

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, January 25, 2008*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the following Members requesting leave of absence from today's sitting of the House: the hon. Member for Oropouche East (Dr. Roodal Moonilal), the hon. Member for Tobago East (Hon. Rennie Dumas). I have received further communication on behalf of the hon. Member for Couva North (Mr. Basdeo Panday), the Leader of the Opposition. He also is requesting leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which these hon. Members seek is granted.

PAPER LAID

ILO Recommendation—R197 Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Recommendation, 2006. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**Local Food Production****(Measures taken)**

8. Mr. Vasant Bharath (*St. Augustine*) asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources:

Could the Minister inform this House of:

- a) the measures which his Government has taken to increase local food production including dairy and poultry farming; and
- b) the estimated time within which these measures are expected to impact on the cost of living?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Sen. The Hon. Arnold Piggott): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to address this honourable House in response to question No. 8 posed by the Member for St. Augustine.

Mr. Speaker, at present the dilemma concerning the rising cost of food, which is global in nature, has engaged the attention of governments and consumers

around the world. Various scenarios across the globe, such as the diversion of significant portions of the world's corn supply to ethanol production, droughts in Australia and the increase in demand for various food items by India and China, have conspired to foster worldwide increases in the cost of basic food items such as bread, flour, chicken, milk and corn. Here at home, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has sought to boost local food production with a view to mitigating the impact of the global increase in the cost of food.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, in its role as facilitating agency has gone to great lengths to ensure that our nation's farmers have available to them infrastructure that is conducive to increased agricultural output, rehabilitating or creating over 250 kilometres of agricultural access roads servicing 33,500 acres of land for active agricultural production benefiting more than 3,000 farmers since 2002. The Ministry's Land and Water Development Division alone rehabilitated 57 kilometres of such roads servicing 1,196 farmers on 8,270 acres at a cost of \$11 million for fiscal 2007. Additionally, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, has actively maintained various minor watercourses and developed and introduced irrigation systems that encourage year-round food production.

Mr. Speaker, my Ministry has carried out surveys to subdivide blocks of land for 30-year agricultural leases for distribution to the public and is ensuring that parcels are inspected annually to ensure that each parcel is being actively utilized for agricultural purposes at the risk of forfeiture of the lease.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago, through the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, coming out of the divestment of Caroni (1975) Limited, has made lands available to former Caroni workers, as well as the national community, to be utilized for food production. The result of this is the planned development of 7,802 agricultural plots of approximately two acres, developed on 17 sites comprising approximately 18,575 acres.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources is working towards the establishment of eight 100-acre plus commercial farms throughout Trinidad at a projected cost of \$98.5 million. The process is under way for the establishment of these farms in the following areas:

- Jerningham (100 acres) vegetable crops
- Edinburgh (100 acres) vegetable crops
- Orange Grove (100 acres) vegetable crops
- Caroni (100 acres) root crops and rice

- La Gloria (980 acres) livestock
- Mon Jaloux (300 acres) integrated farming with crops, livestock and aquaculture
- Picton (1,000 acres) livestock, tree crops and root crops
- Chaguaramas (200 acres) demonstration farm, with assistance from Cuba.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to advise this honourable House that, in response to advertisements placed locally, regionally and internationally, FRPs have been received and are currently being evaluated by the Ministry. It is expected that the large farm initiative will increase local food production due to the size of these facilities.

The average age of the farmers of our nation is 60 years. As part of its effort to boost national food production, the Ministry's Extension Training and Information Services Division continues to train persons engaged in or interested in agricultural pursuits with a view to increasing the efficiency of production of local foods and the use of appropriate technologies. Participants in training offered by the Division are trained in good agricultural practices with emphasis on yield increasing technologies. During fiscal 2007, the Division conducted 207 training sessions for 3,971 persons. It is expected that the training of such large numbers of persons in ways to increase agricultural production will itself result in increased local food production.

Arising out of the need for an infusion of "young blood" into the nation's agricultural sector, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources initiated the Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture (YAPA) in 2002. The programme's aim is to train young persons in aspects of farm management, crop cultivation and livestock production needed to effectively engage in commercial farming thus increasing food production.

From its inception to present, in excess of 6,740 young persons have been trained under Phase I and an additional 335 under Phase II. For fiscal 2007, 227 young persons were trained under YAPA I and 29 under YAPA II.

This Government, under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, also made food production easier for the nation's farmers. This is by increasing support for persons engaged in food production through its Agricultural Incentive Programme. Examples of these incentives are as follows:

Vehicles:

- New wheel tractors—refund of 15 per cent of the showroom price, up to \$25,000;
- Imported used/refurbished wheel tractor—refund of 15 per cent of the showroom price up to \$15,000.

Land Preparation

- Tillage operations—refund of 25 per cent of the cost up to \$200 per hectare.

Mr. Speaker, both the Research and Agricultural Services Divisions of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources provide seedlings and germ plasm to farmers within the Research Division producing hardier, higher yielding, disease and pest resistant plants, thereby fostering increased production. Similarly, the Agricultural Services Division provides farmers with planting material throughout the year to ensure that they can plant year-round thereby having a positive impact on the country's agricultural output.

In carrying out this mandate for fiscal 2007, the Agricultural Services Division produced for distribution a total of 565,613 seedlings. This figure represents the production for cocoa, breadfruit, citrus, mango, avocado, assorted tropical fruits, spices and ornamentals.

With regard to livestock, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources also provides support for farmers in the form of artificial insemination and stud services with the intention of increasing livestock production. These services are provided to the farmer all year round and recently have been decentralized to provide quicker response to farmers' requests.

The National Agricultural Market Information System (NAMIS) is a database of marketing and ancillary information which will allow farmers, agri-food entrepreneurs, consumers and policy makers to make wise trading and business decisions with respect to agriculture. The database will allow agri-entrepreneurs to forecast shortages and gluts of commodities and adjust their production levels to take full advantage of these scenarios. The implications of NAMIS for lowering food prices and increasing food production are therefore obvious. There is little doubt that this initiative has, and will continue to positively affect the nation's agricultural sector and agricultural output.

As part of its focus on increasing local food production, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, in a joint public/private sector initiative,

supports the Trinidad and Tobago Agri-Business Association (TTABA), which has begun implementation of the National Agri-Business Development Programme, which aims to develop the agri-business sector with a view to, among other things, improve national and household food security.

In Phase I of the programme, nine groups of commodities have been selected, and they are hot peppers, pumpkin, pawpaw, cassava, sweet potato, rabbit, tilapia, coconut and herbs (chadon beni, basil, oregano, thyme, aloe vera, noni). Commodity and farmers' groups have contracted with TTABA to supply these commodities with the Cunupia Farmers Group in the lead. The programme is expected to significantly increase local production of value-added and agri-processed items.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources has identified the tilapia industry as one that can be successfully developed to provide increased fish for the national community at reduced prices as well as for export.

The Agricultural Development Bank also plays an important role in the Government's overall plan to boost agricultural production in Trinidad and Tobago. Allocations to the ADB in the 2007/2008 Budget were increased to \$75 million, with an additional \$25 million to be made available as needed. This is due to the fact that the ADB provides financing for farmers, a necessary component if they are to increase levels of food production.

In terms of poultry and dairy, Mr. Speaker, the poultry sub-sector is the largest agri-business in Trinidad and Tobago. The Government recognizes the importance of this sector in ensuring local food security and supports the accessing and utilization of new technologies to increase the industry's production levels.

A major new technology is the tunnel ventilation poultry pen, which not only dramatically improves efficiency and allows for the production of more chickens per year at a lower production cost, but provides a higher level of bio-security in terms of managing the threat posed by the avian influenza.

