

**VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTIETH MEETING OF THE JOINT
SELECT COMMITTEE APPOINTED TO ENQUIRE INTO AND REPORT
ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES, SERVICE COMMISSIONS AND
STATUTORY AUTHORITIES (INCLUDING THE THA) HELD IN THE J.
HAMILTON MAURICE MEETING ROOM, TOWER D,
INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD,
PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2019 AT 10.34 A.M.**

PRESENT

Dr. Varma Deyalsingh	Chairman
Ms. Ramona Ramdial	Vice-Chairman
Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus	Member
Mr. Nigel De Freitas	Member
Mr. Darryl Smith	Member
Ms. Khadijah Ameen	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Ms. Khisha Peterkin	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Terriann Baker	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Dr. Lovell Francis	Member
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MINISTRY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mrs. Jennifer Daniel	Permanent Secretary
Mr. Raymond Seepaul	Deputy Permanent Secretary
Mrs. Esther Pilgrim-Soanes	Director, Finance and Accounts

DIEGO MARTIN REGIONAL CORPORATION

Ms. Shivastri Ramawadh	Chief Executive Officer
Ms. Susan Hong	Chairman

UNREVISED

Mr. Ken Calliste	Financial Assistant
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SIPARIA REGIONAL CORPORATION

Mr. Ravindranath Gangoo	Chief Executive Officer
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Alderman Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh	Chairman
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Ms. Kelly Bates	Financial Officer
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SAN JUAN/LAVENTILLE REGIONAL CORPORATION

Ms. Dianne Lakhan	Chief Executive Officer
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Alderman Anthony Roberts	Chairman
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Ms. Gabrielle Jones	Corporate Secretary
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PENAL/DEBE REGIONAL CORPORATION

Mr. Motilal Ramsingh	Chief Executive Officer
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Ms. Neralla Rampersad	Corporate Secretary
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Dr. Allen Sammy	Chairman
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Mr. Chairman: Good morning all. I am Dr. Varma Deyalsingh. I am the Chair of this Committee, the Joint Select Committee Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA). Welcome to the Thirtieth meeting of this Joint Select Committee. I also would like to give a welcome to members of the listening and viewing audience who are invited to send their comments via Parliament's various social media platforms: Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

On this occasion, our Committee, we have the pleasure of meeting the various corporations who were invited here this morning. Again, welcome again to the representatives of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

So welcome to members of the Siparia Regional Corporation, San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, Penal/Debe Regional Corporation and Diego Martin Regional Corporation.

At this stage I would like to invite the members of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to introduce themselves.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Would the members of the Diego Martin Regional Corporation introduce themselves?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Can I call now on San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation to introduce themselves?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Would members of the Penal/Debe introduce themselves?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: I give a warm welcome to all. I would like to invite the Committee members to introduce themselves, starting with my Vice-Chair.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: To those present, I would like to remind the persons present and also the members of the public that the objectives of this enquiry are to examine the role of the line Ministry and executive management of municipal corporations in promoting and facilitating accountability and transparency in the operations of municipal corporations. Also to assess the internal control systems within the municipal corporations, and lastly to examine the proposed local government reform initiatives associated with the management of finances with municipal corporations.

I would now like to invite the following officials to make brief opening remarks, not to exceed more than two minutes because we are now pressed for time. I would like to start with Mrs. Jennifer Daniel, Permanent Secretary in the

Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

Mrs. Daniel: Good morning again, Chair, and members. It is my pleasure and the pleasure of my team, I speak on their behalf, to be here this morning to participate in this exercise that, as was mentioned on the last occasion, the end, the fruit of it is for improvement in the system. So we are committed to that, and because of that we engage and we really value the opportunity for this meeting. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mrs. Daniel. It is a pleasure to have you amongst us again. Will Ms. Susan Hong, Chairman of the Diego Martin Regional Corporation give any opening remarks?

Ms. Hong: Thank you, Chairman. For me again, as I said before, it is pleasure to be here, as we examine the management and operation process of our corporation. We look forward to it to make a better place, and a better place for our residents. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Would Alderman Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh, Chairman of the Siparia Regional Corporation?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, we are very happy to have engaged the attention of your distinguished Committee. It is very important that we look at the operations of local government as it is, as we work towards local government reform. I can tell you that the \$69 million that is spent on the 58,000 burgesses may not be the best value for money that we can get in the present system with a heavily unionized environment, with bureaucratic public service applications and procedures to source funds, with weak, poor, untimely and insufficient releases from the Ministry of Finance and thence to the Ministry of Local Government. We are beleaguered with institutional problems, and we are really calling out, yearning out for reform. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Dr. Ramadharsingh. I would like to hear from Alderman Anthony Roberts, Chairman of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation.

Mr. Roberts: Thank very much, Chairman. I want to join with my colleagues to express gratitude for the opportunity to discuss some important matters as they relate to local government. So we look forward to the deliberations at this Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Would Dr. Allen Sammy, Chairman of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation.

Mr. Sammy: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We too in Penal/Debe would like to share with you our joys and our sorrows. I am particularly concerned with local government reform and the added burdens, particularly the financial burdens, if the reform in fact does materialize in the short-term, because the current burdens are overbearing as it is. I am not sure how we can handle additional burdens. So I look forward to sharing and to hearing the views of the members, and how we can help to resolve some of these issues. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I hear the plight of certain members. I hear the cries out there, the challenges, and I am saying that—at least I am hoping today we can get an insight into the operations of the various corporations, challenges faced.

We have actually had these hearings before with other corporations, and have identified certain issues. So it is really to get an idea what is happening in the corporations; are there any sort of problems in terms of financial mismanagement; are there any sort of levels that people may be looking at the corporations and saying it is not running adequately. So it is to get ideas how you run, how you can run in a transparent manner, efficient manner. And also the Ministry here who

gives the oversight will be giving us an input to see what are the best practices that should be adopted in the corporations. So it is to help us to help you basically we are here.

So I would like to start here now. We are going to have periods of questions, and I am asking members please to ask the questions through the Chair, and to remind you persons to activate your microphone when recognized by the Chair, and deactivate it once they have completed their contributions. For housekeeping rules, if you can please put your phones on silent.

So I would like to start a line of questions to Diego Martin Regional Corporation. We have gotten submissions from the various corporations, and in your submission from Diego Martin had given us—in your submission you stated that your corporation has made regulations for the custody of money, passbooks and cheques. However, you failed to provide the Committee with a copy of these regulations. Could you please explain why these regulations were not made available to the Committee?

Mrs. Ramawadh: Thank you, Chair. At the Diego Martin Regional Corporation we have had a severe problem with record-keeping. However, not simply the record-keeping but with the actual record management. Where the storage is concerned there was a terrible water seepage in the building that compromised the records when we were at Orchid Drive. We have moved to the new office now, and having done that, when we recognized that the records were compromised we purchased two containers to store the records, but it already had mould and we are engaging the services of NALIS to correct that.

Mr. Chairman: So in terms of any sort of accountability, we have no sort of records available at all, right?

Mrs. Ramawadh: At this time, Sir, no.

Mr. Chairman: So the regulations were actually damaged, or lost or destroyed?

Mrs. Ramawadh: With the water. Yes, it was damaged.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, if I may. The regulations is not a bulky document, so I am wondering if you would have it on soft copy even, because the regulations would be a document that you work with all the time at your corporation. So do you not have it soft copy anywhere at the corporation?

Mrs. Ramawadh: At this time we were unable to retrieve it. I am sorry.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, through you, perhaps the Director of Finance and Accounts at the Ministry could provide some information, because regulations guide the corporations and if a corporation does not have a copy to produce, it does not have a copy to follow, then I have serious concerns. So a document like this is something that should be lodged at the Ministry, and perhaps the Ministry could send over a copy.

Mrs. Pilgrim-Soanes: So, Chair, member, first time I am hearing of it. I am unaware that they had regulations that were missing. So maybe after we could provide the information. We will search the Ministry and we will provide the information, whether we have it at the Ministry, whether it was forwarded to the Ministry. But at this point in time I am unable to say whether the Ministry has that record.

Ms. Ameen: So in the meanwhile what guides this corporation with regard to the custody of money, passbooks, cheques and so on, that should be governed by a regulation? What guides you?

Mrs. Ramawadh: It is the Financial Regulations of 1965. This is what would guide us. That is what we use at the moment.

Mr. Chairman: Again, I would like to address your response. You stated that the Council of Diego Martin Regional Corporation has not outlined specific directives for improving internal controls and financial management. So given that the corporation's Council has not issued any specific directives in this area, would it be accurate to say that the Council is happy with the checks and balances that are currently observed in the corporation?

