering funding for the 14 provincial councils. This includes \$4.3 million designated for the salaries and wages of 182 provincial council officers, alongside other operational expenses totaling around \$6.1 million." The President also acknowledged the recent launch of the Tailevu Strategic Plan 2023 - 2050. Within this framework, the province is guided by 8 fundamental pillars: 1. Spiritual Wellbeing 2. Good Governance 3. Wellbeing 4. Human Resource Development 5. Sustainable Economic Growth 6. Environment and Climate Change 7. Culture and Heritage 8. Innovation

and Technology. The Head of State reiterated the importance of the people of Tailevu supporting the strategic plan and ensuring that each tikina and the 146 villages in the province reap its benefits. "Consider the future you wish for Tailevu – one in disarray or one rich in culture, with prosperous people and spiritual well-being," urged His Excellency. "Your province has the opportunity to lead the change our government seeks for our nation – to foster a unified country where people are content, working together towards peace and prosperity," emphasized President Katonivere. Meanwhile, Tailevu Provincial Council Chairman Mr.

Rusiate Tudravu thanked His Excellency for making time for his busy schedule to be with them today. "Your esteemed presence not only exemplifies your exceptional leadership but also underscores your unwavering commitment to prioritizing your people. Your dedication to fostering harmonious coexistence among different races, coupled with your emphasis on environmental preservation, is truly commendable. It's leaders like you who pave the way for a brighter, unified future for our community," said Mr. Tudravu. The 2-day meeting will conclude tomorrow. Tailevu Province has 22 Districts and 146 Villages.

Delay in bitumen supply impact Fiji's road rehab program

The delay in the supply of bitumen has impacted delivery of road maintenance and rehabilitation programs for the past month. The Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) executive chairperson Atunaisa Nayago said bitumen – the black binder material used for road surfacing – had been in high demand in the last two months because of urgent road repairs needed before the anticipated cyclone season from November to April. He said because of this delay, they had implemented alternative measures to ensure the safety and functionality of the country's

road infrastructure. "To address the potential risks associated with the non-supply of bitumen, we have initiated gravel patching using crushed base materials in the affected areas," Mr Nayago said. "This temporary solution aims to provide a safe driving experience for the motorists while we await the arrival of necessary supplies." Additionally, Mr Nayago said the authority was also actively exploring other alternatives, such as emulsion patching, to address priority areas that required immediate attention. He said those measures were being taken to

minimise inconvenience to road users and ensure smooth flow of traffic. Mr Nayago said they had received confirmation that

bitumen supplier Technix Pacific Pte Limited that a shipment would arrive in the first week of November. He said normal road

maintenance works would resume once supply was restored.



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Fiji News



I am pleased to see our own people doing well wherever they go. Photographed here with Vinod Bhindi outside his business in Los Angeles. He will be our new Honorary Consul in Los Angeles where we have a substantial Fiji diaspora. He hosted us to a lovely lunch which included the security personnel assigned to me by the U.S. Federal Government over the two weeks I spent in the U.S. attending the UN in New York and Washington D.C. Vinaka vakalevu incoming HC Vinod Bhindi!

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Diwali

Diwali: Spreading the Lights of Happiness

It's a Festival that illuminates the Earth as well as the Skies and brings joy abound on this world. It is a festival when the whole of India transcends into a land of myriad lamps. Deepavali, the Festival of Lights has all the charm, grandeur and splendour that can even illuminate our minds and hearts while also promoting the much needed peace, harmony and brotherhood in the society. It is a Festival that unifies every religion, every home and every heart. The festival of Deepavali has a deep spiritual meaning, it essentially means the Awareness of the Inner Light. In a way it is the celebration of the awakening and awareness of the Inner Light which has the power to outshine darkness and clear all obstacles in life. Deepavali literally means a row or array of lights. Celebrated on the thirteenth/ fourteenth day in the dark half of the Kartika Masa (October – November), it is a celebration of light despite being the darkest night of the darkest period. As every festival in India even the Festival of Deepavali has its own inner significance than mere lighting diyas, wearing new clothes, exchanging sweets and bursting crackers. Diwali's essence lies in the sloka, 'Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya' which means "Lead me from darkness to light." Similarly, we have to light the lamp of happiness, the lamp of prosperity and the lamp



of knowledge to dispel sorrow, poverty as well as disease. As per the Vedanta, every devout Hindu has to fill his heart with the oil of love, light the wick with the knowledge of Truth and ward off ignorance. It further states that we can kindle light in many hearts just like a Diya which can light many Diyas. One of the legends associated with Diwali that Lord Krishna killed demon Narakasura to free the Gopikas, in a way signifies that we have to fight the evil or demonic forces within us by following the path of righteousness. The festival of

Diwali reminds each one of us to understand that life is much more than a mere journey and it's a continuous quest for truth and knowledge. Unity in Diversity: The legends regarding Diwali also highlight the philosophical truth of the Vedas. The Festival of Diwali binds people and is a synthesis of spirituality, religion, culture and social values. In Northern India, people celebrate the Festival of Lights to mark the return of Lord Ram to Ayodhya along with Seeta and brother Lakshman after a 14 year exile. While in South India it signifies the victory of

Lord Krishna over demon Narakasura. Ultimately both remind us of the necessity to destroy evil forces and strengthen divine forces. In Western India, Diwali is associated with the legend which states that on this day Lord Vishnu in his 5th incarnation as Vamana, had rescued Lakshmi from the prison of King Bali. This is another reason behind worshipping and invoking Goddess Lakshmi during Diwali. As per a legend from the epic Mahabharata, it was Karthik Amavasya when the Pancha Pandavas returned from their 12 years of exile. It is said the people who loved the Pandavas celebrated the day by lighting thousands of earthen lamps and distributing sweets. History says the greatest Hindu king Vikramaditya was coronated on the day of Diwali, which also makes the festival historic and not merely mythological. The Festival of Diwali is also of great significance to Jains as it is said it was on this day that Lord Mahaveera attained Nirvana or eternal bliss.

The Sikhs too have a reason to celebrate Diwali. History says that it was on this auspicious day that Guru Hargobind, the Sixth Sikh Guru was freed from captivity of Jahangir, the Mughal Emperor. Sikhs also celebrate Diwali to commemorate the laying of the foundation stone for the Golden Temple in 1577. Sweet Temptations: Diwali is that Festival when

sweets continue to tempt us throughout. If there is one festival which boasts of loads and loads of sweets, then it is undoubtedly Deepavali which is just incomplete with sweets. Sweet boxes are generously exchanged among friends and relatives, in a way contributing towards harmonious co-existence. In the modern day world, Diwali celebrations are not just confined to India, but is celebrated by Indians across the globe with the same festive spirit. It helps in fostering a sense of brotherhood as it encourages people to come together and celebrate the festival regardless of their background. The Divine light burns within us and all around us. Let this Diwali bring joy and happiness abound for humanity by dispelling the darkness of ignorance and many more evils that are creating havoc on mankind. Let the Lights of Happiness spread across the globe. It is all about discovering the knowledge of our infinite potential and dispelling ignorance. Diwali is also resplendent of the dawn of knowledge through the inner light, that is the enlightenment of the soul. The Spiritual Factor: As per the Vedanta, every devout Hindu has to fill his heart with the oil of love, light the wick with the knowledge of Truth and ward off ignorance. It further states that we can kindle light in many hearts just like a Diya which can light many Diyas.