The local dairy industry has suffered tremendously with the drastic increase in the cost of concentrate feeds. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, therefore, through the Livestock and Livestock Products Board, has partnered with a major milk processor and local dairy farmers in a mulatto grass cultivation exercise to be used as feedstock to help farmers offset the increased cost of feeding their animals. Initial results show increased milk production as well as improvement in the quality of milk. Additionally, the Ministry is currently reviewing the Agricultural Incentive Programme to include more support for dairy farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Government has, through these various initiatives, sought to create an environment that is conducive to increased food production. However, as with most activities that are agricultural in nature, these initiatives are expected to come into full fruition in the medium to long term.

I thank you.

1.45 p.m.

Mr. Bharath: In the Prime Minister's budget speeches over the last several years, he has alluded to the input of Cubans in the farming industry in Trinidad and Tobago. I noticed the Minister talked about requests for proposals on an international basis. Does that now mean that the Cuban projects have been put on hold?

Sen. The Hon. A. Piggott: Cuba is regional and as well, that has not been put on hold. We have the Tucker Valley/Chaguaramas Demonstration Farm, to which I allude and we would be partnering with Cuba, in terms of developing that demonstration farm at Chaguaramas.

Mr. S. Panday: Having regard to what the hon. Minister has said, is the Minister of the view that the Government has done enough to enhance local food production?

Sen. The Hon. A. Piggott: The Government had been doing significant work in the agricultural sector and I spent the last couple of minutes enunciating those very, very clearly. The words that I spoke earlier are the words of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources and that of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. S. Panday: What is the percentage production of local food in fiscal 2007, as against fiscal 2006?

Sen. The Hon. A. Piggott: I take it that is a new question and, therefore, I suggest that a question be posed.

Mr. S. Panday: Further supplemental. Could the hon. Minister state how many lots have been distributed to the ex-Caroni (1975) Limited workers?

Mr. Speaker: No, I—[*Interruption*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Piggott: I also take that to be a separate question at this time and suggest that it be posed separately.

Lange Park Regional Facility

(Allocations made)

- 10. Mr. Jack Warner** (*Chaguanas West*) asked the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs:

Could the Minister state what has become of the allocations that were made for the development of the Lange Park Regional Facility after extensive discussion and consensus was reached between the Chairman of the Sports Company, the Chaguanas Borough Corporation as well as the Lange Park Residents Association and the Lange Park Security and Management Company?

The Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs (Hon. Gary Hunt): Mr. Speaker, in keeping with Government's 2020 vision for sport and recreation, the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs is mandated to provide first class sporting infrastructure towards the development of sport throughout Trinidad and Tobago. This mandate is guided in large measure by the National Sport Policy, which speaks not only to the provision of first class training facilities for our elite athletes but additionally to providing recreational venues such as community recreation grounds, children's play parks and jogging tracks for the enjoyment of the national community in an effort to encourage healthy lifestyles.

Cabinet approved a policy for categorization of recreational facilities. This policy provides for two categories of community recreational facilities, namely, community "A" and "B" types.

The community "A" recreation ground is a grassed area between 5.7 and 10 acres in area, which can accommodate the playing of two sporting disciplines, with accommodation for 200 patrons.

The community "B" recreation ground is a grassed area under 5.7 acres, located within communities, which can accommodate general recreational activity.

The Lange Park Recreation Ground, with a total area of 4.94 acres, falls, therefore, in the community "B" classification and cannot, according to the policy, accommodate a regional facility. The policy, notwithstanding consultations with the Lange Park Residents' Association, the Lange Park Security and Management, the Chaguanas Borough Corporation and the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, arrived at a consensus that a regional facility should not be pursued. The residents who will benefit from this facility have all agreed that the facility should be developed as a community-type recreational facility. It should be noted that a regional ground is generally at least 10 acres in size, in order to accommodate the facilities associated with such a ground.

Additionally, there were no allocations made for the development of the Lange Park Recreation Ground, since it was not included in the cluster of recreations approved for development by Cabinet. This recreation ground, however, remains under consideration as part of the future development of sporting facilities throughout Trinidad and Tobago and the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs gives its assurance that it will continue to collaborate with all stakeholders, including the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East, in whose constituency this recreation ground falls.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Mr. Warner: Mr. Speaker, I would like clarified—is the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs saying that there was no allocation made for Lange Park?

Hon. G. Hunt: The answer to that question was contained within the answer I previously gave and the answer is, no. There were no allocations.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Minister be kind enough to give us some understanding. Under whose responsibility are these recreational facilities? Is it the borough corporation's; not particularly Lange Park? There seems to be a national misunderstanding and question as to who is responsible for some of the recreational facilities that are five to 10 acres and those that are less than five acres. The Sports Company is now a part of it and the borough corporation is now part of it. We need to have some clarification.

Hon. G. Hunt: Mr. Speaker, that is an additional question and I will answer if it is posed to the House, as is the normal procedure.

**Status of the “Eye in the Sky”
(Busy Corner in Chaguanas)**

11. Mr. Jack Warner asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister indicate the status of the “Eye in the Sky” at the Busy Corner in Chaguanas and when last was it used?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Martin Joseph): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In response to question No. 11, sky watch units or “Eye in the Sky” as they are commonly referred to, are becoming very popular internationally within the law enforcement fraternity, as a means of enhancing police visibility, surveillance and deterrence.

In the United States, for example, beginning in 2006, the New York Police Department strategically placed sky watch units in various communities to deal

with criminal activity in those areas. More than 100 units currently support the surveillance efforts of the US Border Patrol. Also, following Hurricane Katrina, in New Orleans, the police utilized sky watch units to monitor the Mardi Gras celebration and allay the public's fear of crime.

In 2004, the Ministry of National Security acquired three such units for use by the police service, one of which is assigned to Busy Corner, Chaguanas. According to information provided by the police service, that unit remains fully operational. Officers of the Chaguanas Police Station have advised that the unit has been helpful in monitoring crowds during large gatherings for events such as Carnival and for surveillance of everyday activities in the busy shopping area.

During the month of December, there was a problem with its camera which was rectified within the same month. That problem, however, did not render the unit inoperative.

Firearms Interdiction Unit

17. Mr. Subhas Panday (*Princes Town North*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the date the Firearms Interdiction Unit which was headed by Superintendent Chandraban Maharaj was established;
- (b) the number of firearms and the amount of ammunition retrieved and/or confiscated by the said unit;
- (c) the areas in Trinidad and Tobago where the above arms and ammunition were retrieved and/or confiscated; and the date the said unit was suspended?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Martin Joseph): Once again, in response to question No. 17: the Firearms Interdiction Unit was established within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service on July 22, 2003, by Department Order No. 233/2003.

From the date of its establishment, the Firearms Interdiction Unit (FIU) was headed by senior Superintendent Raymond Craig. Superintendent Chandraban Maharaj never headed this unit.

With respect to (b), from the date of its establishment in 2003, to its disbandment in 2005, the FIU seized a total of 111 firearms and 2,813 rounds of ammunition as follows: 2003, 21 firearms seized, 53 rounds of ammunition; 2004, 73 firearms seized, 1,229 rounds of ammunition; 2005, January to July, 17

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firearms seized, 1,531 rounds of ammunition. This gives a total of 111 firearms seized and 2,813 rounds of ammunition.

With respect to (c), the areas from which the arms and ammunition were retrieved or confiscated included Chatham, Port of Spain, Arima, Tableland, Claxton Bay, San Fernando, Chaguanas, Princes Town, Laventille, Cunupia, Longdenville, Cedros, Sea Lots, Valencia, Morvant, Curepe, Valsayn North, Trincity, Rousillac, Toco, Maracas Bay and Tobago.