Ms. Hong: Chairman, I cannot say that the corporation is happy with the checks and balances in the corporation, but we are hopeful that our records could be sanitized, and we would be able to go through those records and provide the answers that you want, probably in writing, to the Committee.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, anywhere in the document was stated with regard to how far Diego Martin Regional Corporation is with regard to their audits and financial statements? If we could know when was the last audited financial report and administrative reports and so on.

Mr. Chairman: You could direct the question.

Mr. Forde: Morning again. Based on the trend of questioning that has taken place so far and the information that has been provided to us, with regard to your financial statement and audited reports, when was the last year we would have had information on that from you all?

Mrs. Ramawadh: That would be 2008.

Mr. Forde: 2008?

Mrs. Ramawadh: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Is it as a result of the answers provided so far for the Committee, could we simply say that the reason or reasons for being 2008 is as a result of the information you have provided the Committee with so far?

Mrs. Ramawadh: To a large extent, Mr. Chairman, through you. To a large extent, yes.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, I—

Mr. Forde: No, wait, hold on, hold on, just now. One second, Mr. Chairman. First of all, we are live on national television right now, okay, and I just want to be clear, Mr. Chairman. 2008 and going forward 2009, in order to come up to presently, where does it leave us? Where does it leave us? What does Diego Martin Regional Corporation have to say in going forward in getting that information when the auditors do come, or when your financial department decides to prepare these documents?

Mrs. Ramawadh: Through you, Mr. Chair. At present the financial officer, whom we recently got, he has started to guide the process, and we have prepared in draft up to—from 2012 to 2018. However, it is in draft and the supplemental records are the ones that were compromised.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, I just want to ask with regard to these documents that were compromised, you indicated that NALIS is assisting with the restoration of these documents. Is there a time frame by which you believe you would have substantial information that you could forward to the Parliament?

Mrs. Ramawadh: In approximately four months we believe it should be sanitized.

Mr. Chairman: You also stated that transactions are bundled and deposited together making it difficult to match daily bank entries. That is page 5 of your response to question 11. I ask two questions. One, what system has been implemented to ensure that documents are correctly filed and separated and, two, in the absence of a cashier, who has been given the responsibility of managing the revenue collection system?

Mr. Calliste: Mr. Chair, the entry or the data stated here with regard to the bundling of the receipts, it involves collection from the CMOH Department where receipts are collected and deposited directly into the bank. But many times what they do is that they do not identify what the payments are for, so that on the statement you see a bulk figure and when you total the receipts you see a bulk figure, but you are unable to get a breakdown as to what those figures were paid for.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, something like this, a policy or a system would have to be put in place by the financial officer to guide the Council on matters like these. We have you listed here as a Financial Assistant, and we did recognize in our last session that the finance officer in many of the corporations, the position is vacant. What is the situation with Diego Martin with regard to a financial officer?

Mr. Calliste: A financial officer was contracted to the Diego Martin Corporation as of May last year.

Ms. Ameen: So you have one at this time?

Mr. Calliste: Yes.

Ms. Ameen: And, Chairman, if you would allow me? And your role would be Financial Assistant; is that on the establishment?

Mr. Calliste: No, I am a contracted officer also.

Ms. Ameen: So Diego Martin created this position as financial assistant to boost the work of the financial officer?

Mr. Calliste: Well, the thing is that for years the Diego Martin Corporation—I have been there for five years—had no financial officer during that period of time, for five years, so I was filling in at the point in time.

Ms. Ameen: All right. And, Chairman, I just want to ask the other corporations if

they could indicate in terms of the presence of a finance officer. San Juan/Laventille, do you have a financial officer?

Mr. Roberts: The answer is no, we do not. We do not have even capable staff to deal with the accounts of the organization.

Ms. Ameen: Siparia?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Yes, we do.

Ms. Ameen: Right, we met her earlier. And Penal/Debe, do you have a finance officer?

Mr. Ramsingh: Not at the moment.

Ms. Ameen: When was the last time you had one?

Mr. Ramsingh: November 7th, the person had resigned.

Ms. Ameen: 2018?

Mr. Ramsingh: In 2018, sorry.

Ms. Ramdial: Thank you very much. Through you, Chair, and to the Diego Martin Regional Corporation. In your submission you outlined several instances of alleged financial crimes or financial improprieties which were perpetrated against the Corporation. Could you care to explain and give us the information? How were these financial improprieties detected? Have you done investigations? Is there an audit report? Is it completed?

11.00 a.m.

Mr. Calliste: With regard to the fraudulent activities perpetrated against the corporation, we listed six items here. Number one is the collection of fees for burials. Somewhere along the line, I do not know when, the receipt books were given to the cemetery keeper who is not an employee. So the corporation is now in the process of correcting that situation.

Number two, there were six cheques valued approximately \$50,000 each that were removed from the pile by the then accountant in 2013 and paid to people who did not supply goods or services to the corporation. That matter is attracting the attention of the TTPS right now.

Mr. Forde: 2013?

Mr. Calliste: 2013.

Ms. Ramdial: So the investigations—

Mr. Calliste: Is ongoing.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay.

Mr. Calliste: Yes.

Ms. Ramdial: We will need to liaise with the TTPS to find out.

Mr. Calliste: Then we did mention a tent city shelter where the emergency unit purchased a tent city shelter, and the complete unit was not supplied. Somehow the vendor was able to get the payment for the entire project, and he failed to supply all the units. There are a few items that were missing.

Ms. Ramdial: And this was when?

Mr. Calliste: In 2016.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay. Is this also another ongoing investigation?

Mr. Calliste: Yeah. The vendor has proved to be a little elusive so far, but yes, the investigation and this is ongoing.

Ms. Ramdial: So, you do not have any records of the vendor at the corporation in terms of—

Mr. Calliste: Yeah. We have the vendors; the problem is to find them.

Ms. Ramdial: Meaning, are they in Trinidad and Tobago? Have they left the country? No? And the police have no leads at this time?

Mr. Calliste: Yeah. The matter is being investigated.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, when you make a purchase and the item is delivered to the corporation, some officer is responsible for checking the item to ensure that you have received what you have paid for before payment is recommended. Some part of your investigation, perhaps not the police aspect, but your administrative investigation should identify who was the officer who signed and collected something that was not, in fact, complete. Have you gone down that road? Have you identified the officer? And has there been any sanctions or anything against that person?

Mr. Calliste: This entire tent city emergency shelter, what happened there is that most of the items were imported from the United States. Somehow the vendor convinced the corporation to advance him the money to pay for the items. Right? And some of the items when they arrived here, were not the correct items, so they were sent back and reimported. We did not get all after that.

Ms. Ameen: Is making advance payment, is that part of your practice, your procedure? Or is that the corporation—

Mr. Calliste: No.

Ms. Ameen:—broke their rules and are now paying the price?

Mr. Calliste: This was a special case. I do not know the exact details more, but this case was a special case.

Ms. Ameen: You see, for those of us who advocate for independence for corporations, when we hear issues like these, it puts serious spokes in the wheel, eh. Because you have the authority now to do procurement, and the checks and balances, the accountability is important, but in this case the corporation broke the

rules, taxpayers' money "gone down the drain" and now you are paying the price for it. So do not blame the vendor. The officer who is responsible are those who have to account.

Mr. Calliste: And I can assure—

Mr. Forde: Chairman, I am hearing the discourse and, you know, I want to bring in the Permanent Secretary here, you know, in terms of I know that would be your second stint with us, so you were privy to some of the information we had at the first session with the other four municipalities that we had.

And again, we have these four here, well we have not really gone into the other three as yet, but so far we are hearing the same set of information. You know, the little details which part we are seeing the urgent need for these financial positions to be put in place. You know I mean, I heard the Chairman from Siparia Regional Corporation, I heard the Chairman for Penal/Debe about the burdens, financial releases, the reform. But if those things are improved we would still have these problem, you know. Reform tomorrow, reform next week, reform next month, we will still have these issues because the people who have to ensure that the reform works, are you all, us, we, the people. You know what I mean?

So it if is that the procedure has to be followed, the procedure has to be followed. Do not tell me that the burden, do not tell me the Minister of Finance is not releasing the money timely as the case may be. Probably it is good that he is not releasing it timely to ensure that we hold onto some of the money. I mean, look at these three issues: fees for burial, 50 cheques, \$50,000 by six cheques; the vendors issue and we could go into it.