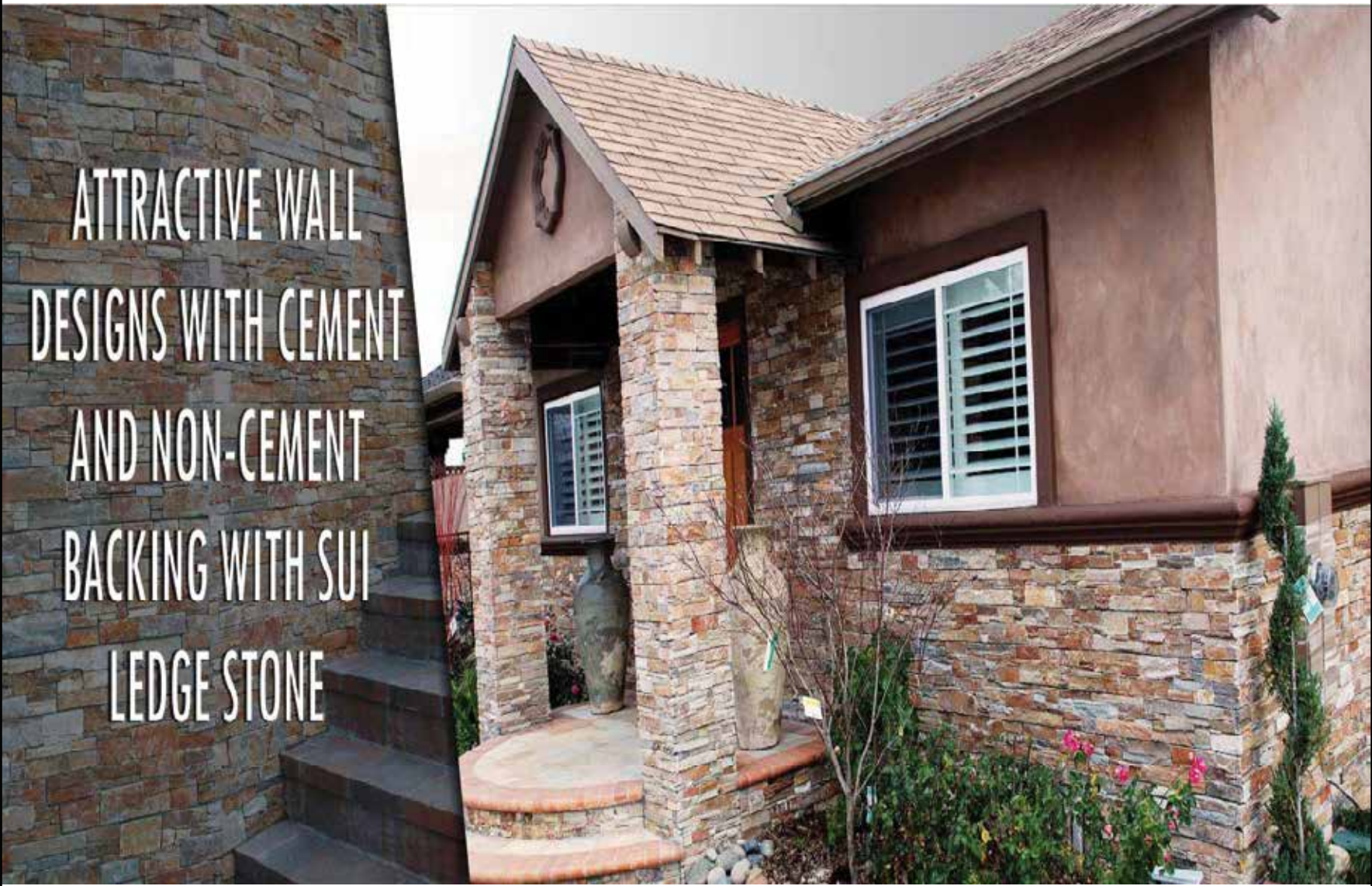




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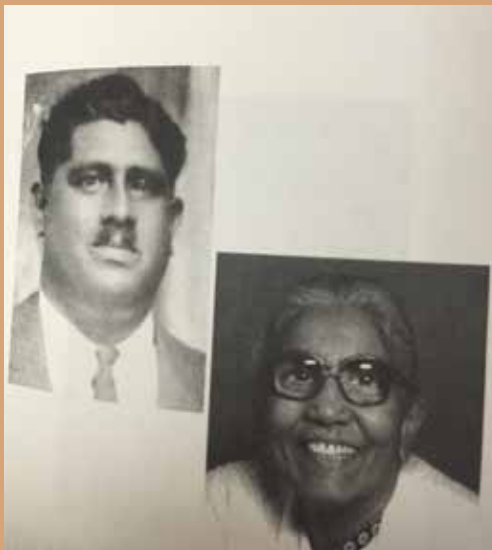
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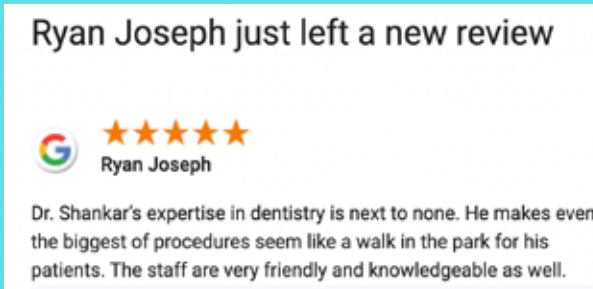
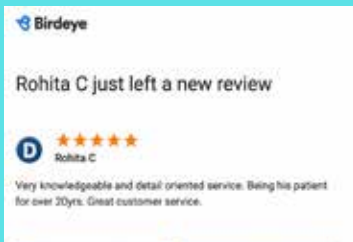
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Fiji News

EMPOWERING NUKUTOCIA: A BRIDGE TO PROGRESS AND UNITY

The Fiji Day Celebration on Ovalau held special significance for the residents of Nukutocia when a newly funded government foot crossing worth \$26,000 was inaugurated on Wednesday, October 11th. This foot crossing connects the eastern and western sections of the village, providing essential access for a population of 195 individuals residing in 45 households. Nukutocia village has always been recognized for its determination and unwavering efforts in promoting development. The inauguration of its new foot crossing by Hon. Sakiasi Ditoka, the Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, represents a significant milestone in their partnership with the Government. "Government remains committed to prioritizing the well-being of every Fijian, regardless of where they are located geographically." "This new inclusion guarantees accessibility to the village area situated on the other side of the creek, regardless of the prevailing weather conditions. This significantly amplifies convenience, particularly for women, children, and the elderly," stated Honorable Ditoka. The Minister emphasized that these initiatives stand as a national priority, aiming to support rural and outer island communities in fulfilling

their fundamental requirements, elevating their living standards, and achieving self-sufficiency. "The core aim is to offer equal opportunities to every citizen of this country, ensuring that rural and maritime communities actively participate in the nation's growth and development," reiterated Honorable Ditoka, emphasizing the government's commitment to inclusivity and progress for all. "This foot-crossing bridge serves not only as a convenient pathway for villagers to traverse the creek but also guarantees safer journeys for school children, women, and elders of the village, both day and night," he remarked. The Minister also spoke to the villagers on the importance of a comprehensive village development plan. "Significant development necessitates open dialogue, commencing at the grassroots level, where each individual plays a unique role in advancing the path of development. Hon. Ditoka emphasized that development is not the sole responsibility of a single entity but rather a shared mission that thrives on the synergy of collective efforts. "By recognizing the significance of the contributions of each individual and uniting under a common vision, we can drive sustainable progress and bring about enduring positive changes for



each of our communities and beyond." "The importance of integrating climate change and disaster risk management into our development efforts cannot be overstated. Proceeding with development without considering these factors can lead to substantial costs and even disasters. It is essential to incorporate risk-informed strategies across various sectors, ensuring the resilience of rural communities in Fiji," said the Minister. School teacher and respected advisor to the Nukutocia Village Development Committee, Mr. Luke Vateitei, expressed his heartfelt appreciation for the Government's initiatives and underscored the

unwavering dedication of the village towards self-improvement. "As a village that values leadership and collaboration for the betterment of our community, we swiftly recovered after the devastation caused by STC Winston. Our concerted efforts led to significant improvements in our housing facilities. We have also successfully acquired grass-cutting machines, with 20 more on the way," Mr. Vateitei remarked. "While we have made progress, there are still areas where we need the Government's support," he continued. "We are pleased that the Minister has highlighted the importance of integrated village

development. Currently, we are working towards the realization of our vision, which includes establishing village cooperatives not only for our village but also for the entire Tikina Lovoni," Mr. Vateitei added. "This proactive approach by the government mirrors a shared vision for a more inclusive, secure, and prosperous Fiji, ensuring a better future for all its citizens," he concludes. The newly commissioned footcrossing not only symbolizes physical connectivity but also signifies the government's dedication to fostering social cohesion, resilience, and progress in every community across the country.