After two years in operation, the Firearms Interdiction Unit was disbanded with effect from July 22, 2005, via TTPS Departmental Order No. 228/2005. Since then, the police service has seized 110 firearms in the last six months of 2005, 266 in 2006 and 220 in 2007.

Mr. S. Panday: Was Superintendent Chandraban Maharaj ever a member of the Firearms Interdiction Unit?

Sen. The Hon. M. Joseph: My understanding is that he was a member of the Firearms Interdiction Unit.

Mr. S. Panday: A further question. Subsequent to 2005, was there a unit in the police service also called the Firearms Interdiction Unit, which Superintendent Maharaj headed?

Sen. The Hon. M. Joseph: The answer is no.

Transportation of Prisoners (Organization contracted)

18. Mr. Subhas Panday asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the name of the organization and/or company which the State has contracted to transport prisoners to and from the courts; and
- (b) the sums paid by the State to this company for the years 2006 and 2007 for that purpose?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Martin Joseph): Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. In response to question No. 18: (a), in September 1996, based on the need for an efficient transportation service for prisoners to and from court to ensure their presence at hearings, the company Amalgamated Security Services Limited was selected by Nipdec to provide prisoner transportation services to the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service.

In response to (b), for the years 2006 and 2007, Amalgamated Security Services Limited was paid the sum of \$10.26 million per year, amounting to a total of \$20.52 million for the two-year period.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Tabaquite.

Mr. S. Panday: With the greatest respect—

Mr. Speaker: Do you want a supplemental?

Mr. S. Panday: No, question No. 19.

Mr. Speaker: No, we have an agreement. Question No. 19 is not yet approved.

Mr. S. Panday: Thank you.

Criminal Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

(Details of)

25. Mr. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC (Tabaquite) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) whether at any time during his tenure in office as Minister of National Security he made a public statement that there were in Trinidad and Tobago 66 criminal gangs with about 300 criminals and that he proposed to take steps to bring them to justice;
- (b) if the Minister made that statement or stated words to that effect, could the Minister state what steps, if any, he took to have them brought to justice; and
- (c) if the answer is in the negative, could the Minister say whether he took steps to identify the criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. If he did, could he state the result of the exercise and state what action (if any) was taken by him in respect of his findings?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Martin Joseph): Thank you again, Mr. Speaker and hon. Members. In response to question No. 25(a), on June 06, 2005, in this honourable House I, as Minister of National Security, was authorized by Cabinet to update the Parliament and the nation on the measures the Government had implemented to deal with crime and criminal activities. In that

presentation I made the following statement regarding the existence of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago and the steps taken to bring them to justice. The statement read as follows:

“Mr. Speaker, hon. Members, our best intelligence indicates that there are some 66 known gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. We further estimate that there are some 500 hardcore members. We also have a sense of some of the areas in which they operate.”

In response to (b) in the said presentation, some specific initiatives were identified, which the Government undertook to bring these gangs to justice. Specifically, I identified the establishment of the Homicide Prevention Working Group, with the main goal of reducing homicides, especially gang-related homicides in the first instance. This initiative combines stakeholders from various agencies to identify problems and develop solutions with respect to homicide in Trinidad and Tobago.

In addition, the strengthening and expansion of the operations of the Interagency Task Force, which incorporates elements of the police service and the defence force, was identified as another measure that was being put in place to deal with the prevention and detection of gang and drug-related homicides.

2.00 p.m

The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) created a presence in Carenage, Diego Martin, Beetham Gardens and Cocorite in order to deal with rising gang violence. This was in addition to the established centres of operation on Quarry Street, Charford Court, Harpe Place and Beverly Hills.

As hon. Members are aware, the problem of gang-related activity is directly linked to the illegal drug trade in Trinidad and Tobago, and the prevalence of firearms which accompany this trade. As such, efforts to disrupt the activities of gangs must also include initiatives designed to disrupt the trade of illegal drugs in the country. Toward this end, the following steps have been taken since the statement in question was made:

- restructuring of the Homicide Bureau of Investigations in 2006 to improve homicide detection;
- establishment of the repeat offenders programme; a sub-committee of the Homicide Prevention Working Group to identify persons and groups responsible for the highest levels of crime in the country;

- continued support of the Pride in Gonzales Project, which involves a number of stakeholders, including the Catholic Social Justice Commission, representatives of the community of Gonzales, government ministries and other stakeholders; and
- incorporate training, meetings, family counselling, workshops and camps for young persons, in an effort to stem the activities of gangs in the area;
- the purchase of more than 450 vehicles for the police service to improve mobility and visibility, including 43 mobile police units equipped with CCTV; conducting weekly COMSTAT meetings where all Assistant Commissioners of Police meet with the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime and Operation) to be informed of gang-related activities taking place within the police divisions under their jurisdiction and institute measures to combat such activities;
- the establishment of a police post in the Morvant/Laventille area to deal with rising gang activity and the establishment of the Crime and Problem Analysis Branch in 2007, to provide accurate and timely information on criminal activity by collating data received from the police divisions, analysing data and identifying criminal patterns and developing strategies to prevent crime.

These steps were taken in addition to the E999 patrols, road blocks and other police and joint army and police patrols designed to prevent gang and drug-related activities within communities.

Finally, a number of steps were taken to involve the communities in which these gangs operate, in order to hamper recruitment activities and to listen to the concerns and recommendations of the residents. These activities included seven public consultations on crime, the dial 555 public education meetings, monthly meetings held by the Citizen Security Programme, an initiative designed to address the issues of crime and violence in society at community levels with special focus on at-risk youths.

Mr. Speaker, part (c) is not applicable.

Mr. Maharaj SC: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the hon. Minister could tell this honourable House whether anyone of these criminals or criminal gangs was brought to justice in the courts.

Sen. The Hon. M. Joseph: Mr. Speaker, my understanding is that a number have been brought to justice. I do not have the specific information, but that could easily be provided to the hon. Member.

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. Could the Minister say how many criminal gangs are there at the present time and how many members are in those gangs?

Sen. The Hon. M. Joseph: Mr. Speaker, I anticipated the question was going to be asked. I have been advised that there is an estimated 86 such gangs. The average members are between 15—20. So, you are talking about at least 1,290—1,720. I was told that the reason for the increase in numbers was as a result of “splinter groups” forming within gangs as a result of some of the displacement activities in some of the core gangs.

Witness Protection Programme

(Details of)

26. Mr. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state:

- a) whether there exists a Witness Protection Programme in Trinidad and Tobago;
- b) if the answer to (a) is yes, whether the Witness Protection Programme comprised witnesses who abandoned the programme? If the answer is yes, could the Minister give the number of persons who comprised the programme for each of the years from 2003 to 2007 and could the Minister state for each year the number of persons (if any) who abandoned the programme; and
- c) the reasons, if any, given by them for abandoning the programme?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Martin Joseph): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. The Justice Protection Act, No. 78 of 2000, came into operation on April 04, 2007, having been proclaimed by Legal Notice No. 76 of 2007.

The Act provides for the establishment of a programme for the protection of certain witnesses and other persons, and for matters incidental thereto. The regulations to establish the agencies of the Trinidad and Tobago Justice Protection Programme were published via Legal Notices Nos. 96 and 97 which came into effect on May 01, 2007.

Hon. Members should note that prior to the proclamation of the Act and publication of the Legal Notices, the Justice Protection Programme or the Witness

Protection Programme as it is sometimes referred to, began on May 05, 2003 to operationalize the arrangements laid out in the Act.