Mr. Chairman, I do not think that we need to go into anymore because we need to hear the other corporations to find out what is happening in the other

corporations. “We just on Diego Martin and the first half an hour gone already. We aint hear Siparia. We aint hear Diego Martin. We aint hear San Juan/Laventille. We aint hear the others.” Well I mean—so, Mr. Chairman, I do not know what else to say, but we need to ensure that the financial officers in these organizations are in place, and we need to ensure—we have an ex-chairman. I am an old—we have also our next colleague here who was at Diego Martin. So we could ask some direct questions, you know. Between this Committee here we have three persons on this Committee that could ask some direct questions as to exactly where we are.

And you know I mean, we need to get these financial officers, Madam PS. I know your hands may be probably tied because there is a whole procedure and how it is done, but still when we get these financial officers we need to get the positions down the line to ensure that the checks and balances are in place, to ensure that—and we follow the procedures.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Chairman. Before we move off the issue through you, Mr. Chairman, I would like to direct this question to all of the corporations present here. We have been advised that the Diego Martin Regional Corporation has a financial officer. Penal/Debe had a financial officer who resigned on the 7th November. Siparia has a financial officer, San Juan/Laventille does not have a financial officer. Based on the response you would have sent to this Committee, Madam PS, that the corporation—that was based on a question I had raised when we met with the first set of corporations, whether or not the corporations have the authority to contract out, to bring in persons on contract, and also to contract out the preparation of their financial accounts.

A study of all these documents reveals that none of the corporations are up to date. In some cases you have accounting units staffed with only junior staff. I

mean, we are in 2019.

So I would like to ask all the corporations, one, if you have a contract—a financial officer on board? Those who do not have a financial officer on board, what is preventing you from bringing a financial officer on board?—because the corporation, we were advised by the PS, the corporation has the authority to engage in procuring those services. Why? What is responsible? We cannot, in 2019, have accounting units that are not staffed by the required qualified personnel; it is not a parlour we are running here.

Mr. Chairman: Could we start with any response from Siparia?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: We do have one, but what I would say is that, when we came in we saw it as important because the accountant is part of the administration, not really overseeing all of the finances and the auditing functions and so on, and a person of this calibre was necessary. And there is a provision in the Act where you write the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and we did, in fact, effect that by a Motion, wrote the letter and then lobbied the Ministry to fill the position, and I think that this helped us to get one very early in the game.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I am hoping the others could learn from you. So could I get a response from San Juan/Laventille on this issue?

Mr. Roberts: Thank you very much, Chair. I am extremely happy for these discussions. We at this time do not have a financial officer. We made attempts to ask the Ministry to provide us since it is their responsibility to do so. We have not had any response to date. The council has asked the CEO to have discussions with the Ministry so that we could make arrangements to acquire a financial officer, but that the Ministry will assist us with the payment of that officer because funding will be a problem for us to be able to acquire the services of a financial officer, and

that is where we have gotten.

Mr. Chairman: Could the PS, please, respond to this statement?

Mrs. Daniel: Certainly, Chair. Coincidentally, the ad for the financial officer is in the newspaper today. The closing date is February the 24th. And just to add to what was shared on the last occasion, and it is brought out by what was shared by Penal/Debe's CEO, I was not even aware that the person assigned there— So in my—the information I had is that there were four positions vacant, but a fifth has been made vacant. And it may be helpful to hear, I do not know if the CEO is aware of the reasons or the reason for the person terminating, but it would be useful to hear what the reason was.

Mr. Chairman: Penal/Debe, could you? Yes.

Mr. Ramsingh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have sat on its various panels to interview financial officers over the years, and always one of the problems we get is attracting sufficient numbers, and then when we do get people some people leave. All right?

One of the problems when you—the interview stops when the remuneration package is announced. Yeah? And that is what turns off quite a lot of probably very competent persons. I am not saying that those who are here are not that competent. And then when you reach to the—when people reach and actually take up the job and they see the challenges, sometimes they may look to revert because they are very marketable. In my instance, I had a public officer who was seconded, sorry, who was assigned on the ground of public policy, so that person reverted to their substantive post within the public sector. Right? And that is one of the problems that we have really.

Ms. Ramdial: Can you say why your financial officer resigned?

Mr. Ramsingh: Reverted. The officer has a substantive position in the wider public service and they reverted to that position.

Ms. Ramdial: Is there a reason why that officer reverted?

Mr. Ramsingh: No reason was proffered.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Is there any sort of, you know, some sort of, what I would like to say, disagreement among the officers, members of or, what I am saying, not a level of, you know, cooperation or assistance meted out to these officers that could lead them to move away from this position?

Mr. Ramsingh: If I speak to Penal/Debe, the Act is clear on who is the principal financial officer. That is the treasurer post. It is similar to the financial officer post. In the early days there used to be some disagreement within the public sector, the public service officer and the financial function officer, but I think that is something that needs to be sorted out or had to be sorted out at the corporation level. All right?

But when we look at the some of the issues and the accounting as is identified, some of the accounting departments the work becomes very challenging. It is not as simply as it is made out to be. It is very challenging, because accounts is not only the recording of the transactions, it is also dealing with the Ministry of Finance through financial cash flow management, all the financial processes, budgetary controls, a number of issues that encompasses that job, and that reinforces the need for having competent or qualified persons on board.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, through you, I just want to ask: Has Penal/Debe made any effort to hire a financial officer or a contract person to fill the position while the

Ministry does its necessary work?

Mr. Ramsingh: We, yes, not a financial officer, but what we have done is we have retained on a part-time basis two very experienced persons who would have worked in, both at the corporation levels, at accountant levels and at the Ministry up to the level of accounting executives or auditors; so they are quite experienced. And what we have them doing is periodically residing in the accounting unit to assist desk by desk in order to get the systems operational and to ensure some level of compliance, some level of—the system is implemented then.

Ms. Ameen: One of the key roles of this financial officer is to advise the Council on financial matters. Do these officers play that role? Or do they simply assist in making things more efficient in the accounting department?

Mr. Ramsingh: Well the—all the reports in the absence of the financial officer, all the reports that are required by financial officer or the treasurer are presented to the Council.

Ms. Ameen: So then, you as the CEO would take up the job of advising the Council on financial matters?

Mr. Ramsingh: Well, in the absence of most—I mean, we have been doing that for years, in a sense, before we even had a contracted officer. And I think one thing that is missing, one of the problems with the contracted officers, having contracted officers at all levels is when the contracted officer's term of contract has expired, you are left with gap. So persons who are expiring very soon, because most of those corporations will not have somebody, and now we are going into preparation of budgets. Right? So it is probably we can look at extension of terms and so on of those contracts.

Ms. Ameen: Chairman, if I may, eh. The role of the financial comptroller in the

corporation as with most of the chief officers is primarily to advise the Council, and to advise the Council on financial matters. It is a contract position at this time because the public service has not filled that position for more than 20 years since the start of Act 21 of 1990. And even though the Chief Executive Officer is the chief accounting officer, the truth is that the treasurer of the Council, to give financial advice to the Council, it is a little different to be accounting, and accounting for your spending and putting procedures in place.

So the Council would have a priority based on whatever they consider as urgent within their region, whatever direction they want to take their region in terms of development, and that strategic financial decision making is where the financial comptroller should come in. But the expectation that your financial officer should be bogged down, for want of another term, with administrative business and filling in for a Clerk I that is missing, and all these missing vacant positions within your corporation, is defeating the purpose of a financial officer to advise the Council to take it forward and to be part of holistic development within your region.

So, I think corporations, because they are so strapped for staff, even when they do have a person filling in as a financial officer you are really getting lost in the mud.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, if you would permit me. While we have the CEO of the Penal/Debe on his verbal legs, the two persons that you said, Mr. CEO, that were retained, they were former public officer at the level of accounting executives?

Mr. Ramsingh: One—sorry.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Are these the same two persons that you had informed the

Committee that have been hired on a part-time basis to provide in-house training to the accounting staff?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes, they are.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So they were brought on board for the sole purpose of training the accounting staff?

Mr. Ramsingh: Training, advising, working along with them, yes.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So then—but you just shared with member Ameen that you had two persons who, well, are picking up the slack for the financial officer; that cannot be so.

Mr. Ramsingh: These are the said two persons. We only have two persons on board and they reside within the accounting unit. One of the problems we have is the lack of experienced staff.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: No. No. The point that I am making, the information that came before this Committee through your submission is that two persons were retained on part-time to provide in-house training to the accounting staff, but you just shared with member Ameen that you have two persons at the level of accounting executive sort of picking up the slack from, that was left by the financial officer. I am saying that is not in sync with the information you shared with this Committee.