FEO launches strategic plan to enhance credibility and efficiency of electoral processes

The Fijian Elections Office and the Elections Disability Access Working Group has launched its 2024-2027 strategic plans to enhance the credibility and efficiency of the electoral processes. While speaking during the launch, Acting Supervisor of Elections Ana Mataiciwa says the strategic plan will serve as a road map that will guide the FEO over the coming years, outline key objectives, strategies and actions to ensure that every vote is counted and every elections is conducted with utmost integrity. She says the strategic plans includes the modernisation of electoral processes, the promotion of voter engagements and the enhancement of stakeholders collaboration as the

FEO is committed to fostering an environment where inclusive and diversity are respected and where Fijians can exercise their right to vote with confidence, pride and without fear. Mataiciwa says their strategic plan guides the work to assist FEO in making decisions, planning projects and aligning work with commitments to stakeholders. She says the FEO will also make sure that the Elections Disability working groups will also be in all the electoral cycle, whether to be a candidate or forming their own party. When questioned by the media on some of the concerns raised during the previous elections, Mataiciwa says the main concerns raised was trust in the election and its

processes. She says whenever there were concerns raised to the FEO, people were shut down, however, moving forward they will have a consultative ap-

proach and open door policy through the amended laws in the upcoming months whereby concerns will be referred to relevant departments to be addressed.

She says this will also be looked at during their auditing of the system to be transparent during pre-elections and after election.



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Fiji News

New impersonation scam emerges on Viber targeting the education sector, and asking for funds to be sent via MPAiSA - Shandil

The Consumer Council of Fiji is issuing a fresh alert to the public regarding a new and highly sophisticated form of impersonation scam targeting the education sector that has recently come to the council's attention. In this latest mutation of the Viber impersonation scam, hackers have infiltrated Viber accounts of several prominent figures in the education sector and are sending messages to teachers and colleagues, requesting funds to be transferred to certain M-PAiSA accounts. This manipulative scheme preys on the goodwill of individuals who genuinely want to help, and it has already caused financial distress to some victims. Council CEO, Seema Shandil says scammers have evolved their tactics to exploit the trust of individuals in the education sector, posing a financial threat to teachers and prominent figures within the education sector. Shandil is urging the public to take heed of this new development as this scam will potentially spill-over and target the general public. The council says

one disturbing case involved the hacking of the Viber account of Muniappa Gounder, the General Secretary of the Fiji Teachers Union. Shandil says messages were sent from his compromised account to teachers and other individuals in the education community, requesting urgent fund transfers, often citing critical reasons. Another targeted individual was Sangeeta Singh, the CEO of the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority. Her Viber account was also compromised, with fraudulent messages sent to teachers and other prominent figures in the education sector, imploring them to send money. In one particularly cunning tactic, a high school assistant principal received a call, purportedly from an educational institution, claiming to have sent him important information. He was asked to click on a link sent via text messages, which ultimately led to the hacking of his Viber account. Subsequently, messages were sent from his account to teachers, urging them to transfer money. Shandil says the scammers have been utiliz-



ing various excuses to persuade their victims to send funds, including urgent medical attention and an immediate need for cash. A significant challenge in this new scam is that when consumers attempt to call the number via Viber to verify if the person genuinely needs assistance, the call is answered by the scammers themselves. As a result, the council strongly advises consumers to make a normal cellular call to the individual in question before transferring any

money to ensure their identity. Shandil says it is alarming to see the evolution of these fraudulent impersonation schemes. They urge all teachers and individuals in the education sector to exercise extreme caution and verify the identity of those requesting financial assistance. Consumers are also reminded to urgently switch-on two-factor authentication for their viber app to reduce vulnerability to such hacking. The Council is actively engaged with the Multi-

Interagency Taskforce, led by the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Trade, Cooperatives, SMEs, and Communications. This collaboration aims to devise effective strategies and actions to address such scams and protect consumers from further harm. People who have fallen victim to such scams are urged to contact the Council immediately through the national consumer helpline at 155 or via email at complaints@consumersfiji.org.

Fiji to have reduced time and cost associated with trade after receiving blueprint

Fiji will now have reduced time and cost associated with international trade after receiving a Blueprint with the European Union to develop the first Single Window System that intends to pave the way for work on developing and optimizing the country's existing capabilities of the customs management system. While receiving the blueprint the Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, SMEs and Communications Manoa Kamikamica says the release of the blueprint for Fiji's future electronic single window will lay the foundation for government departments to seamlessly accelerate the trade processes internationally. He says this will not only reduce the time and costs associated with trade but also improve the ease of doing business and will help to reduce paper usage and carbon emissions generated when traders physically travel to different government agencies to clear

consignments. While handing over the blueprint, the Chargé d'Affaires of the European Union to Fiji and the Pacific, Dr Erja Askola highlighted that both countries aim to strengthen

their trade relations based on the EU-Pacific Economic Partnership Agreement, allowing Fijian businesses to export all their goods to the 27 EU Member States without duties and quotas

and help Fiji's exports to the EU market. She says to give the trade a further boost, they recently launched the Fiji-EU Trade and Investment Forum as a platform for interactions

between Fijian and European businesses and other relevant actors that will tremendously facilitate Fiji's trade with Europe and the rest of the world.





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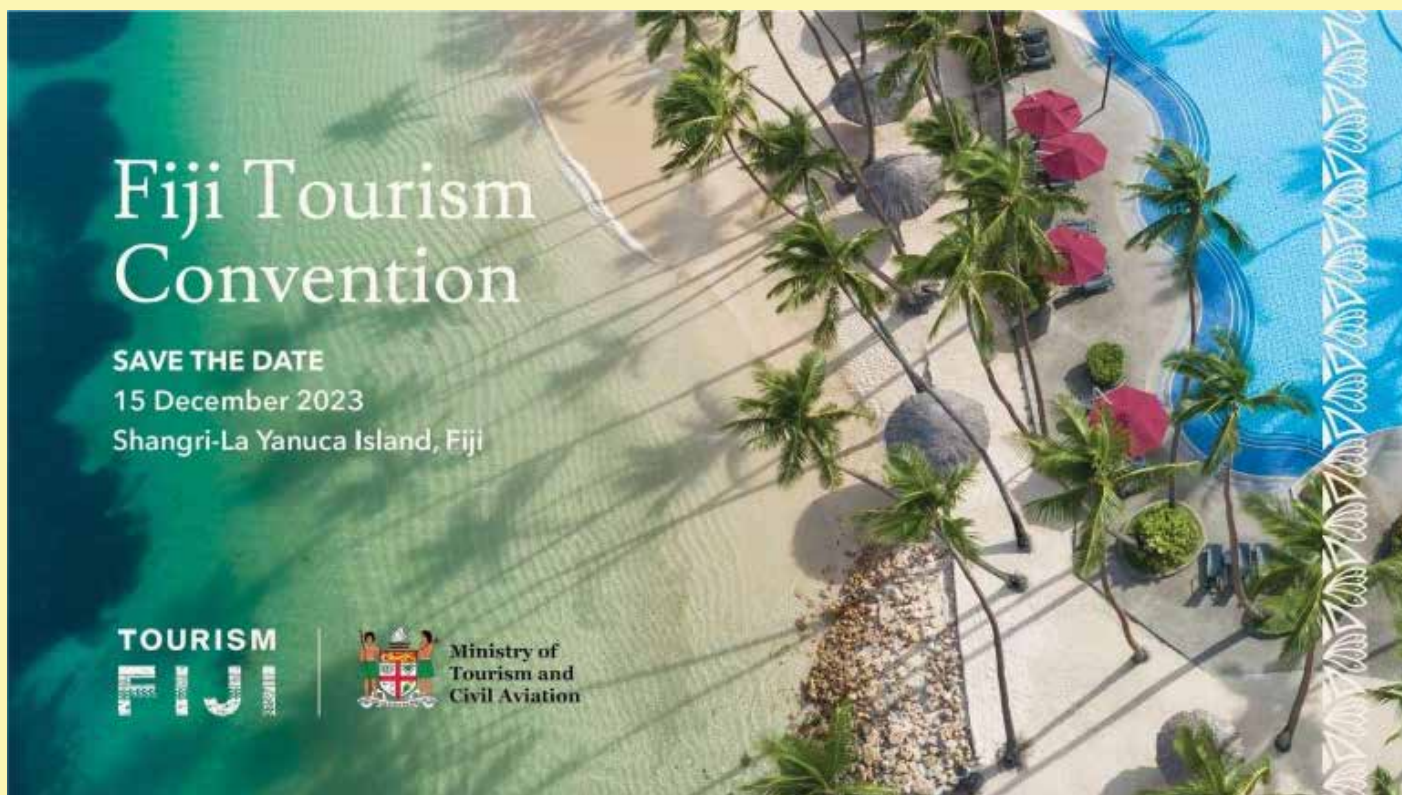
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Fiji News