According to information provided by the programme from May 05, 2003 to December 31, 2007, 102 witnesses have participated in the programme. Of that number, 11 have voluntarily withdrawn. The numbers indicate as follows between 2003—2007:

In the year 2003, the number of witnesses supported by the programme, 27; the number of witnesses who voluntarily withdrew, 2; in 2004, the number of witnesses supported by the programme, 30; the number of witnesses who voluntarily withdrew, 2; in 2005, the number of witnesses supported by the programme, 44; the number of witnesses who voluntarily withdrew, 2; in 2006, the number of witnesses supported by the programme, 63; the number of witnesses who voluntarily withdrew, 1; and in 2007, the number of witnesses supported by the programme, 76; the number of witnesses who voluntarily withdrew, 4.

One should be cautioned, however, that since the total number of witnesses for the individual years includes witnesses who would have rolled over from previous years, adding these figures as they are would give an inflated total for 2003—2007.

With regard to the persons who withdrew, a number of reasons were proffered. In many cases the witnesses felt:

- (1) the programme was too restrictive, especially in cases where there were substance abuse challenges;
- (2) the programme did not meet their expectations as they wished to reside in a particular country or countries as a condition to participation;
- (3) an unwillingness to be separated from extended family; and
- (4) the money provided was insufficient to support a previous lifestyle.

However, for those persons who remained in the programme, the State has been able, through testimonies, to secure guilty verdicts in nine cases. Not guilty verdicts were granted in 14 cases and, at present, there are 14 cases before the courts and four are due for retrial.

Mr. Maharaj SC: Mr. Speaker, could the Minister state whether there was any witness protection programme in existence before 2003?

Sen. The Hon. M. Joseph: Mr. Speaker, there were elements of the Witness Protection Programme that were in existence, because in the absence of the

regulations, it was being implemented—I do not want to say in an ad hoc way, because that in itself would be wrong. The short answer is yes, there was a Witness Protection Programme prior to 2003.

Cuchawan Trace West Roadway
(Reason for Delay)

31. Dr. Hamza Rafeeq (*Caroni Central*) on behalf of Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

- A. Could the Minister state the reasons for the inordinate delay in the commencement of rehabilitation work by his Ministry on the Cuchawan Trace West roadway, which was due to be undertaken in March 2007?
- B. Could the Minister indicate to the House the new date for commencing work on the Cuchawan Trace West landslip and the repairs and paving of the said road?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, thank you. Cuchawan Trace West falls under the jurisdiction of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation. A retaining wall constructed by the said corporation failed due to its poor design. Notwithstanding the fact that this road is the responsibility of the UNC-controlled Penal/Debe Corporation, and the fact that the retaining wall constructed by that corporation failed, in June 2007, the Ministry of Works and Transport completed remedial works as follows:

- temporary road works to maintain vehicular traffic on Cuchawan Trace West;
- paving works and construction of a curb and slipper drain to Cuchawan Trace East;
- design for a new retaining wall for Cuchawan Trace West, which included a geotechnical analysis carried out by Geotech and Associates, and which was completed on August 15, 2007.

The final design and drawings by engineers of the PURE Unit of the Ministry of Works and Transport was completed on September 05, 2007.

Tendering by NIPDEC was completed on December 15, 2007 and the successful tenderer for the retaining wall works is General Earth Movers Limited.

The scheduled date for the award of contract was January 10, 2008, and this has occurred. The proposed commencement of the date of the project is January 24, 2008, and the contractor has already mobilized.

It should be noted that much of this information has already been provided in this House on several occasions.

Dr. Rafeeq: May I ask a supplemental question?

Mr. Speaker: Yes.

Dr. Rafeeq: Minister, are you saying that work commenced there yesterday?

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I said clearly that the proposed date for the commencement of the project was January 24, 2008, and the contractor has already mobilized.

Debe Health Centre

(Status of)

32. Dr. Hamza Rafeeq on behalf of Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

- A. Could the Minister inform the House of the revised completion date for the Debe Health Centre?
- B. Could the Minister indicate the revised cost for the Debe Health Centre and the reasons for the cost overruns?

The Minister of Health (Sen. The Hon. Jerry Narace): Thank you. Mr. Speaker. The revised completion date for the Debe Health Centre is February 14, 2008. The original contract sum for the Debe Health Centre is \$3,138,000.

I was advised by the board of the South West Regional Health Authority that notwithstanding the revised completion date for this project, the centre is expected to be completed with no cost overruns.

Occupational Safety and Health Agency

(Death of Finbar Adonis)

30. Dr. Hamza Rafeeq on behalf of Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*) asked the hon. Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise:

- A. Could the Minister indicate whether the Occupational Safety and Health Agency has conducted and/or received a report on the death of contract worker Finbar Adonis in December 2007?
- B. Could the Minister indicate the findings of such a report?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, this is the answer to question No. 30.

The Occupational Safety and Health Agency has conducted preliminary investigations into the December 09, 2007 death of contract worker Mr. Finbar Adonis.

The Occupational Safety and Health Agency has also received a preliminary report from the team appointed by Petrotrin to investigate and report on the matter.

The preliminary investigations conducted by the Occupational Safety and Health Agency have revealed the following:

- (a) The firm St. Clair and St. Clair Contracting Services Limited was contracted by Petrotrin to undertake maintenance work at the No.1 Catalytic Reforming Unit (CRU) in the hydro processing area of the Pointe-a-Pierre Refinery.
- (b) At approximately 3.00 p.m. on December 09, 2007, Mr. Finbar Adonis, an employee of the St. Clair and St. Clair Contracting Services Limited and other employees were conducting works on the pipelines on the No. 7 compressor in the Catalytic Reforming Unit of the hydroprocessing area at Petrotrin Pointe-a-Pierre when employees reported hearing a scream, and finding Mr. Adonis lying on the ground thereafter. Mr. Adonis had been working on a platform approximately 15 feet above the ground.
- (c) Mr. Adonis was rushed to the Augustus Long Hospital where he subsequently died.

The Occupational Safety and Health Agency is continuing its investigations into the incident and has advised that a definite report would be available by February 15, 2008.

2.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Before we proceed, hon. Members, there are other questions on the Order Paper to be answered, both oral and written, and I understand that the Leader of the House is asking for a two-week deferment. Proceed.

The following questions stood on the Order Paper:

**Chaguanas Magistrates' Court
(Redevelopment of)**

9. Could the hon. Attorney General state:
- a) what are the plans of the Government for the redevelopment of the Chaguanas Magistrates' Court; and
 - b) whether the Government is at this time paying rent for any facility on Ramsaran Street or in any other location in Chaguanas as an alternative Magistrates' Court? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Blimps and/or Sky Ships
(Details of)**

19. Could the hon. Minister of National Security, with regard to the blimps and/or sky ships, state:
- a) the costs to rent and/or to acquire or to lease each blimp and/or sky ship;
 - b) the dates on which each was acquired;
 - c) the annual cost of repairs and/or maintenance; and
 - d) whether they have assisted in solving any of the murders so far for this year; and if so, which murders? [*Mr. S. Panday*]

**DNA Act
(Implementation of)**

27. Could the hon. Minister of National Security state:
- a) whether government has started to implement the DNA Act;
 - b) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, could the Minister state:
 - i. the implementing stages which have been completed;
 - ii. progress (if any) made in establishing a DNA Bank to obtain and store the DNA records of individuals;
 - iii. whether the government is at present causing the use of DNA by the police to detect crimes;
 - c) if the answer to b(iii) above is in the affirmative, could the Minister state whether the use of DNA assisted in detecting any crimes giving the nature of the crimes detected; and

