

Facts don't lie - NFP

BY BALA DASS – NFP SPOKESMAN ON SUGAR

Cane farmers are not chattels, to be used and discarded.

Everyone can claim to be wise with the benefit of hindsight. Great leaders and politicians have in the past led and served cane farmers. They all did their best to secure a peaceful, stable and just future for cane farmers, their families and indeed the nation as a whole.

However, Government and its leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama horribly believe former politicians and indeed farmers' leaders were failures.

Unfortunately, the same senseless rhetoric was used by the leader of Fiji Labour Party and the National Farmers Union Mahendra Chaudhry in the FLP's weekly opinion "FLP Facts don't lie!" in the Fiji Sun of Saturday 15th February.

While defending the FLP's track record in response to Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum's allegations, Chaudhry used the issue of Crop Rehabilitation Programme following the drought of 1997/98 to justify FLP's economic track record. He claimed the economic growth of 9.7% was due to the "remarkable recovery" of the sugar industry as a result of the Crop Rehabilitation Programme (CRP) that the FLP "had forced" the Rabuka Government to implement following the drought. He claimed "it took the threat of a harvest boycott to force Rabuka and Reddy to agree to the cash grant and CRP".

Chaudhry also claimed that as a result of the CRP the cane production "rebounded to 4 million tonnes in 1999

resulting in a record payout to cane farmers of a cane price of \$82 per tonne.”

Nothing can be further from the truth. Chaudhry should re-visit Parliamentary Hansard of the Extra-ordinary Parliamentary Session between July 7-10, 1998, and read the debates.

The then Leader of the Opposition Jai Ram Reddy had written to the then Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka on 18th June 1998 raising the plight of farmers and asking Government to implement Crop Rehabilitation. On 22nd June 1998 Mr Rabuka replied to Mr Reddy’s letter stating:-

- (i) Government’s CRP (\$23.7m) will be a direct grant to the Fiji Sugar Corporation
- (ii) Cash assistance of \$8 million (cash grant) to come from Sugar Cane Growers Fund
- (iii) \$19 million in loan for CRP to come from Growers Fund

In total \$27 million was to come from Growers Fund while \$23.7 million was given by Government. The total component of CRP was \$52.7 million.

These recommendations of Government, as outlined in Mr Rabuka’s letter to Mr Reddy, were approved by Parliament only three weeks later.

Chaudhry as Prime Minister and Minister for Sugar moved Bill No. 23 in Parliament and got parliamentary approval for the repayment of \$27 million to the Growers Fund from the Sugar Export Tax. 70% of the tax is paid by farmers and 30% by FSC.

On 24th August 1999, Chaudhry told Parliament "In reality, the money that we are returning to the Fund by way of repayment are farmers' own money".

Chaudhry is also incorrect by claiming that as a result of CRP the cane price for 1999 was \$82 per tonne. The truth is that \$81.79 per tonne was the price paid for sugarcane crop in 1998. The price paid for the 1999 crop was \$50.76.

Following CRP, 3.958 million tonnes of cane was harvested in 1999. However 170,000 tonnes of cane was un-harvested and left standing in the fields. Chaudhry, both as PM and Sugar Minister, refused to direct the FSC to pay compensation to farmers for the leftover cane crop. He also refused to direct FSC to make a special payment following a low 3rd cane payment of \$8 per tonne in March 2000. This is despite the fact that thrice in previous years, farmers received a special payment.

When farmers threatened a harvest boycott, Chaudhry said harvesting must begin saying "he was contractually bound by the (Master) Award and could not give directive to FSC for an early payment" – Fiji Times front page, May 8, 2000

One only is as good as his/her last act and Mahendra Chaudhry's most recent track record is abysmal as he fully participated in a regime borne out of the military coup of December 2006.

He served as Minister for Sugar in Bainimarama's Government for 18 months between January 2007 and August 2008. During this time, cane production

plummeted from 3.2 million tonnes in 2006 to 2.32 million tonnes in 2008. Sugar production also plummeted from 310,000 tonnes in 2006 to almost 208,000 tonnes in 2008.

If the coup hadn't destroyed democracy, Fiji could have now been producing around 4 million tonnes of cane and manufacturing around 400,000 tonnes of sugar after the European Union had committed assistance worth \$350 million to the industry over a 7-year period.

The sugar industry would have been salvaged had the military regime fulfilled its commitment to hold elections by March 2009, as committed to the European Union in early 2007.

This is well known to the FLP leader who was one of the three Bainimarama Government's Ministers that travelled to Brussels to give this commitment.

The rest is history.