New dates for Fiji Tourism Convention

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Viliame Gavoka has announced the rescheduled dates for the 'Fiji Tourism Convention,' which is now booked for 15 December 2023 at the Shangri-La Yanuca Island, Fiji. This Convention stands as a pivotal milestone in the tourism industry of Fiji, bringing together leaders, experts, and stakeholders in constructive dialogue on the latest trends, challenges, and opportunities within the sector. Participants will include representatives from various tourism businesses, government agencies, and industry associations. DPM Gavoka emphasised the significance of continued dialogue, stating, "We are reinstating the Fiji Tourism Convention as a shared commitment of the industry. We hope that this platform provides an opportunity for collaborative engagement and idea exchange towards the sustainable development



of our tourism sector. We are enthusiastic about hosting the Convention and making it an annual event." The program will encompass a wide array of key-

note addresses and panel discussions, addressing critical topics, including hospitality dynamics, transport infrastructure expansion, tourism policy and regula-

tion, and sustainable investment strategies for emerging markets. The forthcoming Fiji Tourism Convention is expected to foster productive discussions and so-

lutions for the advancement of Fiji's tourism industry, all while further establishing the nation as a premier tourist destination.

Fiji welcomes the Pacific Partnership

"The Pacific Partnership is a testament to the enduring bonds of friendship and cooperation that unite our nations." This was highlighted by the Minister for Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, Sakiasi Ditoka at the opening of the Pacific Partnership 2023 today at the Grand Pacific Hotel. In his opening remarks, Ditoka said the partnership as a result of its collaboration with the United States Navy, stands as a shining example of what nations can achieve when they unite to address shared challenges, working towards peace, resilience, and prosperity in the region. "As we approach the cyclone season, it is a timely reminder of the vital role of cooperation in addressing the diverse challenges that confront us in the Pacific." "Our region is renowned not only for its natural beauty, the vastness of its ocean spaces and the peaceful serenity that its images conjure in our imagination but unfortunately, also for its vulnerability to natural disasters, the ever-present threat of climate change, and the pressing need to fortify our health-care systems." Ditoka added the Pacific Partnership stands



as a beacon of hope, symbolizing its resilience and embodies the values of compassion, solidarity, and the understanding that no single nation can tackle these challenges in isolation. "Our partnership with the United States through the US Navy, the Center for Excellence

in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, and USAID epitomizes our shared commitment to humanitarian assistance and disaster response." "Through training, collaboration, and resource-sharing, we not only enhance our ability to respond to disasters effectively

but also strengthen our capacity to provide essential services like healthcare and education." In closing Ditoka extended his heartfelt appreciation to the United States Navy and all partners for their unwavering support and collaboration. "Let us join forces, working hand

in hand, to ensure that Pacific Partnership 2023 becomes an unequivocal success. Thank you and let us commence this incredible journey of resilience and hope. May our efforts help to bring prosperity, health, and happiness to the people of Fiji and the Pacific."

Fiji News

Shamima Ali calls out government for revoking march permit

Fiji Women's Crisis Center Coordinator Shamima Ali says government must put an end to the fundamentalist rhetoric and fear mongering and remind ourselves that Fiji is a secular state and has had a long history of religious freedom despite attempts to derail this sometimes. Ali condemned governments decision to disallow a group of students to march peacefully to call for an end to the genocide being conducted in Gaza. She says this is a violation of peoples right to freedom of expression, assembly and participation in global movements. The Coordinator also questioned if Police made this decision with impartiality or if it was partiality for Rabuka's pro-Israel stance.



Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji condemns attack on Israel



Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka today issued a strong condemnation of the recent attack by Hamas on Israeli towns and settlements near the Gaza Strip and central Israel. The Prime Minister expressed profound concern regarding the indiscriminate firing of thousands of rockets toward Israeli population centers, as well as the use of other munitions with the sole intention of causing harm and loss

of life, regardless of age, gender, or status. "Fiji is deeply troubled by the distressing reports of civilians, including the elderly and young, who have been subjected to attacks and abductions from their homes," the Prime Minister said. "The Government of Fiji categorically abhors the barbarity of these atrocities and calls for the immediate release of all abducted persons. The attack has, regrettably, resulted in the

loss of over 1,200 Israeli civilian lives, with many more injured. "I want to make clear our condemnation of the terrorist attack by Hamas which targeted innocent non-combatants and resulted in continuing loss of life. We also stand with Israel. Israel has the right to defend itself and her people. In light of these tragic events, Fiji extends its heartfelt condolences to the victims and their grieving

families. "We stand firmly with the State of Israel and affirm its unequivocal right to defend itself against such indiscriminate attacks, as permitted by international law." At the recent United Nations General Assembly, Fiji, in alignment with other nations, called for global peace and the establishment of zones of peace in our respective regions. Central to this pursuit of peace is our unwavering commitment

to opposing aggressions that violate the principles of human decency, territorial integrity, and the deliberate targeting of innocent civilian lives, in accordance with international humanitarian law. The Prime Minister and the people of Fiji send their thoughts and prayers to Israel as it navigates through these difficult days, working diligently to safeguard its people and secure peace for the region.

Fiji stand with Israel in Gaza conflict

Fiji affirms its solidarity with Israel and commitment to global peace in the midst of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. Fiji's stance was demonstrated by its recent vote in support of the Canadian amendment and against the recent UN resolution urging a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Along with other countries, Fiji supported a Canadian amendment to the resolution. The amendment intended to address actual ground realities and correct factual omissions, identify and condemn Hamas for initiating the crisis, holding hostages, and using them and civilians as human shields since October 7 2023 terrorist attack. These facts are essential to understanding the reality of the situation that will inform the next steps in seeking a meaningful solution. The final UN resolution did not mention these facts hence Fiji voted against it. Fiji's intent in voting for the amendment was to advocate against all acts of terror, show support for the hostages and innocent civilians. However the amendment was defeated. Fiji, along with the United States and 12 other nations, firmly support Israel's right to defend itself and, in this particular case, to counter Hamas, a terrorist organisation. The 14 nations highlight



the fact that Hamas has used civilians as human shields, and in manipulating global opinion against Israel. From coverage of the conflict since October 7; Hamas' actions and level of atrocities underscore their disregard for innocent lives. It's crucial to note that Israel's primary target is Hamas, not the Palestinian population. Israel's response aims to safeguard its sovereignty and protect its citizens. They have established safe

zones to help Gazan citizens relocate out of harm's way. While the resolution does call for the immediate release of all hostages, condemns all acts of terrorism and indiscriminate attacks, including those against Israeli civilians, it fails to explicitly name Hamas. Addressing all aspects of the situation is crucial to achieving lasting peace. If the actions of Hamas are not unequivocally denounced in the resolution, the attainment

of lasting peace remains in jeopardy. As pointed out by Israel's UN Ambassador Gilad Erdan, a ceasefire would provide Hamas with time to rearm, and the vote was not intended to bring peace but to "tie Israel's hands." In the words of the US UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield there are no 'law-free' zones in war. Hamas is not a signatory to any international convention, and its actions consistently disregard international standards

of conduct and the laws of war. The organisation's sole objective is the destruction of a sovereign state and its people, regardless of the costs. Fiji is among 14 countries, including the United States, Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Guatemala, Hungary, Israel, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, and Tonga, that voted against the resolution drafted by the Arab nations.