- d) if the answer to b(iii) above is in the negative, could the hon. Minister state whether the government intends to use the DNA to detect crimes, and if so, to give the time frame in which DNA will be used for the detection of crimes? [Mr. R. L. Maharaj SC]

**Point Fortin Hospital
(Construction of)**

35. Could the Minister of Health indicate when the construction of the Point Fortin Hospital will commence, the projected date of completion and estimated cost of the above mentioned? [Dr. T. Gopeesingh]

**Scarborough Hospital
(Details of Project)**

36. Could the hon. Minister of Health indicate the expenditure to date on the Scarborough Hospital, the work completed, the projected date of completion and the estimated total cost of the project? [Dr. T. Gopeesingh]

**Health Sector
(Improvement and Development of)**

37. Could the hon. Minister of Health indicate:
- A. whether any projects and plans outlined for the improvement and development in the health sector, in the Prime Minister's Budget Statement of 2006-2007 inclusive, have been unfulfilled?
 - B. If so, could the Minister list them and indicate their status? [Dr. T. Gopeesingh]

Questions, by leave, deferred.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following questions stood on the Order Paper:

**Caroni (1975) Limited
(Details of Assets)**

1. With regards to the Caroni (1975) Limited, could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land And Marine Resources state:
 - a) the assets held immediately before it was closed;
 - b) whether the said assets referred to in (a) were disposed of by lease, rental, sale or other methods;

- c) the names of the individuals or companies which acquired same or acquired any interest in same or were in possession of or were permitted to have occupation of any of the assets including land of the said Caroni (1975) Limited; and
- d) the particulars of any such acquisition or acquisition of any such interest of delivery of possession or giving occupation of any such assets by each individual or company; giving the dates of such acquisitions and/or delivery of possession and/or occupation of any such asset, the price paid and the terms of the acquisition or delivery of occupation and/or possession. [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Rural Electrification Programme
(Projects undertaken)**

5. Could the hon. Minister of Public Utilities list the projects undertaken under the Rural Electrification Programme in 2006 and 2007 and the projects proposed under this programme for 2008? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

Questions, by leave, deferred.

**DEFINITE URGENT MATTER
(LEAVE)**

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Chaguanas East. Sorry, Caroni East.

Dr. Gopeesingh: I think you understand we were going to win that seat, Mr. Speaker.

Dengue Fever Outbreak

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 12 of the House of Representatives, I am presenting your amended version of the matter. [*Interruption*] Okay.

I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing the following matter as a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the impending national epidemic of life threatening dengue haemorrhagic fever, as a result of the presence of and exposure from the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito discovered in Port of Spain, Chaguanas and Ste. Madeline in South Trinidad.

The matter is definite as it pertains to a specific matter, namely, the dengue infection of several construction workers and families throughout Trinidad.

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[DR. T. GOPEESINGH]

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The matter is urgent because there is the necessity for immediate action to be taken by the Ministry of Health to prevent an impending epidemic or pandemic of life threatening dengue haemorrhagic fever.

The matter is of public importance because of the impending danger to the lives of inpatients and staff of the General Hospital, Port of Spain and all Carnival enthusiasts coming to and around the Queen's Park Savannah by the spread of the dengue infection by the *Aedes Egypti* mosquitoes found on the building site on Keate Street, right here in Port of Spain.

Mr. Speaker: Yes, hon. Members, I have studied the Motion as moved by the hon. Member for Caroni East and I find it worthy of discussion. Is it the wish of the House to discuss this matter?

Hon. Members: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: That being the case, normally a matter falling under Standing Order 12 will be stood down until 6.00 p.m. With your leave, I am asking that the matter be taken at 4.30 instead. If you so agree, would the Leader of Government Business move pursuant to Standing Order 90, the suspension of Standing Orders 10(2) and 12(3) so that we can take this matter at 4.30 p.m. Hon. Members, your tea break will therefore be at 5.30 p.m. Can I enquire before you move the Motion, how many Members intend to support you in this motion?

Dr. Gopeesingh: One Member.

Mr. Speaker: Only one?

Dr. Gopeesingh: One Member.

Mr. Speaker: Okay, one Member, so that you have 30 minutes to make your contribution and the Minister of Health will reply. He has 30 minutes also.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with your direction pursuant to Standing Order 90, I seek the leave of the House to waive Standing Order 10(2) and 12(3), so that the hearing of the debate on this matter of definite public importance can take place at 4.30 p.m.

Question put and agreed to.

**RISING FOOD PRICES
(GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO CONTAIN)**

Mr. Harry Partap (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the price of food continues to rise and the poor and low-income earners now find it difficult to feed themselves and their families;

And whereas the Government has failed to take adequate measures to keep food prices at an affordable level to all citizens;

Be it resolved that this honourable House condemn the Government for its failure in containing food prices at affordable levels for the entire population.

Mr. Speaker, I must admit that I had great difficulty in preparing for this debate, because every time I thought I had completed my notes, prices went up. Yesterday when I thought I had completed, the price of eggs went up by seven cents a unit and this followed the rise in the price of poultry feed.

The Motion standing in my name invites this honourable House to consider the role and responsibility of the Government in keeping food prices at affordable levels for the entire population. We on this side are asking this honourable House to examine whether and to what extent the Government has failed in its responsibility to contain or to cap or to stop the increase in the price of food so members of the population could sustain themselves and their families according to normal standards of nutrition.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I move this Motion here today, the Governor of the Central Bank, a man who is reputed to be an apologist for the Government, has broken his silence saying that persons over the age of 60 years cannot afford to meet the cost of basic needs, and this includes the cost of food, medication, health care and other necessities such as non-consumable grocery items and toiletries. At the current pace, many of them may not even be able to die in dignity because they do not know how their expenses will be met for their last rites.

This is the reality of the day in which we live, under this heartless, insensitive Government, which does not care if babies have milk to drink, as long as the waterfront skyline is looking good. It is faceless development and Vision 2020 is blind and faceless. The steady rise in food prices is having a debilitating impact, a crippling effect on the poor old age pensioners, low income earners and the unemployed in Trinidad and Tobago.

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The poor and the downtrodden are not the only ones feeling the squeeze when they have to go to the market or the grocery. The middle and higher income earners are also reeling because it is burning a hole in their pockets and purses. High food prices is not a partisan issue; it is not a poor people issue; it is a national issue, because it affects every one of us. Money is money and the cash register is no discriminator of persons; everybody pays the same high prices.

Those who could have afforded plenty are now buying less; those who could have only bought a little are now buying even less or doing without; and those who have become too frustrated to hope are being forced into crime. Not because that is their nature, but because they have been backed into a hopeless situation. Those who are in a position to do so pass on these increases to others, but what is the situation with those who are on a fixed income—the small man. When these increases are compounded and dropped on his head at the grocery or the market he has to bear it alone.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is the intention of the people's Opposition in this Parliament, the United National Congress Alliance, to demonstrate one, the cost of food is extremely higher than it reasonably should be, and two, that it is so because of the negligence and/or the refusal of the Government to take the necessary steps that are within their power to reduce the cost of food and other products that are either grown or manufactured here in Trinidad and Tobago, or imported from the Caribbean and other countries.

In so doing, we will demonstrate why it is that the population woke up on November 06, 2007 to regret making the gravest error of believing that the PNM would change its ways, and show some measure of consideration to the suffering of people. [*Interruption*] You are right; it is not the whole population, you are a minority government; you know that.

Madam Deputy Speaker, but “those in the fire does feel the heat.” As someone who faces the market on a weekly basis and sometimes every month, your humble servant, I can tell you that food prices have taken a quantum leap. In this rich country, with such a high GDP and national income, mothers have to be charged in court for stealing milk to feed their babies. They are charged for planting a little ochro; they have to appear in court in shackles. Shame on the PNM! That is what you have introduced in this country.