Mr. Ramsingh: No. I do not have anybody at accounting executive level, but I said the former accounting executives in the public sector, retired at that position, and retired as auditor.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: No. The point is that, you said that these two people are literally taking up the slack of the financial officer who would have retired on the 7th of November; that is what you just shared with member Ameen. But I am

pointing out, in the information that came before this Committee that you submitted said that these two part-time persons were brought on board for the specific purpose of in-house training to the accounting staff. So if they were brought on board to provide training for the accounting staff, their role could not have been to take up the slack of the financial officer; that is the point that I am making.

Mr. Ramsingh: All right. Thank you. Through the Chair, no, they have not taken up the position of the financial officer.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: No. I said take up the slack.

Mr. Ramsingh: All right. They have not taken up the slack of the financial officer.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: That is what you just told member Ameen.

Mr. Ramsingh: No. Well, I will retract the statement.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Okay.

Mr. Ramsingh: What they do, and let me explain. The training issue is, it is rather than a formal training—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: No. No. I do not have any problem with that.

Mr. Ramsingh: Okay.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: What you are trying to do is to make use of what you have.

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: I was just pointing that there was an anomaly in the information you gave and what you gave to—okay. Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Ramdial: Yeah. Chair, just going back to my question of fraudulent activities at the regional corporations. Now, in your submission San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, you cited that there have been allegations of overcharging

of fees and payment of fees for work that was not done. Could you care to elaborate with respect to these submissions you made on “fraudulent activities”?

Ms. Lakhan: Through the Chair, we did not make that submission.

Ms. Ramdial: But this is what I have here on my document.

Mr. Forde: Quote the page.

Ms. Ramdial: Page, the legal size document:

Have fraudulent activities been perpetrated by external parties during the past five years?

And the San Juan/Laventille Corporation from your submission.

Yes. Allegations of overcharging of fees and payment of fees for work that was not done.

And then we move on, the Diego Martin Regional under that question also where you have:

An attempt was made to cash a missing cheque in the sum of \$4,700,000.

So let us start with San Juan/Laventille.

Ms. Ramawadh: Through the Chair, I think you have it mixed up. We are the one with the missing cheque with the \$4.7 million.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay. So the print was done. Right. So do you care to elaborate on that? Is that an ongoing investigation at this time?

Ms. Ramawadh: Yes. It is an ongoing investigation. The Fraud Squad is investigating that mattering right now.

Ms. Ramdial: And when did this happen?

Ms. Ramawadh: It happened in August of 2017, August 14, 2017.

Ms. Ramdial: All right. Okay. And to Diego Martin Regional Corporation, your allegations of overcharging of fees and payment of fees; so well that was allowed.

Well, I guess you explained earlier. So thank you very much for that.

Ms. Ameen: I want to ask as a follow-up to member Ramdial, the Vice-Chairman's question: What systems have you, both at the Diego Martin and San Juan, put in place since the discovery of these fraudulent activities to prevent future occurrence? And what plans are there to develop and implement anti-fraud measures at the corporation? So, Diego Martin first.

Ms. Ramawadh: Thank you. At the Diego Martin Regional Corporation I first must say that we do not have a fraud policy, and that would be taken to Council. That matter has to be taken to Council to be drafted and for approval. We have in each instant, each issue as it comes up, we have tried to first understand how it came up. In case of the cemetery, it was recent discovery. So we are now trying to find out the exact way the actual cemetery keeper works, and that would have happened just last week. So it is a matter—

Ms. Ameen: Maybe the Chairman could guide because the council is responsible for policies. Have you had the opportunity to consider any policies with regard to anti-fraud measures?

Ms. Hong: While the Council did have some discussions, we work with our financial person to see how best we could come up with some kind of policy to put in place, but our Accountant I is there to advise us on how to draft this piece of policy so that—to prevent something like this from happening again.

Ms. Ameen: And from San Juan/Laventille, any moves toward putting a policy in place?

Mr. Roberts: In terms of policy, the Council did resolve to do a total restructuring of the accounts division, and ensuring that we include the new procurement legislation to guide us as we proceed.

Secondly, we have resolved to establish our own internal audit department. Right? So we have done that. We have established as well an asset management system which will assist us in computerizing the operations of the different departments of the corporation and that is ongoing at this time. We have resolved to do a forensic audit in other departments throughout the corporation because we still believe that some nonsense is taking place at the different levels of the corporation. And the CEO at this time is making, putting the necessary things in place to have someone on board to do the forensic audited on behalf of the corporation.

We resolved as well to change the method of salary payment at the corporation. We now have a system as—is referred to as the Easy Pay, and we have written the Ministry on our intention to move to the IGovTT system. We have been in conversation with the Ministry of Finance as well on that matter.

The issue of the collection of fees and so from, let us say, market and other services that we provide, we resolved and wrote to the Ministry to allow us to have a sort of LINX system with possibility at some point in time to have a whole cashier system. Because, you see, what we have now is a market clerk who would be moving through the market with a basket and a police walking behind to collect fees from persons, and that system is so archaic, so that it is easier if persons could use the LINX machine to be able to make their payments to the corporation.

11.30 a.m.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Sorry, Chairman, permit me. Have the corporations considered perhaps an annual payment for market fees instead of this?

Mr. Roberts: We considered. As a matter of fact, we have done our market by-laws, and we are trying to guide the vendors to make monthly payments instead of

these weekly payments that they now make at the market.

Mr. Chairman: Do you have a time frame that you are looking at to implement this LINX system?

Mr. Roberts: Well, we are actually waiting on the Ministry at this time. We have not gotten a response from the Ministry, but we did send them the resolution of Council to the Ministry, and it is quite some time. It is possibly about a year now. It is about a year now we have sent that information, but we are pressing forward to make sure that these things fall in place to modernize the operation of the corporation.

Mr. Chairman: Will the PS give us some guidance on what it may take to help implement this?

Mrs. Daniel: Chairman, the matter was referred to the Ministry—I am actually seeing in September—and the matter has to be approved by the Ministry of Finance. It has been forwarded to the Ministry of Finance, to Comptroller of Accounts specifically. So the Ministry will follow up with the Comptroller of Accounts. But it is out of our hands, the decision, the approval has to come from Comptroller.

Mr. Chairman: Do the other corporations have any similar plans to implement such a LINX system?

Mr. Calliste: Chairman, at the Diego Martin Regional Corporation, the CMOH department uses the LINX machine to collect payments. We too would like to get the LINX machine into the office where other payments could be made outside of the CMOH payments.

Mr. Gangoo: Mr. Chairman, likewise Siparia, we are going to follow the Diego Martin route and go and seek that facility.

Mr. Chairman: So we could look forward in seeing this—

Ms. Peterkin: Penal/Debe did not answer.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, yeah. Looking at best practice and implementing something that, you know, could work across the board. Penal/Debe, do you have any intention of pursuing that?

Mr. Ramsingh: Mr. Chairman, we have cashiers units set up, and a LINX machine is one of the facilities that we have to provide that service to the burgesses. So people could come into the corporation and pay by LINX as well.

Ms. Ameen: But you still collect cash at the corporation?

Mr. Ramsingh: We still collect cash at the market, but all cash is deposited in night safe as soon as it is collected.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, the question was whether or not fraudulent activities have been perpetrated by external parties during the past five years. I would like to flip the script and ask all corporations present, whether or not any fraudulent activities have been perpetrated internally by any employees of the corporations? For all of them.

Mr. Chairman: Could we start with San Juan/Laventille.

Mr. Roberts: The answer is yes. That is a matter that has been aired in the public and is now receiving the attention of the court. Persons were arrested, and I think it is joint, both internal and external. I cannot say for the matter that was referred to earlier on with the cheque because that investigation is taking place, but we believe that there was some kind of internal involvement as well. So those two matters we have brought to your attention.

Mr. Chairman: Could I get a comment from Siparia?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: No, over the last five years no fraudulent activities were

perpetrated by any external party, or even internal parties that have been reported.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin Regional.

Mr. Calliste: Yes, Chairman, we did have the one case where six cheques were cashed by persons who—were prepared by the then accountant and cashed by persons who did not supply goods and services to the corporation.

Ms. Ramdial: Just one thing, in your submission you had also where 300 workers, labourers, were hired, and that is before a committee—was that perpetrated internally?

Mr. Calliste: Yes, it was.

Ms. Ramdial: What is the status of that case?

Mr. Calliste: The matter is being handled by the Professional Standards Bureau. Interviews were done, and we are awaiting their next move.

Ms. Ramdial: And just one other instance where you had 12 truck batteries stolen from the transport yard. Is that also under police investigation?

Mr. Calliste: Actually that was six truck batteries. Yes, that matter is being investigated by the municipal police right now. That is a recent one.