Peace Corps Fiji welcomes more trainees

Peace Corps Fiji welcomes the second cohort of Peace Corps Trainees to arrive after the 3-year suspension of the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This group of 31 trainees is the 98th group of Americans to volunteer to serve the government and the people of Fiji. After the successful completion of an intensive 10-week training (where they will learn the local language, and culture, and enhance technical expertise) they will begin their 2-year service in their host communities throughout the island of Viti Levu. This cohort will serve against the Community Economic Empowerment Program (CEEP). Designed in partnership with the Government of Fiji, CEEP will train partner communities to design and manage projects and generate income, while also helping

individuals manage household funds. Volunteers will support their communities in creating viable and sustainable projects that address prioritized community needs. Together, volunteers and community partners will work to ensure the success and sustainability of their projects. Peace Corps Fiji Country Director, Kury Cobham, stated "For 55 years, communities within Fiji have identified their priorities, and Peace Corps has provided trained volunteers to work with local partners towards those goals. CEEP is the next chapter in this success story; one where communities will develop the means of economic security," said Cobham. In addition, Ms. Cobham shared that "Volunteer collaboration and partnership with host villages will embrace inclusivity; encouraging participation from



a wide range of community members to achieve community goals." Peace Corps Fiji celebrates 55 years of partner-

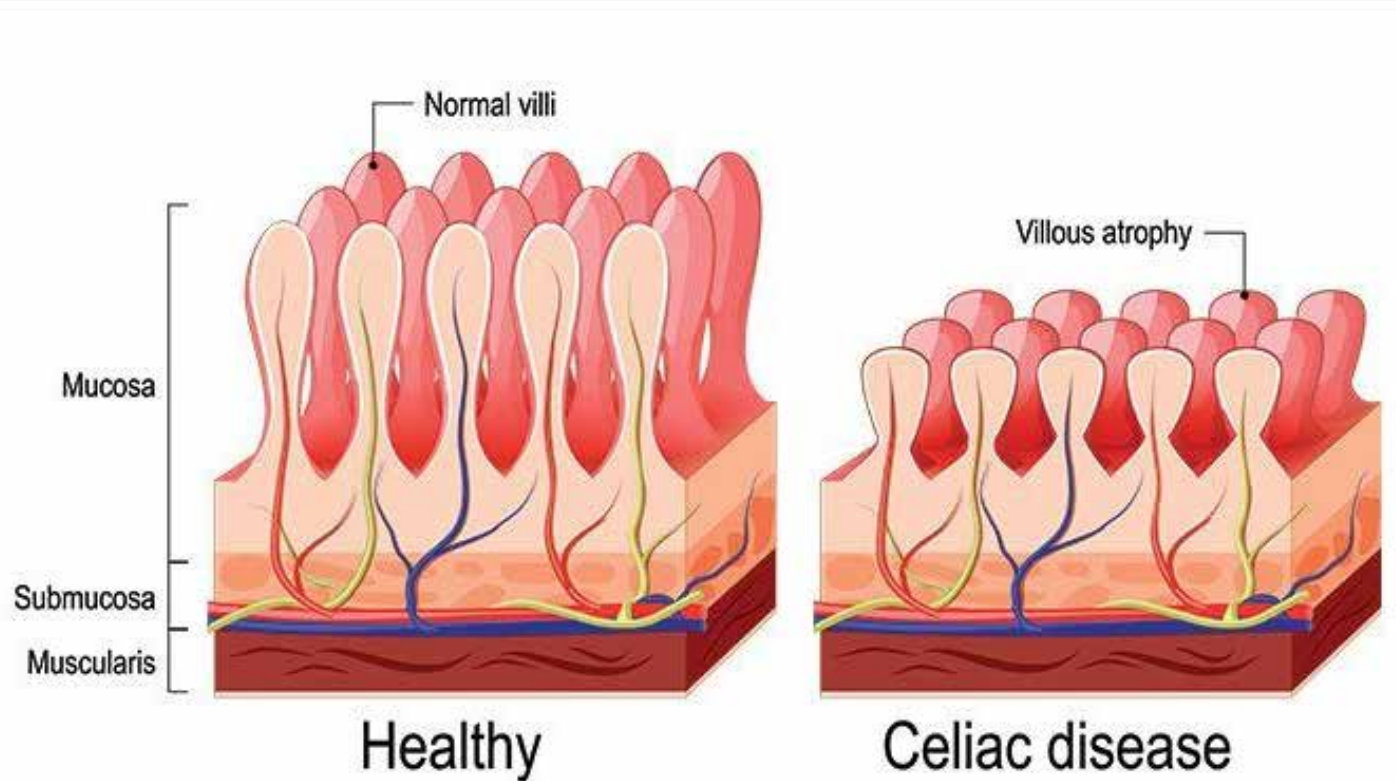
ship and support with Fiji. This longstanding relationship provides invaluable opportunities for the Peace Corps to impart

technical knowledge, partnership, and guidance towards achieving Fiji's priorities and development goals.

Health News

Celiac Disease and Higher Risk of Women's Health Disorders

Women with celiac disease face a much higher risk of other health complications, including ovarian failure, endometriosis, and pregnancy loss, a large new study suggests. "The key message here is that celiac disease is associated with higher odds of women's health disorders," said researcher Rama Nanah, MD, a clinical hospitalist at the Cleveland Clinic. Women with celiac disease should be aware of these associations, and doctors should be careful to check for any additional risks, she said. Compared to women without the condition, those with celiac disease also had significantly higher rates of polycystic ovary syndrome, irregular menstruation, and infertility. The study found that women with celiac disease have a six times greater chance of primary ovarian failure, a 2½ times higher chance of endometriosis, and twice the odds of repeated pregnancy loss – compared to women without celiac disease. But researchers couldn't figure out why celiac disease raises these risks in women. They looked at rates of

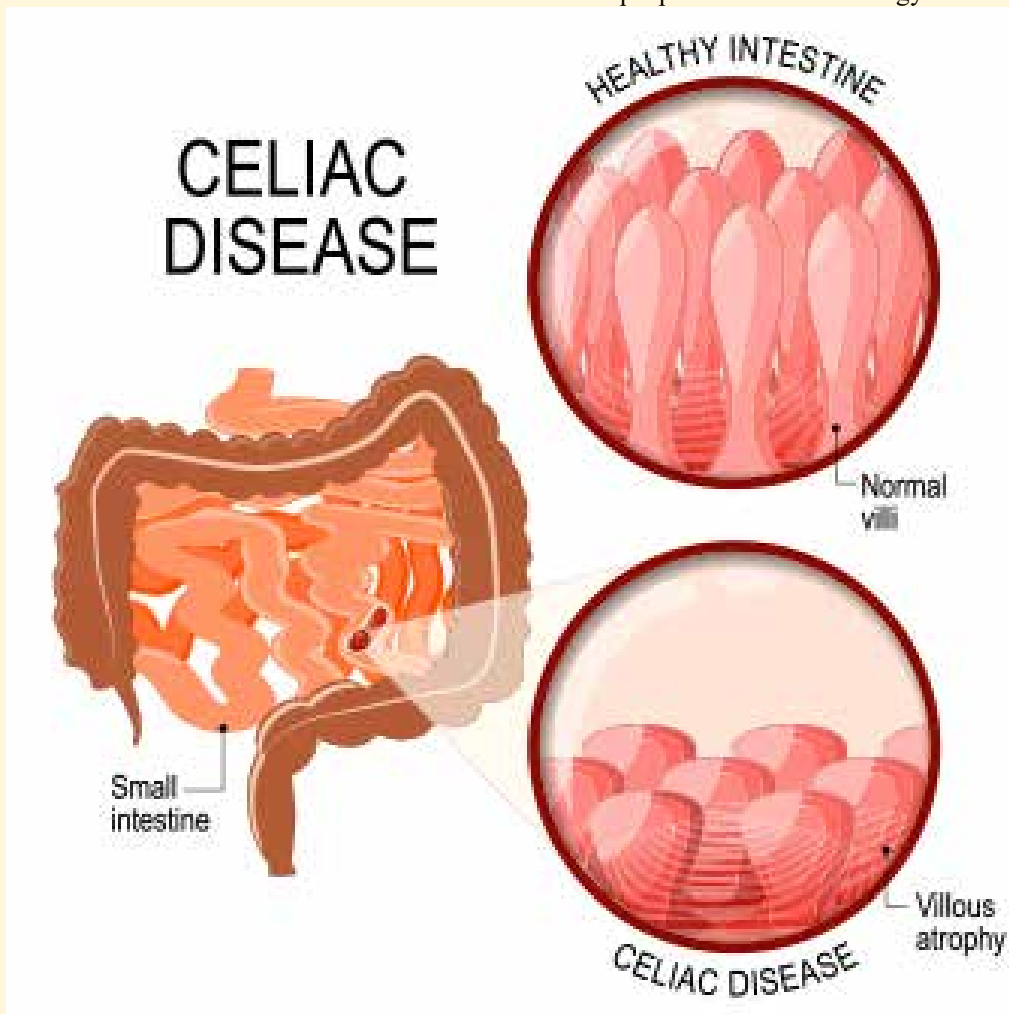


health disorders in 9,368 women with celiac disease and another 25 million women without the condition matched for age, race, and body mass index using a national database of medical claims. More Common in Women The number of people