An 800-gram pack of powdered milk, which cost \$15.75 in 2000, now costs a whooping \$47; a 298 per cent increase in six years. And if you have a baby to feed you know you also have to add Cerelac, Nestum or one of these cereals as

well; so that feeding the baby is expensive under this Government. A two-kilogram pack of parboiled rice, which cost \$8.65 in 2000, now costs \$14. Split peas or dhal costs \$1.47 per pound in 2000, when the UNC was in office; today it costs almost three times that amount, equivalent to close to \$4 a pound. If you decide to make macaroni pie, well to start with, you have to get a 400-gram pack of macaroni, which used to cost \$2.30 under the UNC, now costs \$4.

2.30 p.m.

Cheese is now king cheese; having gone from \$10 per pound in 2001, to a whooping \$30 a pound as I speak.

Mr. Ramnath: Do you go to the market?

Mr. H. Partap: Three times the price; three times more, Madam Deputy Speaker, under this Government. [*Interruption*] The price of evaporated and full cream milk has also increased, and my understanding is that it has increased three times last year. It went up three times last year. A 1-litre bottle of cooking oil went from \$11.15 to \$17.50 now.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: “Wow”.

Mr. H. Partap: Meat prices remain drastically high despite repeated promises by the Government to import cheap meat. Vegetables rose by 70 per cent last year alone. That is in one year. These are staple foods; foods that are used universally and daily. In the last six years vegetable prices have skyrocketed by more than 250 per cent. The cost of production has increased.

The poor access roads, the high incidence of predial larceny, loss to floods, absence of equipment, high cost of input such as pesticides, all contribute to the high cost of production for the farmers. Not to mention the mass exodus of farmers from the agricultural sector due to the intransigence and the lack of commitment by the Government.

I heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources say this evening in the House, boasting about what the Government has done, but farmers are leaving the land. He did not say so, and that is what he should have said. They are leaving the land, and for several reasons and I would indicate some as I proceed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is the reality that people in this country must face every day, and to have a Minister get up, as was done today and last week and read all the initiatives undertaken by this Government over the last six years is simply not enough. As a matter of fact, that is an insult, not just to us as

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parliamentarians doing the people's business, but it is an insult to the entire nation, if not the farmers themselves. Everybody knows, even the hon. Minister himself must admit that with all the initiatives his Government has put in place costing millions of dollars they have all failed. They have failed. Food prices continue to rise and rise.

Mr. Ramnath: Like bread, “eh”.

Mr. H. Partap: Yes, like good bread. Every year since 2001 this Government has promised to control inflation and every year since 2001, the Government, by its own admission and by its own reckless spending patterns has pushed inflation higher and higher.

We have heard that once more the Central Bank and the IMF are warning all of us about the ill effects of the Government's induced inflation spiral. Every year the Government promises some help to the agricultural sector. They are making many promises, but the delivery amount to a big fat zero. They are not delivering! And if they are not delivering, of course food prices will escalate. The reason that food prices will rise higher by the end of this year is simple. Like every PNM budget before it, there was absolutely nothing in this 2008 budget which would have had the effect of causing food prices to fall. Nothing! Nothing in the budget. Food prices will not fall, and that is the reality. And falling food prices was never the Government's intention, anyhow. It was never the Government's intention. I understand that they are seeking to control the rate of price increase, so instead of increasing from \$4 to \$5, they say they want to control it to \$4.75. What madness? What madness, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Ramnath: This is a man who goes to the supermarket.

Mr. H. Partap: Nothing about getting food prices to fall comes from them and that is a clear indication that this Government does not appreciate the serious problems which the average citizen in this country has to face on a daily basis. It is not that they do not know. I do not want to believe that. It is that they do not care, and I see that the Minister of Social Development is shaking his head. I think he is saying, it is not true what I am saying.

Dr. Browne: We do care.

Mr. H. Partap: But as I go further on I will show you how much you care.
[*Interruption*]

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is clear to us that since agriculture has nothing to do with oil and gas they have no interest in it. They have no interest. Agriculture

in this country has nothing to do with cities, with towns or the East-West Corridor; about multimillion dollar buildings, billion dollar businessmen, lunches and dinners in expensive hotels. Agriculture does not have anything to do with that. Agriculture is rural based, and they have something against rural people. Agriculture is about regular people, ordinary people. People who are prepared to sacrifice and to work hard, they are accustomed to getting nothing from the Government and that is exactly what they are getting. They are getting nothing from the Government!

Hon. Member: Blows.

Mr. H. Partap: Nothing! Even the promises amount to nothing.

Mr. Ramnath: “Nobody does get anything.”

Mr. H. Partap: Even their promises to the poor, they mean nothing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, but inflation is something we as a people need to know about. It is something we cannot stay silent about, because unless we control inflation we run the risk of ending up like one of our neighbours—Guyana. There is an old joke that says in Guyana, they do not count money, they weigh it; that you may see a man pushing a wheel barrow with money and bandits will attack him, they will push him down and they will grab the wheel barrow, empty all the money and run-off with the wheel barrow. That is inflation. That is inflation, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me put it to you in this way. Does \$100 today buy you the same amount it used to buy last year or the year before? Certainly not! Do you not realize that when you go to the grocery you are leaving with less but spending more? The doubles which used to cost you \$1 in 2001, when the UNC was in office, costs now \$3 and in some places \$3.50. [*Interruption*] That is inflation.

This Government is making a big ado about inflation being controlled at 7.9 per cent. And they are talking per cent, but when the poor man reflects on that this means nothing to him. Let me put something in perspective here, because this is how we see it. This is how the man in the street sees it. This is how the pensioners, the single mothers, the poor and the working poor see it. Since 2001, food prices in this country have increased dramatically. Let me put that into perspective as well. If an item cost \$1 in 2001 and today it costs \$2.48—and of course this is the general food price index—the food then, increased by more than 150 per cent, some more, some less. And, this is only food we are talking about, not transportation, not the other things.

Hon. Member: Rent.

Mr. H. Partap: Not rent. This is why we are here this evening to debate this Motion condemning the Government on its lack of action in relation to food prices.

It is my thesis, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the food price hike, the general rise in inflation is due in large measure to the rapid expenditure by this Government despite all the expressed concerns of international and local agencies. They ignore everybody. They are causing the prices to rise and they are doing nothing about it. They are doing nothing to stop it, and worst of all, they are not doing anything to help those people who are most affected by high prices. People who are unable to cope, people who are endangered by their action.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if increasing food prices are what is pushing inflation then the answer to solve the inflation puzzle is simply, produce more food; encourage local production, promote the sectors. What do we see? They are not prepared to do that, and I want to point out that this matter of high food prices is not an isolated Opposition view. Not at all! It has been the view of the social scientists and the economists—and of course, you know they do their surveys and so on, but they do it after they eat. They survey people who do not eat. But it is also the view of the Governor of the Central Bank, and only on Wednesday he made an impassioned plea for retirees living on the brink. I want to read two or three paragraphs from a report carried in the *Express* newspaper of Wednesday—

Mr. Ramnath: What about the headline, “Broken and old”.

Mr. H. Partap: Yes, “Broken and old”, that is it. And I quote:

“Government should take a closer look at the needs of retired people and develop a plan to help them so that they would be able to survive hardship, according to Kern Williams, general manager of the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Retired Persons.”

2.45 p.m.

“Williams was responding to a Central Bank survey which found that almost half of this country's retirees do not have enough money to give them the standard of living they had hoped for during their retirement.

Central Bank Governor, Ewart Williams, (no relation to Kern Williams) said that: 70 per cent of the people surveyed were under stress to manage their finances and a significant per cent of people also had problems making ends meet.