Ms. Ramdial: Okay, very good. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: Could you give me some clarification about the context these 300 workers were hired for?

Ms. Ramawadh: Mr. Chair, my information is that around 2016, employment slips, I believe some of them were blank, somehow reached out to members of the public. As I said, it is being investigated right now, so much of the details we would not have, and they came into the employ.

Ms. Ramdial: To you, for how long were these 300 labourers employed for at the corporation? And how much moneys were expended in term of salaries?

Ms. Ramawadh: Mr. Chair, I would like to ask Mr. Calliste, if I can, please?

Mr. Calliste: These workers had been in the employ of the corporation from 2016. The letters started being issued around October 2016. I do not have a figure with me as to how much was paid so far, but—

Ms. Ramdial: How long were they employed for? You said from October 2016 to?

Mr. Calliste: The letters were issued until further notice.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Chair, I also recall I think, during 2010 to 2013, the Chairman's gold chain was stolen and ammunition and guns were stolen. Was that also solved by the police?

Mr. Calliste: I cannot answer that. I heard about that incident.

Ms. Hong: Through you, Chairman, I know that was investigated by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, but I since then have not heard anything from the police on that matter.

Mr. Chairman: When you hire workers, do you hire them on a temporary basis or a permanent basis? Because I am trying to figure the 300 workers. You said that you may have hired them and you have to break their contract and hire them again. Was there any sort of a—how come they were allowed to have a contract for so long undetermined?

Ms. Ramawadh: Therein lies the problem, Mr. Chair. That is where the error occurred, and there is no cut-off date.

Mr. Chairman: So, it is before a committee now? It is being investigated how that slip-up occurred? Good.

Ms. Ramawadh: Yes, and the officer involved was transferred to another corporation, and the matter as we said earlier is before the Professional Standards

Bureau.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I guess, would the other corporation be warned about this individual?

Mr. Smith: Is the individual still working with you all?

Ms. Ramdial: No, transferred.

Mr. Smith: Transferred to where?

Ms. Ramawadh: To another corporation.

Ms. Ramdial: Would you care to share which corporation that individual was transferred to? Because, I mean, we need to put in some mechanisms.

Ms. Ramawadh: Head office, Kent House.

Ms. Ramdial: Head office.

Mr. Forde: Chairman, I heard the financial officer say that—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: No, we have one other corporation to answer.

Mr. Forde: No, but for this particular one that he does not have a figure, could we get the figure in writing, please?

Ms. Ramawadh: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Please ensure that the figure for that 300 batch of workers, if we could get what it cost the taxpayers?

Mr. Calliste: For the period of time?

Mr. Forde: For the period of time.

Mr. Chairman: I would like to call Penal/Debe. I think we need a response from them.

Mr. Forde: You got response from everyone?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, except Penal. Penal/Debe.

Ms. Peterkin: No, except Penal. Penal/Debe.

Mr. Chairman: Penal/Debe.

Mr. Ramsingh: Chairman, to my knowledge there are no cases of fraud whether external or internal, but the practice is that if there is any instance of fraud, suspected fraud, it will be referred to the police. What we do have though, I mean this generally for everybody, is given technology now people might tend to copy a letterhead and utilize that to go and engage with other members of the public. We had one case like that where somebody—some land issue with two parties and they used a building inspector's signature. That is before the Fraud Squad.

Mr. Chairman: But in your submission you had listed procedures that were implemented to detect inadequacies and misappropriation of funds—that is page 9 of your response to question 7. Could you specify the major systems that have been documented and state how often these systems are actually reviewed? And also, what factors prompted the closer monitoring of the garbage collection system?

Mr. Ramsingh: Chairman, what we did, we utilized the services of some. We have periodically university staff, and—students, sorry—and also OJTs, and we did some walk-through of most of the systems within the corporation, so we could have assessed where there may be weaknesses and try to put some systems in place to address that. I give some examples there, you have an establishment of a single stores, the separation of the stores, functions of receipt, custody and issue from usage and payment functions, that is suppliers' and contractors' invoices are submitted and pre-checked in accounts rather than go to the department; that enables us to keep a better track on our cash and make sure that everything is in order before it goes for certification. Where there are weaknesses and technical expertise, we would have engaged experienced professionals to assist there.

With respect to the garbage collection, we have been attempting to enforce

the terms and conditions of the contract, and several measures have been put in place. We have had numerous meetings with the contractors and we seek to enforce their side of the—have them enforce their responsibility. It is a challenge, given that we—I mean, it is on the media that we had some issues in Palmiste areas and so, and those issues would have arisen simply because this contract was in existence since 2012, it is now 2019, and there are different demands by members of the public that cause us to take action, and when we do, the other side of the story is the contractor will now abide by what their terms and conditions are to. So, in this case we had an issue of if—you want me to go on?

I will just give an example. In the Palmiste district the contractor used to start pretty early to finish. What happens is, people were insisting that they were starting too early, the trucks coming too early. When the contractor starts at the appointed time, now you are complaining that the garbage—at peak hours—the garbage truck is working now so it causes a traffic congestion. The size of the truck, the contractor has to make average four trips to the dump. When they leave late, when they are coming back down they meet all the traffic, so the trucks were going into late hours of completion. And some of those things were what caused the problem. We have since resolved that.

Mr. Forde: And as we are on the garbage sanitation issue, so how would you rate the whole garbage scenario within your region? How you rate it? Very good? Good? Satisfactory? Poor? How would you rate it? And I would like to get the comment from all of the particular Chairmen also, and as you are on the floor also, same time, you said that the contract has since—we are no longer working on a contract? Right?

Mr. Ramsingh: No.

Mr. Forde: So it is on a what, a month-to-month basis? How it works presently?

Mr. Ramsingh: It is on a month-to-month basis now. When the contract expired, we would have written the Permanent Secretary and they would have advised that the contracts to be extended on a month-to-month, on the same terms and conditions, and therein lie some of the problems.

Mr. Forde: So you are saying more demands are being made on behalf of the public in terms of the schedule?

Mr. Ramsingh: That is correct

Mr. Forde: Right, in terms of the contractors now, in terms of their efficiency, in terms of their trucks being in order, in terms of the dip tray being in place, in terms of the whole service being provided, are the checkers sending in, on a daily basis or weekly basis, what areas are being cleaned properly, or have not been cleaned properly? Could you deduct or rate it? I need information from that from all chairmen here please?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes, we do that. We have instituted the rectification notice as for the terms of the contract, and checkers were trained to do that. So if there is any variation, the checkers cannot authorize any change to the terms and conditions. So if there are any variations to the terms and conditions they have to refer that to their supervisor. In addition, we have a desk within the public health section where all checkers will call in the time of the—at different points along the scavenging route. So the people in the office will record that the truck has been at this point, this point inspected at so and so time. So, we try to ensure that the work is done in that way. If the service is done satisfactorily, I would say there has been some tremendous improvement given the constraints that we have. We have 18—how many there is? I cannot remember, but we have three contractors, one contractor

having about the bulk of the areas, and that sometimes poses a problem.

Mr. Forde: So your rating would be?

Mr. Ramsingh: Sorry?

Mr. Forde: Your rating? Your rating?

Mr. Ramsingh: I would say fair.

Mr. Forde: As we are in the back row, we would have San Juan/Laventille.

Mr. Roberts: Thank you, Chair. Generally I will say that we could say satisfactory, save and except for the Laventille area. We normally have some problems with that particular contractor, and we issue rectification and default notices—in other words, we cut you when you do not perform. If you do not discharge your responsibility to the burgesses in terms of the collection of garbage, we do not pay you for that particular time that you have defaulted. But generally, our health department is on top of the situation, and when that occurs in Laventille, what we do is that we send trucks and backhoe to ensure that the place maintain—we maintain a clean environment. So, but other than that, outside of that we are generally okay.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Siparia.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: I would think that we are pretty good at the garbage collection situation, I would rate it around 7.5. There is always more that could be done. We initially had some issues and we called in all the CSOs and the SOs in a meeting of the health committee, and that was a very expanded meeting and a very detailed meeting where the whole process went through. I think you described some of it. And that helped a lot, because they realized that it was a very important—that they report back in a timely manner as to the state of garbage collection. Because the councillors were reporting what the people were saying in

particular areas, and we harmonized that with that particular meeting.

Then, of course, the contractors, nine of them, they are complaining, and they are saying that, of course the conditions of work and the cost of fuel and employment, the salaries have increased so much that they are almost breaking even, that is what they say, but we continue to work with them, and at times we have had not to pay if we were not satisfied. But by and large we are doing well, and Petrotrin, the closure of Petrotrin has put increased pressures on us, because there were some areas in Santa Flora and Fyzabad that were serviced by Petrotrin, those were the company communities. And now the Siparia Regional Corporation has to come forward and take, with the limited resources, to handle that. So, we have had to build in-house capacity to assist with some of these areas.

