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MEDIA RELEASE

POLITICS OF PANIC

The \$10 million assistance package announced by the Fiji First Government's Minister for Economy to help cane farmers is not a new initiative but part of Government's rehabilitation programme after the devastating effects of Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston.

Minister for Economy Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum's announcement can be likened to politics of panic following the overwhelming rejection for the third time of the Reform of the Sugarcane Industry and Sugar Cane Growers Fund (Amendment) Bills (Bills 19 & 20).

Had Government not picked up the deductions as promised earlier, farmers would have ended up with only \$4.586 million dollars from the total of \$14.586 million paid out to them as 4th cane payment of \$10.57 per tonne. This confirms our long held view that majority of our farmers are in debt in perpetuity.

All correspondence should be addressed to the general secretary

Most importantly, 70% of farmers' income has already been deducted as debt, fertilizer, harvesting expenses and land rent in the previous three payments for the 2016 season. So for most farmers this help, which should have been implemented when announced last year as part of Government's post-Winston rehabilitation package, has come too late.

The announcement also vindicates the National Federation Party's call for the implementation of a minimum guaranteed cane price of \$100 a tonne to ensure all our cane farmers, especially 70 percent who produce an average of 150 tonnes of cane, earn decent income.

On Saturday a *Fiji Times* opinion poll showed that the Fiji First Party's popularity has fallen by 10 percentage points in two months. By Monday, the Economy Minister has suddenly found \$10 million for cane farmers.

This announcement has come from nowhere. No thought has gone into it. It offers no long-term solutions for farmers. It is not budgeted for in the national Budget. It is driven by the politics of panic.

Honourable Sayed-Khaiyum is the man who, at the same time as he spends public money for blatantly political purposes, attacks other political parties for "using" cane farmers.

Running around offering to pay their deductions for one cane payment, he must really think that the farmers are ignorant. There are at least four more cane payments before the election. Will he just throw more money at the farmers to save his political skin?

After 10 years in power, this Government has no vision and no plan for the sugar industry. It refuses to listen to farmers and their representatives. It has taken away their democratic voice in the Cane Growers' Council. The Prime Minister is the Minister for Sugar, but he spends more time overseas than in the cane belt. Only now, because elections are coming, has the government started to panic.

NFP says to farmers – these payments are like the Prime Minister's "small enterprise grants" and "Help for Homes". So take the money Government is throwing at you. It comes from our taxes after all.

Nobody will be fooled by this vote-buying gimmick.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Biman Prasad', written in a cursive style.

Professor Biman Prasad
NFP Leader