Kern Williams said the association was aware of the problems highlighted in the survey and it had written Government several times, outlining the problems of retirees.

I just want to repeat this last paragraph from the report.

"Kern Williams said, the association was aware of the problems highlighted in the survey and it had written Government several times, outlining the problems of retirees."

Minister of Social Development, you really care? You really care?

"Kern Williams said, 'many retirees receive a small pension which is sufficient only to meet the rising costs of essential foodstuff. '

He said, the association had made representations to Government to have the pension plans indexed to the cost of living. "This would go a long way to ease the inflation on essential items'."

You understand what the man is saying? Minister, I hope you do. Unfortunately, the Central Bank Governor chose instead to focus on increased spending on motor vehicles and consumer items. He advised that people need to learn how to budget and plan ahead. Good advice! But that advice knows the plight of these pensioners. They are certainly not spending money on cars; they are struggling to survive day to day. These are people, Madam Deputy Speaker, who are at their most vulnerable with high medical bills and lower ability to work. This is well over 100,000 persons we are speaking about.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it also ignores the well over 250,000 citizens whom they say live in poverty. You all are saying so. These people are the hardest hit by the rising food prices. And to compound this, as my colleague reminded me a while ago, the CDAP drugs, you are not getting them.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. H. Partap: Not what? I am telling you yes. And the Minister of Health makes all kind of foolish excuses. The fact is, the pensioners, the people who matter, they are not getting all of the CDAP drugs. Look into that.

The policies of this Government are forcing citizens into the ever increasing poverty trap and that has social implications for health, for crime, poverty and now it has implications for these people's future.

The United National Congress Alliance understands the plight of the senior citizens. We understood it. This is why we had announced several measures in our

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2007 election manifesto to ease the plight of most vulnerable section of our community. Just to mention a few:

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

- we had said we would have increased citizens pension to \$3,000 per month; we said so
- we were going to reduce the senior citizens pension age from 65 to 60 years of age; and
- we would have offered assistance for the home for the aged and home care for the aged.

These are about three or four things that we said we were going to do to help those vulnerable in the society.

The UNC demonstrated that we care about the citizens of this country. [*Desk thumping*] We do not deal with slogans; we deal with results. "Performance beat ole talk every time and any time."

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. H. Partap: But we live it. I am talking about living the slogan. Do not tell me you care and then you have mothers facing a jail sentence because she "steal" milk for her baby. [*Crosstalk*] "Nah".

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. H. Partap: You are a minority government, I hope you understand that. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. H. Partap: I am not arguing that. Mr. Speaker, that food prices are high, is also the view of the majority of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, even them. Believe it or not, it has been the view of the hon. Prime Minister, the distinguished Member for San Fernando East. It has been his view that prices are high. He has direct responsibility to do something about high prices, but he simply goes about his business surrounded by a wall of security and just merely confirming what all of us already know, that prices are high and shooting up through the roof.

Mr. Speaker, it is not that he does not know, as I said just now: he knows about the traumatic effect of high food prices on the vulnerable in the society. He is aware of it. Hear what the hon. Prime Minister said in his opening remarks at

the expensive talk shop called, "The National Consultation on Food Prices" on August 15 and 16 of last year, that is, five months and nine days ago. I quote:

"We come together to discuss the very important issue of food prices in Trinidad and Tobago"—Today, the very important issue—"I can think of no matter of greater importance since, when food prices rise, every citizen is affected with the most telling effects on the disadvantaged and the vulnerable."

Yes, he is right. No, I am not against what he said. He is right, but like he does not understand what he said. This is what he said when he addressed PNM members two weeks ago at a rum and roti celebration in Macoya, that he also acknowledged the escalating food prices. I quote:

"The high food prices was the second most important issue after crime."

You see; so the gentleman knows.

Mr. Speaker, knowing the problem and doing nothing about it, should be a good reason for every Member of Parliament on the Government Benches, including the Prime Minister, to join with us in supporting this Motion here this evening. That is all the reason why they should join us in supporting it.

We have it on record that the Prime Minister has admitted on two occasions that his Government has failed the people of Trinidad and Tobago on two important counts: the failure to stem spiralling crime, which is recording a murder rate of two persons per day, and the failure to control escalating prices. Two important areas he acknowledges. It seems to us that the impotency of this PNM Government was somewhat lost to the electorate on November 05, 2007. But, apparently, when we reality hit them, they began singing a different tune, as the December 16, 2007, UWI Ansa McAle Psychological Research Centre poll has shown. That was a polled question of rising food prices: Sixty-six per cent of the respondents said the Government is not seriously dealing with reducing the sharp rise in food, and 58 per cent said that the Government is not serious about dealing with increased food product. I am sure if they were asked whether the Government knew what to do to halt the rising food prices, I know overwhelmingly they would have said that this PNM Government does not have a clue of what to do.

There is a credibility problem, Mr. Speaker, with this PNM Government. You cannot trust them; you cannot trust what they tell you. In the last session and even coming up to December, the former Minister of Education had advertisements in the newspapers saying that she built 22 early childhood centres. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Manning: That is not true, she did not say that.

Mr. H. Partap: No. Her successor must have been fed up with doing her spin-doctor work before and she decided, well let me talk the truth once in my life. So, she contradicted the boss's wife and said 11. Yes, she said 11 were completed. I do not know how you will fare; you contradict the boss's wife. You may have to pay for that sometime.

Mr. Speaker, we are seeing that we cannot trust them. You cannot trust what they are telling you. The Kanhai Presbyterian School; the parents and children also know that they could not trust the Government; they did not build the school yet. How could you trust them? Lengua too, I understand; Elswick too, I think. So the evidence is there for all to see.

You would recall, Mr. Speaker, in response to a question on food prices posed by my colleague, the distinguished Member for St. Augustine last week, the hon. Minister of Legal Affairs said that the Government had embarked on a series of measures to contain high food prices. He said that those measures started since 2002. He outlined, and I will go through them quickly. He said:

1. the removal of VAT on some basic food items;
2. the removal or reduction of common external tariff on some basic food items;
3. the removal of surcharge on imported chicken;
4. the convening of a national consultation on food prices citing a plan which:
 - (a) includes a prices council to address comprehensively from a supply side perceptive the level of prices in the economy.

Nice words, beautiful words which amounts to nothing and I continue:

- (b) the establishment of a Consumer Advisory Board to monitor prices and advise the Minister.

Mr. Speaker, the crucial thing is none of these four measures had any impact at all on price trends. None!

3.00 p.m.

In fact, prices took a sharp upward curve. While they were announcing one plan after another, prices were moving past them. Like the many crime plans they have been announcing, they too soon will be running out of days in the month to keep up with murders in this country. That is what they have brought down on this country of Trinidad and Tobago.

Last week in response to a question, the hon. Member for St. Augustine, Minister Taylor, my Member of Parliament, spoke with pride and a certain degree of satisfaction about the Consumer Division's publication of comparative prices on some basic food items. I do not know what he was gloating about; maybe he was pleased to provide revenue to the media in advertising space, because the list of comparative prices cannot help the pockets of beleaguered consumers. It offers no help to them.

The Minister said that the Consumer Division issued three weekly and one monthly publication of poultry, food and vegetable prices, other selected food items and hardware prices. They published this in the newspapers. This means that in any one week there were seven days of one full-page coloured advertisement of these comparative prices each day; and then each day in the three daily newspapers and every month there was a one-day full-page coloured publication of comparative hardware prices in each of the daily newspapers. That is what he told us. It cost an average of \$7,000 a day for a full-page coloured ad, more or less. Based on what I have said, a rough calculation puts the cost of the Ministry's grand plan to keep prices down, at about \$2 million a year. That is only if one assumes that the plan runs for one week each month; I have been checking it and it has been more than one week.