Mr. Forde: Diego Martin.

Ms. Hong: Thank you. Through you, Chairman, we have five contractors working in the region of Diego Martin. Diego Martin is a very lovely place to live, so you find we have an increase in population in the Diego Martin region. There are areas where we have absolutely no problem, and there are other areas that we have problems, and I would tell you how these problems arise. There are areas where people do not want a bin in front of their homes, and that is causing serious problems, because there are areas that new garbage sites are being created, and there are areas where people do not want no bins at all. And these areas, unfortunately, are the hilly areas where we need to have bins in the area that we could reach the people who live on the hill.

So, we have a problem. I am not going to say we do not have a problem. Where we have bins people leave from all about—and I do not know if other regions do not have that problem—to dump, where we have the bins. So, at times,

sometimes while we want to come down hard on the contractors, there really is an increase, and the old contract does not cater for that increase. So, how I rate Diego Martin, out of 10 I will say a six.

Mr. Forde: Have any of the regional corporations here enforced the Litter Act at any time? Quick answer, each one. You could go ahead Diego Martin—enforced the Litter Act, have we charged anyone? Have we cited anyone? Have we—

Mr. Chairman: I think in the essence of time, I am hoping we can get that in writing because—

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, these are critical aspects to the public, you know, because we are hearing of the different ratings that they are getting, and on a daily basis on the media you hear a lot of complaints with regard to sanitation and so on. All right, but we could get it in writing. Not a problem. All right, could I just go to my last question for everyone?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, sure.

Mr. Forde: With regard to the development programmes at each regional corporation, we have various sizes, we have various councillors for each particular region, so each particular municipality will receive their development programme, how is it divided among each councillor's electoral district? Is it equitably done, or is it that a particular councillor's area would get a particular amount from a different one? Quickly please.

Ms. Hong: I would not say it is equitable, but what I say is based on the need, and sometimes you have to soften up to understand the need of other councillors, and based on that need, you know, we will give way. So, it is based on—

Mr. Forde: So, it would not be based on political affiliation?

Ms. Hong: Well, in Diego Martin we do not have, we have—

Mr. Forde: Siparia.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: Well, given the nature of Siparia, consultation is the order of the day, because we have a very balanced council. It is just a slim majority, and we divide the money among the representatives, and the Chairman's office gets one of those allocations as well.

Mr. Roberts: Chairman, I am not that fortunate to get an allocation as Chairman, but the Council will determine on the allocation based on the needs of the region, and that is how we do our distribution. Because some areas are less developed than others, and as a result we take that seriously into consideration.

Mr. Forde: Penal/Debe, Dr. Sammy.

Dr. Sammy: Yes, Sir, ours is equitable but not necessarily equal. We have one political hue, so we have no internal challenges as others may, so there is always consensus. But there is an issue that some areas are in greater need than others so the formula is not always a smooth one, and some councillors will say, "Well look, I need some additional, maybe I can make up for it out of recurrent, with projects, small projects". But, yes, it is equitable.

Mr. Forde: So we ensure that the region benefits at the end of the day.

Dr. Sammy: Certainly, Sir.

Mr. Forde: One other question. software, how do you all deal with unspent balances? Like for instance I would like to know, with your last year, how much funds went back to the Ministry?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: I think we have been very vocal in Siparia about unspent balances, and very, very determined to get our unspent balances. We have about, at the last time it was 4.5 million, and I think we are just about 5.2 million. We are fighting for that money, and the Ministry has to send an audit team within the next

week or two to confirm the existence of the money so that we could get the approval to spend it.

Mr. Forde: Right, and you would have projects enlist?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: We have projects lined up for that.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Diego Martin.

Mr. Calliste: We are in the process right now of waiting on the internal audit to verify our unspent balance.

Mr. Forde: You have a ballpark figure?

Mr. Calliste: About 18 million.

Mr. Forde: Eighteen million for one year?

Mr. Calliste: No, no, no, several years.

Mr. Forde: Okay.

Mr. Calliste: The last time we accessed unspent balance was 2011.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Right. San Juan.

Mr. Roberts: The council resolved how they wanted to spend the unspent balances. Since we are pursuing an administrative building at this time, our unspent balances, all of it, will go towards the remodelling and furnishing of that particular building. At this time we have about six million that has already been audited, and I suspect about three or four million unaudited at this time.

Mr. Forde: Okay, and for what period, roughly?

Mr. Roberts: That could be from about 2012 to present.

Mr. Chairman: Probably the corporations could give us the figures and also the amounts in writing. *[Interruption]* I have a question—

12.00 noon

Ms. Ramdial: This is directed to the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation.

Now, in your submission you indicated that the Ministry seems to have been working counter the directives of the Councils in that several new CEOs have been assigned to the corporation over the last 12 months. Can you give me your response and I could also have the Permanent Secretary after respond to that. Thank you.

Mr. Roberts: I think I try to make it very clear, over the last year, that is 2018, we have had five CEOs. And certainly if you have five CEOs it will destabilize the operation of the corporation because when a new CEO comes you have to readjust, give that CEO an opportunity to settle and that has been the problem. For this year, 2019, we are on our second CEO, all right? So—

Ms. Ramdial: Why, Sir, Chairman, have you had—

Mr. Roberts: Really we have no control. There was one CEO that we asked to be removed because we had a conflicting situation and the others were removed by the Ministry, I guess. The Permanent Secretary might be able to guide on that situation.

Ms. Ramdial: PS?

Mrs. Daniel: Chair, I am happy that Chairman Roberts indicated in his response that there was a request on the part of the Council, because that happens from time to time. And, of course, laws of natural justice, there would not be an automatic movement, but then you have to balance the relationship between the players. Of course, if you think about it, if there is an issue with a CEO and there has to be a rotation, it means that someone who is probably very pleased with their current arrangement would have to be moved. So that alone accounts for movement.

In the case of the person, actually, this CEO here—and that gives you a sense of some of the challenges that we do have. Ms. Ramawadh was holding on in

a temporary capacity while we facilitated the movement of the CEO outwards. But we had to provide a more long term arrangement in San Juan/Laventille and we moved her onto another—and I cannot guarantee how long-term that is going to be either, because there are realities in the public service context with seniority and persons who are supposed to come into the system, who are to assume. So that can change and that is our reality. We are talking about persons retiring, we have had in one place a retirement, we have an impending retirement and that is what we are working with.

Mr. Chairman: Do you consider that San Juan situation as extraordinary? Do you encounter strained CEO relationships with the other corporations?

Mrs. Daniel: I do not think—

Mr. Forde: Chairman, probably we should get the Chairmen to answer that question.

Mrs. Daniel: It happens from time to time. There is the feedback and I just want to say that the first recourse is not to move around persons so that there would be some intervention sometimes at a level beyond myself and conversations would be had and so on. And there are times when the feelings may be mutual and there would be times when there is a request. Of course, in the case of Diego Martin, as an example, the person who is there and who is probably—there may have been no dissatisfaction, but there was an opening somewhere closer to that person's home and, in fact, a number of CEOs would have been eagerly wanting to replace the person who had retired and Diego Martin—the former person was the lucky person I suppose.

Mr. Chairman: I would like to recognize member De Freitas, please.

Mr. De Freitas: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. This question is to the

Siparia Regional Corporation. With regard to the discontinuation of the financial management software due to duplication of effort and its demand for additional staffing, I would like to find out, was there resistance from staff in implementing this computer-based system?

Mr. Gangoo: Chairman, I would like to ask the financial officer to answer that.

Ms. Bates: At the point in time when they tried to implement the software I was not employed at the corporation, but the feedback that I would have received is, there was some level of change, resistance, resistance to the change, and additionally there was no adequate resources in terms of the human resource in order to do the additional data entry into the software.

Mr. De Freitas: So there was not enough—how much people do you need to do the data entry?

Ms. Bates: At least two dedicated members of staff.

Mr. De Freitas: And there is no way the corporation could have found two people to do data entry. So you scrapped a programme which, from what we have been hearing all morning, would have greatly reduced the leakage of funds that is happening at these corporations. And because you cannot find two people to do data entry you scrapped that completely, so much so that just the Siparia Regional Corporation was seeing that they have not had financial reports since 2013. What assurances can all of these corporations give to the population of Trinidad and Tobago that these types of leakages would not happen again? We are seeing a situation where there is a solution and that solution is stifled and stopped because you cannot find two people to enter data and you are telling me there is resistance to this. What assurances can you all give to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because it is taxpayers that is paying for this, each corporation?