diagnosed with celiac disease continues to grow, and it remains more common among women, Nanah said at ACG 2023 in Vancouver, Canada, a major conference sponsored by the American College of Gastroenterology. Other re-

searchers, for example, report women are about twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with celiac disease. Diagnosis was based on a positive blood test, biopsy results, and/or a code in the records that a woman had dietary counseling regarding celiac disease. Nanah and colleagues included girls and women 10 to 60 years old. Those 10 years to 18 years old with celiac disease were almost four times more likely to have what's known as delayed menarche, in which a girl does not begin menstruating by age 15 or within 3 years from the time adult breasts start to form. In the next age group, women 19 to 35, those with celiac disease had higher rates of polycystic ovary syndrome, or PCOS, endometriosis, and infertility. Women 36 to 45 with celiac disease also had higher rates of these three disorders, as well as menopausal disorders including premature menopause. Women 46 to 60 also had higher rates of menopausal disorders if they were diagnosed with celiac disease. The study adds to previous research that linked celiac disease to higher rates of complications during pregnancy, labor, and delivery. Nanah said their large study could help clear

up some prior contradictory evidence about these associations and adds a new link to higher rates of PCOS in women with celiac disease. The large number of women from a diverse outpatient population were strengths of the research. Because it used data collected for reasons other than research, some factors, like the effect of diet on the rates of health disorders, could not be determined. The study suggests that girls and women with celiac disease should have tests done for these other health conditions. The research is impactful "because it allows us to keep in mind co-existing conditions that may affect our patients' quality of life, including infertility," session co-moderator Shannon Chang, MD, a gastroenterologist at NYU Langone Health in New York City, said when asked to comment. Because doctors cannot do much more for people with celiac disease than suggest a gluten-restricted diet, most of those affected do not return for frequent medical care, Chang said. The message for primary care doctors and OB/GYNs is to consider these other conditions in women with celiac disease and bring patients back for regular follow-up visits.



Health News

Study Says People Over 50 Lost Brain Power in Pandemic

Adults over 50 lost brain strength during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of infection, a new study in *The Lancet* says. Researchers in Great Britain had more than 3,000 people complete annual questionnaires and online cognitive tests that measure memory and other brain functions. Study researchers created the PROTECT study to learn how brains age and why people develop dementia. They used brain-training games for memory skill and reasoning. The questionnaire examined risk factors. Results showed a cognitive decline, with stress, loneliness, and alcohol use possibly explaining some findings, the BBC reported. Memory decline continued in the second

year. People who already had memory issues before COVID-19 began had the worst decline.

"Coping with Covid fears, worries and uncertainties and disruption to routines may have had a 'real, lasting impact' on brain health, they say," the BBC wrote. "The rate of the drop in cognitive function was accelerated during the first year of the pandemic, when lockdowns occurred, the study found." Social isolation can also have negative effects on brain health, said Susan Mitchell of Alzheimer's Research UK. "Sadly, there's no sure-fire way to prevent dementia yet, but meanwhile, taking care of our brains can at least help stack the odds in our



favour," she said. "It's never too early or too late to think about

adopting healthy habits, which includes looking after your heart

health, keeping connected and staying sharp."

Not getting enough deep sleep may increase the risk of developing dementia

There are currently more than 55 million people Trusted Source around the world living with dementia, and researchers estimate that someone in the world develops dementia every three seconds. As the number of people with dementia is expected to hit about 153 million by 2050 Trusted Source, researchers have been working hard to find more ways to lower a person's risk of developing this neurological disease. Many researchers believe inadequate sleep is a modifiable risk factor for dementia. Now, a new study provides more proof by finding that as little as a 1% reduction in deep sleep — also called slow-wave sleep — each year for people over 60 years of age equals a 27% increased risk of developing dementia. Clarifying the link between sleep, aging, and dementia risk For this study, researchers from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia examined data from 346 study participants over the age of 60 enrolled in the Framingham Heart Study. All of the chosen participants had completed two overnight sleep studies, with about five years between each sleep study. Researchers reported that, on average, the amount of deep sleep each participant

had declined between the two studies, indicating slow-wave sleep loss due to aging. Scientists also followed the study participants from the time of their second sleep study until 2018, looking for dementia diagnoses. "Responding to the rising prevalence of dementia is one of the most critical challenges of our time," Dr. Matthew Pase, associate professor at the Monash School of Psychological Sciences and the Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health in Melbourne, Australia, and senior author of this study told Medical News Today. "Since we don't have any readily available curative treatments to halt or reverse dementia permanently, we were interested in understanding ways in which dementia can be prevented in the first instance," he said. "For the purpose of informing dementia prevention guidelines Trusted Source, we were interested in clarifying how sleep changed with aging and whether changes in sleep with aging were associated with dementia risk," he added. Decreased deep sleep increases dementia risk Upon analysis, the research team found a total of 52 cases of dementia. Even after adjusting for a variety of factors, including age, sex,

and sleeping medication use, researchers found each percentage decrease in deep sleep each year was associated with a 27% increase in the risk of dementia. The scientists also reported that, on average, the amount of deep sleep each study participant had declined between the two sleep studies, indicating slow-wave sleep loss due to aging. "Good quality sleep is important for many aspects of health, but poor sleep is not really thought of as a dementia risk factor. These findings further reinforce the need for adults to prioritize good sleep as part of a healthy lifestyle," Dr. Pase said. "Much like people make time to fit physical activity into their schedule, people should also make time for sleep of sufficient quality and duration. Doctors can educate adults on strategies to optimize sleep and also help to screen for sleep disorders," he added. What is deep sleep? Medical experts suggest most adults get between seven to nine hours Trusted Source of sleep each night. There are four main cycles the body goes through during sleep — three cycles of non-REM (rapid eye movement) sleep and one of REM sleep. The first two non-REM cycles occur as the body

begins to fall asleep. The third non-REM cycle is known as deep sleep. This is the longest of the three non-REM cycles. At this time, the body's heart rate and breathing slows, and brain waves become slower and larger. It is normally very hard to wake up during the deep sleep cycle. During deep sleep, the body replenishes its energy, regenerates cells, and grows and repairs any tissues and bones. Past studies also show deep sleep helps strengthen the body's immune system. It also plays an important role in keeping the brain healthy by helping with developing and storing memories Trusted Source, cognitive function Trusted Source, and efficient learning Trusted Source. Why does deep sleep affect dementia? Because deep sleep plays an important role in keeping the brain healthy, not getting enough sleep can increase a person's risk of developing brain-related diseases such as dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. A study published in April 2021 found people in their 50s and 60s who slept six hours or less Trusted Source each night had a higher risk of developing dementia later in life. Research published in June 2021 reported that deep

sleep may help clear out toxic proteins from the brain related to Alzheimer's disease. A study published in May 2023 provided evidence suggesting deep sleep may help protect against memory loss Trusted Source in older people who have a high amount of beta-amyloid Trusted Source in the brain, which is considered to be a main driving factor for developing Alzheimer's disease. Tips for better sleep Medical News Today also spoke with Dr. David Merrill, a geriatric psychiatrist and director of the Pacific Neuroscience Institute's Pacific Brain Health Center in Santa Monica, CA, about this study. He said that this study has several implications, including that loss of slow-wave sleep could be a potentially modifiable risk factor for dementia, the most common cause of which is Alzheimer's disease. "We know that age and genetics are non-modifiable risks, but the good news is that we are figuring out there are a number of ways to improve the modifiable risks, (of) which sleep quality is definitely one," Dr. Merrill said. When asked about how people can get enough sleep to help possibly lower their dementia risk, Dr. Merrill said to focus on habits and behavioral strategies.