Ms. Bates: I would say for the Siparia Regional Corporation we would intend to find the necessary resources in terms of the human capacity in order to do the data entry within. We currently have a special project where we have asked for additional persons on contract to fill vacancies, to do some data entry for another project that we have for Board of Inland Revenue. That would be to provide some information with regard to contractors and suppliers over the period 2013 to current. And that is the additional staff that we are currently using.

Mr. De Freitas: So your assurance is that you are going to get the staff to put the data—so are you saying that you are going to restart this project?

Ms. Bates: We would have to approach Council in order to restart that project.

Mr. De Freitas: When was the project started and stopped? What year?

Ms. Bates: I think it was started sometime—I am not certain when it was started. I think it was in 2012 and it was stopped in 2016/2017.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: So I just wanted to indicate that this was before this new Council came and the financial officer. We did take steps to bring in a financial officer because of some of these issues. And I just want to point out—it would be the remiss of me if I did not point out that in the Municipals Corporation Act, 25:04, 36 defines:

“(1) The Chief Officers of a Corporation”—as—

- “(a) the Chief Executive Officer;
- (b) the Corporation Secretary;
- (c) the Treasurer;
- (d) the Engineer;
- (e) the Medical Officer of Health.”

And we are interested in the Treasurer. And at 37(1) it says that:

“A vacancy in the office of a Chief Officer shall be reported forthwith to the Commission.”

And 37(2) says that:

“(2) A vacancy in any office held by a Chief Officer shall be filled within three months after its occurrence, failing which, the failure to fill the vacancy shall forthwith be reported to the President by the Mayor...”—or Chairman.

And this is what we used, this clause in the legislation, 37(2) and we wrote the President indicating that there was a failure by the Commission to appoint a financial officer. And I think this is one of the things that helped us to get a person in that position.

Mr. Chairman: Members, we are looking at a 12.30 p.m. closing time, but still I would like to direct a question again to Siparia Regional Corporation. You stated that the finance—an allocation of resources committee recommended a forensic audit on the stores department. That is on page 6 of your response to question 14. Explain the circumstances which prompted this recommendation.

Ms. Bates: There was an issue with regard to forthcoming reports with regard to internal requisitions for items from the stores department and I believe that is what would have prompted Council to investigate further into the procedures within the stores department. In addition, they were concerned about, who were the custodians of the keys to the stores department, as well as the procedure for the requisition of stores, the internal requisitions, and how persons would receive items of stores.

Mr. Chairman: Has the situation been improved or rectified in any way?

Ms. Bates: Well, there was a system audit recently at the end of 2018 and we are

still awaiting the reports on the systems audit. It was conducted by the Ministry of Finance and that was one of the areas that they would have covered.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. In light of the time constraints I would want to ask the representative, the Chairman or CEO or Corporate Secretary of Penal/Debe Regional Corporation. In your information sharing to this Committee you indicated that, you reference numerous lawsuits against the corporation. Could you advise this Committee what is the nature of the lawsuits regarding the moneys owing and the law firms involved?

Mr. Ramsingh: Thank you. Mr. Chairman we have had instances where we have five matters at the High Court where persons would have taken action against the corporation for drainage issues, several infrastructure issues; some of which have since been resolved. At the High Court level we have retained a firm by the name of Harrikissoon & Company. We have several matters at the Magistrates' Court as well.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: How many matters at the Magistrates' Court?

Mr. Ramsingh: Currently we have four matters at the Magistrates' Court all which deals with municipal matters which I would say is blockage of drains, buildings, work of that nature. We also have three pre-protocol letters currently being addressed and we have one other matter, a development matter, that we are working on and pre-protocol letters have been issued in respect to that.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: And the law firms involved in all these matters/

Mr. Ramsingh: At the High Court matter we use the firm of Harrikissoon & Company.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: How many matters at the High Court?

Mr. Ramsingh: Five currently at the High Court—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Five at the High Court and four at the Magistrates' Court.

Mr. Ramsingh: Four at the Magistrates' Court.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So Harrikissoon & Company is the law firm in those matters before the High Court?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: And who is involved at the level of the Magistrates' Court?

Mr. Ramsingh: Trilaw Chambers. It is at page 15 of my submission.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: With regard to—

Mr. Chairman: One minute—just a question.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Sorry Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Is the Corporate Secretary an attorney-at-law?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes, she is.

Mr. Chairman: In cases like this, will your Corporate Secretary usually give legal advice or do you still have to outsource legal advice?

Mr. Ramsingh: The Corporate Secretary does provide legal advice, but sometimes because of the time in preparation and the complexity of the matters, we refer it to external attorneys.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chair. Just one or two more questions. How does the corporation proceed to secure the legal services required? Do you all secure it through sole select or you all invite law firms to bid? What procedure do you all follow?

Mr. Ramsingh: We refer to persons who would have had experiences of this type of nature, of these matters, and we would refer those matters to them for advice.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Now, how do you all procure the services of the—because

you said five matters are before the High Court and Harrikissoon & Company are in all five matters and you have four at the Magistrates' Court and Trilaw Chambers. How did the corporation proceed to secure the services of these two law firms?

Mr. Ramsingh: Well, based on the experience of these attorneys in other matters, in some of the other corporations as well, we just refer that to them.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So it is a sole select?

Mr. Ramsingh: Sole select.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Are you aware Mr. CEO that when you are going the route of sole select, there must be compelling and justifiable reasons for a sole select?

Mr. Ramsingh: Mr. Chairman, I think in the cases when we are issued the letters, when we get them, we have limited time to respond to these things.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Mr. CEO, I want to—based on the experience that I have, I want to caution you to be careful in the direction you are going in, because you might put yourself between a rock and a very hard place, because there are procedures and regulations in place and a corporation cannot, or a CEO cannot say, well an action came up urgently, so because it was urgent I did X or Y. That is how a breach develops. So I would want to caution you. But, Mr. Chairman, I would want to ask the CEO one other—so is it that with regard to five High Court actions that you proceeded to employ the services of Harrikissoon and Trilaw Chambers; they were urgent matters that came before you or the corporation?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes. All these matters, the all five matters came before us—

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: In an urgent way? And the four matters at the Magistrates' Court in an urgent way that others could not be allowed to bid for those services to the corporation?

Mr. Ramsingh: The matters that came before the corporation at the High Court were not—they were not pre-protocol letters. They were matters that were filed against the corporation and we were given a time frame within which to respond. So we would usually take that to the Council with the recommendation of a suitable attorney to represent the interest of the Council in that matter.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: So how long have these two firms been representing the corporation?

Mr. Ramsingh: Only on these matters—

Mr. Chairman: No, how long? Two years, three years, one year; how long is the relationship?

Mr. Ramsingh: Trilaw is one year. Harrikissoon is approximately a year too.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: My final question Mr. Chairman to the CEO. How long have you been the CEO of Penal/Debe Corporation?

Mr. Ramsingh: Just over a year.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Have you at any point in time utilized Harrikissoon Company limited in your personal capacity?

Mr. Ramsingh: Yes, I have Ma'am.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, there are strict rules—I would want to ask the Permanent Secretary to advise this Committee, based on the response of the CEO, whether or not such an action is acceptable. You are the Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Daniel?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, Mrs. Daniel, could you give a response?

Mrs. Daniel: I will speak for myself because as I have indicated at the first meeting our CEOs are accounting officers. So they are accountable. So I will speak for myself as an accounting officer and I will say that where I have—as in the

circumstances we just heard of, that I would ensure that I do not find myself in such a situation. It would certainly, particularly, in the context as painted, if there is no procurement process involved and if it is a sole select—particularly where the—because it is a sole select it means that there may not have even been a tenders committee. So for myself it would not happen and it is a difficult situation to contemplate.

Mr. Chairman: And remember in our first meeting I also mentioned that we need a system in place to monitor the CEOs and this is, I think is something we would have to look into.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: Chairman, I would just end by saying the principle of accountability and transparency certainly would reject any such action taken. Because if a CEO has a lawyer in a private matter, how then can that CEO recommend and contract the services of that same law firm for the corporation? To my mind it is wrong.

Mr. Chairman: Well, there is light at the end of the tunnel because soon the procurement legislation would be in place.

Mrs. Baptiste-Primus: But we do not have any procurement legislation, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: No, this is a question I would like to put at them regarding the creation of—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Forde: But, Mr. Chairman, added also to the same point that my colleague was making, in terms of the other corporations here, because this is our second schedule with these municipalities and it now came up. So it is possible that it might be good to get from the other CEOs if the same situation is happening. Again, in the interest of time they could probably write it to us.