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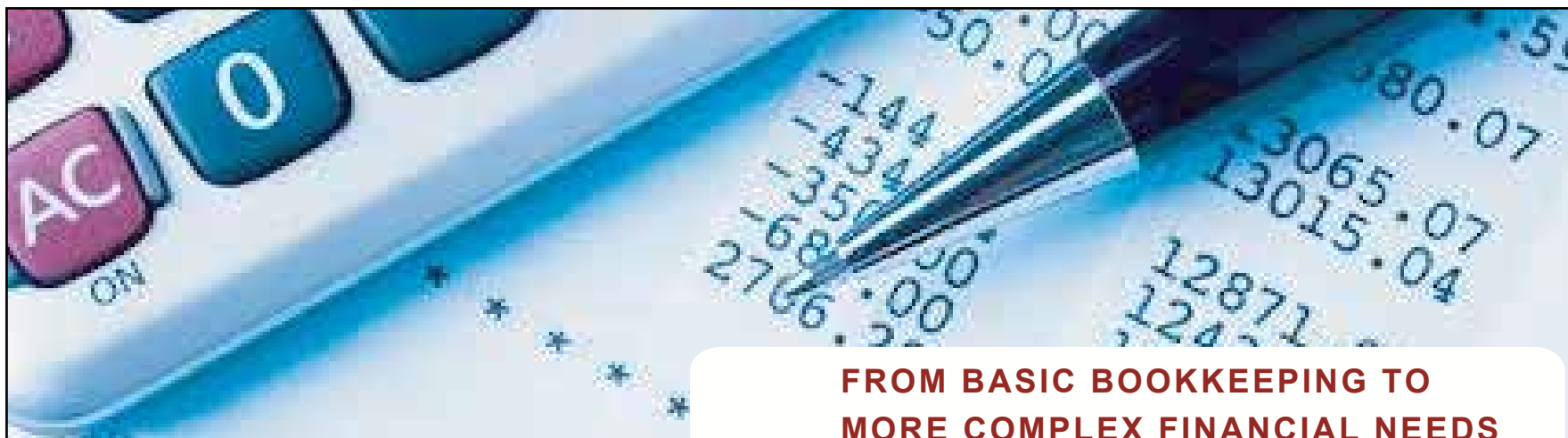
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Health News

States reconsider religious exemptions for vaccinations in child care

More than half the children who attend Munchkin Land Daycare near Billings, Montana, have special needs or compromised immune systems. The kids, who range in age from 4 months to 9 years, have conditions that include fetal alcohol syndrome, cystic fibrosis, and Down syndrome, according to owner Sheryl Hutzenbiler. "These families came to me knowing we could offer them a safe and healthy environment," Hutzenbiler said. Part of ensuring that healthy environment is having a strong vaccination policy, she said, especially for those who are immunocompromised or too young to receive the full slate of childhood vaccines. So, when officials at Montana's health department revived a proposal that would allow people to claim religious exemptions from immunization requirements at child care facilities, Hutzenbiler was both dismayed and relieved. Dismayed, because allowing more children to claim exemptions could compromise the community immunity levels necessary to defend against highly infectious diseases like measles and pertussis. Relieved, because as she scoured the proposed regulations, she found that her facility, which is licensed to care for up to 15 children, would be in a category of smaller providers that could choose whether to enroll unvaccinated kids.

"If it came down to where I had to, I had no choice, I would stop enrolling children today," Hutzenbiler said. "In five years, I would be closed." Montana, like 44 other states, allows religious exemptions from immunization requirements for school-age children. If the state is successful in expanding its policy to child care facilities, it would become the second this year to add a religious exemption to its immunization requirements for younger kids. Mississippi began allowing such exemptions for schools and child care centers in July following a court ruling that the state's lack of a religious exemption violated the U.S. Constitution's free exercise clause. Until recently, the trend had been going the other way, with four states — California,

New York, Connecticut, and Maine — removing religious exemption policies over the past decade. West Virginia has never had a religious exemption. But religious exemptions, fueled by conservative backlash to covid-19 vaccinations, have become caught up in partisan politics, said Mary Ziegler, a University of California-Davis law professor who specializes in the law, history, and politics of reproduction, health care, and conservatism. "It tends to be breaking down much more along red state-blue state lines, where progressive states are moving in the direction of mandating vaccines in more situations and conservative states are moving more in the direction of broadening exemptions," Ziegler said.

"So, as much as religious exemptions for vaccines are not a new issue, they've become polarized in a new way." The proposal in Montana is similar to one the state Department of Public Health and Human Services floated last year, which a legislative committee temporarily blocked after public health advocates and child care providers objected. Afterward, in October 2022, health department officials said they would not enforce a religious exemption ban in child care centers. "We are committed to ensuring that these families have viable child care options in accordance with state and federal law," department spokesperson Jon Ebel told the Montana Free Press at the time. However, in the state's latest proposal, 45 pages into a 97-page draft rewrite of child care licensure rules, the health department seeks to extend that exemption to child care facilities, where a family now can claim a vaccine exemption only for medical reasons. (There is an existing religious exemption for the vaccine against *Haemophilus influenzae* Type B.) KFF Health News sent the health department a list of questions about its decision to include a religious exemption in the rules proposal. Ebel emailed a statement that did not address the exemption at all. "The rules package cuts red tape to increase access to child care for hard-

working Montana families, and ensures that related regulations align with statutory changes directed by the Legislature in 2021 and 2023," his statement said. The Montana Religious Freedom Restoration Act prohibits the state from infringing on a person's right to the exercise of religion.

Another act bans discrimination based on vaccination status. A religious exemption under Montana's proposed rules would require a child's parent or guardian to submit a form attesting that vaccination is contrary to their religious belief, observance, or practice. With no mechanism to check the validity of such claims, health professionals worry exemptions would spike, reducing community immunity levels. "Exemptions lead to less people being vaccinated, which can lead to more outbreaks and more sick kids," said Marian Kummer, a retired pediatrician who practiced in Billings for 36 years.

The risk of disease outbreaks would increase not only in those child care centers but in communities as well, said Sophia Newcomer, an associate professor at the University of Montana School of Public and Community Health Sciences. A community is protected by herd immunity from measles, for example, if 95% of the population is vaccinated against it, according to the World Health Organization. Montana's vaccine exemption rate among kindergartners was 3.5% in the 2020-21 school year, according to the most recent data available, putting it within that range of protection. The health department's proposed changes also

would eliminate a requirement that child care facilities keep out infected and unvaccinated children and staffers when someone becomes sick with a vaccine-preventable disease, said Kiely Lammers, director of the non-profit advocacy group Montana Families for Vaccines. Some have questioned the legitimacy of religious exemptions. Most religions, including a majority of Christian denominations, have no theological objection to vaccination, according to a scientific review published in 2013 in the journal *Vaccine*. And the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled limits do exist on religious and parental rights: "The right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or the child to communicable disease or the latter to ill health or death," says the 1944 ruling in *Prince v. Massachusetts*.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has called for the elimination of all nonmedical exemptions, including both religious exemptions and personal-belief exemptions, "as inappropriate for individual, public health, and ethical reasons," according to a 2016 policy statement. In Connecticut, plaintiffs who challenged the state's decision to remove religious exemptions said they objected to the use of fetal or animal cell lines in the research and development of vaccines. But a three-judge panel for the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wrote in August that religious exemptions do not serve "to protect the health and safety of Connecticut students and the broader public" when it upheld Connecticut's decision. Yet even in California,

which eliminated nonmedical exemptions in 2016, efforts are underway to overturn the law. In a lawsuit filed Oct. 31, several parents backed by a conservative law firm are challenging the law's constitutionality. One plaintiff, Sarah Clark, said she believes vaccines run counter to her interpretation of the Bible "because they are a foreign substance and are harmful to the body."