Mr. Chairman: But one question, with this corporation, what is the estimated time

frame for undertaking the necessary arrangements to become compliant with the public procurement Act?—because you know soon you have to get things in place. So could you—yeah—I need that answer from— Could we start again with Penal/Debe Regional Corporation—about Public Procurement Unit, the time frame necessary to become compliant. So I would like us to—as we go with Penal/Debe Regional Corporation and we heard such startling facts brought up by Mrs. Baptiste-Primus with the CEO and sole. [*Crosstalk*] So I need to know about this procurement, the state of readiness for procurement.

Mr. Ramsingh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We have an existing Tenders Unit that operates. We have asked that the previous Corporate Secretary review the existing procedures in practice to make them compliant as far as possible with what is required from the new public procurement legislation.

Mr. Chairman: Could I get feedback from Diego Martin Regional Corporation?

Ms. Ramawadh: Thank you, Chair. At present there is a Tenders Unit that is functioning and we are engaging them in training. That training is being conducted both at the Head Office, from Head Office, Kent House and internally. And we are in the process of developing the procurement plan right now.

Mr. Chairman: Could you give me a time frame when you plan to finish the— could I get the time frame on that please?

Ms. Ramawadh: Well, right now we do not have the full complement of staff. However, we are trying at least about three months, all being well.

Mr. Chairman: Could I get feedback from Siparia/Regional Corporation?

Mr. Gangoo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Like the other corporations, Siparia has a tenders department, but I do not know if you are aware the procurement legislation, the entire legislation was not assented to as yet. It involves a number of

professionals, like Chief Procurement Officer, contract officers, contract managers, buyers and a host of other professionals. I am not sure if the PS could help me out here in terms of staffing the procurement unit and where we are—what stage we are? But as it is right now, my Corp Sec is involved in training the existing personnel at the tenders department.

Mr. Chairman: Can I get the response from the other corporations?

Ms. Ramdial: San Juan/Laventille.

Ms. Lakhan: Mr. Chairman, we are in the process—the legislation—the Ministry is engaging us in that process right now. They have sent documents for us to be guided by, so we are in the process—we have not identified staff or anything like that as yet. We will need some time to do that.

Mr. Chairman: PS, I see there is an appeal for help in certain corporations which I hope you will be guided. And Ms. Ramdial would like to ask a question.

Ms. Ramdial: Sure. Just a quick question directed to the San Juan/Laventille Corporation. In your submissions you stated that an Acting Accountant II heads the accounting department and has obtained qualifications from CXC. Could you tell me how long this individual has been within the corporation and whether or not this individual received additional training in accounting practices?

Ms. Lakhan: She has taken up the position on July 27, 2017. She has no formal training in the position and we are really having a challenge with that in the absence of a financial officer.

Ms. Ramdial: So what is the intention of the corporation moving forward?

Ms. Lakhan: The intention is that we are going to write to the Ministry to see if we can get a more qualified accountant because the situation at San Juan, we really need help in that department.

Ms. Ramdial: PS, you care to comment on that issue please?

Mrs. Daniel: The advertisement for the position of financial officer is in the newspapers; so we encourage members if you know persons to have them apply. But I want to say that accountant officers in the public service, while they may have entered the system with five O levels, they would have had a considerable amount of work experience in terms of public service accounting systems. So I do not want the impression to be given that this is just a five O levels person who does not know anything about public service accounts; far from the truth.

Ms. Ramdial: Well, in this instance this individual was hired in 2017 if I am not mistaken.

Mrs. Daniel: She would have assumed at the corporation. This is a public servant, a public officer—

Ms. Ramdial: “Ah ha”—

Mrs. Daniel: It is a public service position so the person would have been assigned to the corporation.

12.30p.m.

Ms. Ameen: Mr. Chairman, we are dealing with the oversight and financial management at regional corporations and there are two quick matters that I want to get from these corporations—

Mr. Chairman: We have to be brief. It is 12.30.

Ms. Ameen:—and they can submit in writing if they feel the need to put an explanation. We spoke about scavenging. There are some corporations that have, through newspaper reports, indicated lack of releases, or releases not being on time to pay contractors, and because of that, scavenging contractors are downing tools. We had a case in the Princes Town Regional Corporation which was widely

reported. If this is happening at other corporations, I would like us to be aware of it. I see Mr. Siparia nodding. Is it happening in Siparia?

Dr. Ramadharsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. Ameen: Put on your mike. Because the public—

Mr. Forde: He probably does not want it on record, Ms. Ameen.

Ms. Ameen: The public is complaining about poor scavenging service, but the truth is that many of these contractors are not being paid because the releases are not coming to the corporation in a timely manner. Are you experiencing that?

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, remember that question was raised prior and they have given their ratings and their particulars.

Ms. Ameen: No, no. This is not with regard to the satisfaction of the service. This is with regard to financial operations. Are you getting releases?

Mr. Chairman: I would like the Ministry to give that response in writing.

Ms. Ameen: It has nothing to do with the performance. It has to do with whether the Ministry of Finance is releasing the money to the regional corporations for them to pay their contractors, because contractors are refusing to provide scavenging service because of lack of releases, because they are not being paid. Whether the service is satisfactory or not, we have reached to the stage where some contractors are just not providing service at all and Chairmen are scrambling and seeing what resources they could get from outside to assist. It is not a safe situation. You do not have proper gears, and so on. So this is where I want to get the information. Perhaps the PS could give—

Mr. Chairman: Well, thank you for giving us that question and I would rather that in writing because of the essence of time.

Mrs. Daniel: Can I just be—Chair, just to say that the example given, it was not a

case of—while there have been instances of delays in payments, the Princes Town issue was not a case of outstanding moneys. Okay? Just for the record.

Ms. Ameen: You would send us in writing—

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So that was the last question given by Member Ameen—

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, one question that we had on the last—when we had the last panel, it would be good to get it here. So they will supply it in writing—

Mr. Chairman: Writing, okay.

Mr. Forde:—which is new contractors registered from 2015 to present. New contractors registered from 2015 to present, provide us with a list, please.

Mr. Chairman: Well, we have certainly heard a lot today: water damage, questionable hiring of staff; CEO corporation dysfunction, you know, a lot of things we heard, and I guess there is plenty more but we have run out of time. And, in closing, I would like each of the persons from each of the corporations and the Ministry, if they so desire, to give a brief closing remark. I would like to start with Mrs. Jennifer Daniel.

Mrs. Daniel: It is my pleasure again—it indeed is—to be here. Once again I am leaving with information that I did not come with and with work to do. Thank you, Chair and Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Susan Hong, Chairman of Diego Martin.

Ms. Hong: I, too, want to take this opportunity to thank you all for having us, and it was an experience. I can tell it was an experience that we certainly learnt from. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Alderman Dr. Glen Ramadharsingh.

Mr. Ramadharsingh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It has been a pleasure coming to this very distinguished gathering. I believe that local government is about

community empowerment and we really would like to see more emphasis being placed on local government, even as we head to the reform. It will give more confidence to the population that there is going to be substantial reform. And while it may be others to advocate that we are talking too much about inadequate, poor and untimely releases, it affects our operation, the heart of it; our creditors. The people who we call on for emergency services, they become very hesitant to provide services because of untimely payments. We really need the Ministry of Finance to step up to the plate and to service local government in a much more timely and efficient manner.

Mr. Chairman: Alderman Anthony Roberts.

Mr. Roberts: Thank you, Chairman. I just want to put on the record, notwithstanding the comments of our Permanent Secretary, that the senior staff at our accounting department is woefully incompetent. And as a result, it is frightening. All right?

Having said that, I want to express my gratitude for being invited here to express the position of our corporation and we hope that we will continue to work together in order to satisfy the needs of the burgesses. Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Dr. Allen Sammy.

Dr. Sammy: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I think that this meeting today has exposed the lack of staff and therefore because of the lack of qualified staff at senior level, it must affect performance. So that the public must know why performance is as it is, simply because positions are not filled and therefore certain things cannot be executed. On a final note, however, I am concerned that local government election is due this year and there is local government reform and I am

concerned with the number of services that are intended to be passed to local government. And given that the current system cannot meet the requirements, how prepared are we therefore, to meet those new burdens that will be imposed on us in going forward? Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: I thank you for your points, your knowledge, and in closing, I would like to thank the officials and the media for their attendance and participation, and thank the viewing and listening audience for their interest in the Committee's work. And at this point, I would like to adjourn this meeting. Thank you all.

12.37 p.m. *Meeting adjourned.*