Attorney General Rob Bonta's office said Nov. 1 it hadn't been served with the case yet but will review the complaint and respond as appropriate. Montana's proposed rule is scheduled for a public hearing Nov. 13. Some child care providers, like Hutzenbiler, expect it ultimately to take effect. She said she is already drafting language to submit to the state as required under the proposed rules, saying Munchkin Land Daycare will not accept unvaccinated children. Lammers said state officials should be open to changes and give child care centers with 16 or more kids the same choice as smaller facilities not to enroll unvaccinated children. "I'm hoping at the very least we can make it equal in all settings," she said of the rule proposal. Kummer, the retired pediatrician, said she hopes the proposal prompts enough opposition that the state removes the plans for the religious exemption. But she doubts that will happen, given the anti-vaccination sentiment of Montana policymakers. "It's going to take a tragedy in our state or somewhere else where people wake up to the fact that we need vaccinations," Kummer said.



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Sports

36-year-old Saimone Lomaloma from the province of Cakaudrove proved that he is the best when it comes to yaqona farming after he scooped the Best Yaqona Farmer award at this year's National Agriculture Show. An accountant by profession, Mr Lomaloma ventured into yaqona farming six years ago and has two farm managers, 12 permanent labourers and 50 casual workers from the community. "It can only grow bigger from here on," smiled Mr Lomaloma after receiving his award at the Agriculture Show Awards Night on Friday 27th October. He also received a special award for Best Value Adding Farmer. Around 35 farmers from across Fiji scooped awards in various categories and it is hoped that more farmers will prove themselves come the next agriculture show awards. #nationalagricultureshow23 #buildingaresilientFiji #increasingexports #minimisingimports



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Sports



Sports

Shameen stages successful bouts in Nadi

Vancouver based former Fiji resident, Mohammed Shameen successfully staged 10 blockbuster bouts at Prince Charles Park in Nadi on Friday 13 October 2023. Staged under the banner of the South Pacific Boxing Promotions and under the guidance of the Fiji Boxing Commission, the event gave boxing fans a night of total entertainment in terms of the quality of the fights.

History was also created at the event as the first ever female Muslim boxer entered the ring in a hijab in one of the supporting bouts.

Australia based Lebanese-born boxer Malook Malook entertained the fans with her display of skills and fitness and defeated Lautoka based Katrina Singh on points. Meanwhile, Sigatoka boxer James Singh won the main bout, beating Australia based Puna Rasaubale.



Sports

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Sports

South Africa win Rugby World Cup for fourth time

Defending champion South Africa kicked its way to a record fourth Rugby World Cup title by beating New Zealand 12-11 after All Blacks captain Sam Cane was the first player to be red-carded in a final. Flyhalf Handre Pollard scored all the points for a Springboks side which repeated its 1995 success over New Zealand and denied the All Blacks their own chance to win a fourth title in their record fifth final. Captain Siya Kolisi held the Webb Ellis Cup aloft, kissed his right sweatband, raised the trophy even higher and roared a victory cry loud enough to rattle windows in Johannesburg, Cape Town and everywhere else back home. "People who are not from South Africa don't understand what it means for our country. It is not just about the game. Our country goes through such a lot," Kolisi said. "I want to tell the people of South Africa, 'Thank you so much'. This team just shows what you can do."

As South Africa's players celebrated with laps of honour and prop Trevor Nyakane danced, Kolisi broke off and climbed up the stadium stairs. He headed to see a special friend high up in the stands — tennis great Roger Federer, whose mother is South African. Federer clenched his fist in celebration as he leaned over to celebrate with Kolisi. Cane will fly home with regrets. "Extremely gutted and disappointed," he said. "First of all, that the guys had to play with 14 men for the last 50-odd minutes, I thought the courage they showed out here tonight was incredible, the whole team are absolute warriors." Cane was issued the red card for a high tackle on centre Jesse Kriel. Three other players were sin-binned — two Springboks and one All Black — in a chaotic match. "I'd like to say well done to South Africa," Cane said. "Back-to-back (champions), they have been a fantastic team." Fullback Beauden Barrett scored the only try of the game in the left corner, setting up a tense last 20 minutes. He became the first player to score in two World Cup finals and scored the first try conceded by South Africa in a final. But flyhalf Richie Mo'unga's touchline conversion attempt went wide and ultimately preserved



the winning margin. Both sides finished with 14 players as left winger Cheslin Kolbe was sin-binned for a deliberate knock on. Center Jordie Barrett took the penalty shot from nearly 50 meters wide of the right post but it sailed wide with Kolbe holding his head in his hands, unable to watch. "It was a real arm wrestle," New Zealand coach Ian Foster said "Incredibly proud of the way we fought and to get within a whisker of pulling it off is heart-breaking." Cane was sin-binned but referee Wayne Barnes pulled out the dreaded red after the punishment was upgraded late in the first half following a bunker review. The All Blacks had already had a yellow card after three minutes to flanker Shannon Frizell. Springboks captain Siya Kolisi was sin-binned early in the second half, for another high tackle, evening the numbers with the score 12-6 to South Africa. Saturday's 106th showdown between the gigantic rivals was played on a wet field and pitted the two top-ranked sides. Federer, wearing a South Africa scarf, and fellow tennis great Novak Djokovic were among the crowd of 80,065 who witnessed a gripping but

scrappy game. New Zealand scrumhalf Aaron Smith dived over in the left corner early in the second half but the try was ruled out. Mo'unga made a great break from midfield, dummied inside fullback Damian Willemse and fed Smith to dive over. But yet another TMO decision ruled out the try for a knock on in the buildup. Kolisi's card was not upgraded and he came back on moments later with 25 minutes left to play. New Zealand was on top and a brilliant improvised one-handed looping pass from Jordie Barrett found wing Mark Tele'a, and he slipped two tackles before feeding Beauden Barrett in the left corner. It gave New Zealand hope, but in the end Kolisi became only the second skipper to lead a team to back-to-back World Cup victories after New Zealand great Richie McCaw. "There are no ways I can explain it. I want to give credit to the All Blacks. They took us to the end, they took us to a dark place," Kolisi said. "It shows what kind of team they are, to fight with a man down from early in the game. They put us under so much pressure." When Barnes blew the final whistle, a tearful Kolbe looked

up in relief, Kolisi put his hands on his head in jubilant disbelief, then hugged Kolbe while Cane was sat staring ahead in despair. South Africa coach Jacques Nienaber also looked tearful as his staff grabbed him in celebration. The dream final was stop-started by a stream of penalties under steady rain. Frizell was penalized for tackling hooker Bongki Mbonambi in a neck roll. Mbonambi hurt his right knee and was replaced by veteran Deon Fourie. Pollard's penalty went over, but losing Mbonambi was a big blow. With Frizell still serving his penalty, Pollard slotted over again when Codie Taylor failed to roll away. New Zealand hit back in the 17th minute when scrumhalf Faf de Klerk was penalised for a tackle off the ball and flyhalf Mo'unga kicked the points. But Savea was pinged moments later for a foul on opposite number Duane Vermeulen and Pollard's 40-meter kick crept over. Calmness personified from Pollard, in contrast to Cane's rush of blood. A TMO review showed him leading with his shoulder into Kriel's face. New Zealand withstood two yellow cards in a 28-24 win against Ireland in the quarterfinals, but never trailed

in that game, and fell further behind in this one when Pollard's penalty sailed over following an offside. Seconds earlier, Cane's foul was upgraded to a red following a bunker review and he sank his head into his hands. Still, even with a player less, New Zealand almost scored the game's first try in the left corner when center Rieko Ioane was tackled just in time by Kurt-Lee Arendse. A penalty for lock Eben Etzebeth was kicked by Mo'unga to make it a six-point game at the break. But the All Blacks faced the whole second half — and the threat of South Africa's 'Bomb Squad' — with a player less. Until Kolisi trudged off for a high tackle on Savea, again picked up by a TMO in overdrive. Smith tapped his heart when he came off with 15 minutes left, having played his last game for the All Blacks. Same for Nienaber, who heads back home a hero. Typically, he deflected the credit onto his players. "They have been in a World Cup final before, some of them have played their third World Cup now. The experience pulled them through," he said. "They are an amazing bunch of guys, they are all warriors."



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