This comparative price schedule cannot benefit the consumer, because the difference in prices cannot be more than 10 cents higher or lower. Which consumer, in his or her right mind, would spend money to travel to a grocery or a pluck shop outside of his home village to save 10 cents or thereabouts? Who are you fooling? Who is the Minister fooling? As far as I am concerned, publishing the comparative prices makes no sense. The only beneficiaries are the media houses who are paid for that advertising space. Of course, the Consumer Division officers who will have to cash in on travel allowances are also beneficiaries, because they have to go in search of low and comparative prices. That data does not help the taxpayers.

I want to tell the hon. Prime Minister that since the national consultation five months ago, the price of flour moved from \$32 for the sack of 25 pounds. *[Interruption]* Ten-kilo, okay; from \$32 it has gone to \$47, since your national consultation on food prices. Cucumbers this week were sold at \$7 a pound; chicken was \$8 a pound. These are not luxuries; these are basic foodstuff, basic items that any poor person would want to eat, like myself. Mr. Speaker, this is what is happening in this country.

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[MR. PARTAP]

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One of the biggest con jobs on the poor and vulnerable and also pensioners by this PNM Government, took place last Christmas. [*Crosstalk*] A con job on the poor last Christmas! Under the bright lights of television and flashing cameras, both the Minister of Legal Affairs and the Minister of Social Development offered holders of the Smart Card cheap chicken for Christmas. You see where it came from, Smart Card/con man? But as usual, PNM incompetence and their flare for cheap publicity, forced these vulnerable Smart Card holders to skip chicken this Christmas. They had no chicken, because even when the cheap chicken arrived, they were stuck at the port. So we do not know, but I understand that they will get it for Carnival.

Mr. Imbert: Nonsense!

Mr. H. Partap: Not nonsense! You saw the ones they showed you on television? There was no nonsense in that. The people did not get their chicken; you fooled them. They did not get it! You could stand there and bawl "nonsense", but you are not among the people; "you forget dem". We who live among the people know that those people who had the Smart Card, especially in the rural areas, they could not eat chicken for Christmas. You put that in your pipe and smoke it.

Mr. S. Panday: Or put it in your pot and cook it!

Mr. H. Partap: The PNM has no credibility. Even the pensioners and the poor know that the PNM has no credibility.

Mr. Imbert: And we won the elections?

Mr. H. Partap: Why did you not tell them that you were increasing petrol prices before elections? At some other time I will tell you how the PNM again conned the elderly and the poor, when they promised to increase the Senior Citizens Grant and \$2,000 for national insurance. Not everybody is getting that elderly grant. They are cutting it down. Some people are only getting \$100. But that is for a next time; I cannot give you everything now. They keep on fooling people. You will continue to fool people until they find you out, and they will find you out soon. In fact, they "done know yuh" already.

Mr. Imbert: When was that?

Mr. H. Partap: The Prime Minister must be told very bluntly that his national consultation on food prices was a flop.

Mr. S. Panday: Colossal!

Mr. Imbert: That is why we won the election!

Mr. H. Partap: The four measures lifted out of the report on that consultation and which were announced by the Minister of Legal Affairs last week, brought no relief to a price weary population. The PNM Government does not have a handle on prices, so it engages in semantics. They embark on their favourite hobby horse.

I heard the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Affairs say a little of that today. They have entered the blame game, as if this would make the problem of high prices go away. It would not. Government blamed the world commodity prices; then it shifted to inflation, then it blamed consumers' indiscriminate purchasing power. Last week, Minister Taylor added a new dimension, profiteering by unscrupulous businessmen.

I hold no brief for merchants and businessmen. If they are, indeed, profiteering, then they should face the penalty. But how would the businessman deal with the onerous overheads, including protection money, which he faces on a daily basis? Let me address a few words to protection money, because this adds to the businessman's overhead expenses as well. He inevitably will pass that on to the consumer, so the consumer gets the sticky end of the stick.

This Government has been extracting protection money from businessmen during the Christmas period in a less vulgar way than the criminals are doing it. Small businessmen in rural communities were paying the Ministry of National Security up to \$6,500 a week to provide armed police at their business places. I walked into a small grocery in rural East Trinidad during the Christmas period and I noticed an armed policeman at the door. I jokingly commented to the owner, "I see the Government is providing you with security." His reply was quick and urgent, "I paying for that, oui." That was how he said it; meaning that he was paying the policeman standing in front his building. Naturally I became interested and I asked at what cost; he then brought his receipt. They are given a receipt too. They pay \$6,500 for police protection. That police protection should come with their taxes. They should not have to pay for additional policemen at their business places; the police should be making patrols to ensure that no criminal activities are taking place.

Mr. Imbert: You are telling stories!

Mr. H. Partap: The Minister of National Security said that he was lacking manpower, so, therefore, they could not do regular patrols, but, "If you could pay for it, it is all right; we will give it to you". Mr. Speaker, however you look at it, it is protection money. The criminals are doing it illegally and the Government is doing it legally.

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What have we descended into? What have they brought this country to? Who eventually pays for that? The consumer; I have to pay for that when I go every month or two weeks to buy a couple things for my family. That is added on to the price of food. You want to lock up the businessmen for profiteering?

They are not profiteering; perhaps, you might be able to tell us how a businessman who is faced with that kind of situation keep prices down. Remember he has to pay increased electricity; increased labour costs; increased telephone rates, and now we are hearing that water rates are going up.

I heard the Member for Diego Martin West suggesting that the \$2 billion subsidy on petrol be removed. Do you know what will happen in this country? You are talking about removing the petrol subsidy; I tell you, who "eh" dead, badly wounded, for sure. Why did you not tell the population that before the election? Because you wanted to con them; that is why.

Mr. S. Panday: As always!

Mr. H. Partap: "And you boasting how you won the election?"

Water rates are going up; soon electricity rates will be going up. What is the Prime Minister's priority? The Brian Lara Stadium, where millions of dollars already budgeted have been whittled away. What do we have? We have hundreds of millions of dollars still to be put into the project for completion; but that is his priority. He builds a \$148 million palace for himself, but he cannot spend \$20 million to provide roads for the people in Plum Mitan, and the Biche High School cannot be opened.

Billions are being spent on the water front project but nothing to reduce food prices; poor people cannot eat concrete, Mr. Prime Minister. I know sometimes the concrete looks like benne sugarcake but it is not.

3.15 p.m.

As I have just outlined, businessmen are now further burdened with legal and illegal protection money; what does the Government propose to do to assist the business people so that cheaper prices can reach the poor and those who do not work?

Mr. Speaker, last week the Minister of Legal Affairs also indicated to this honourable House five initiatives to combat high food prices, this is in addition to those five proposals which failed. Allow me to run through quickly those five initiatives, as he calls them.

Initiative No. 1 was a review of a package of incentives in respect of small, large and other dynamic arms of agro-processing. What does the hon. Minister mean what he says that there will be a review of the package of incentives for this, that, or the other? My question is how credible is this promise when only last week the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources removed \$4.6 million from its Agricultural Incentive Programme to pay salaries and COLA and the reason was the most absurd one. The reason which comes from the Finance Committee Report was most absurd, it was; under the Agricultural Incentive Programme the level of claim submitted by farmers was less than projected. But there is a trend in this retiring of funds from the Agricultural Incentive Programme.

Last year, \$7.9 million was retired from the programme and they do not have any initiatives. They would not even change their reason. Do you know it is the same reason—under the Agricultural Incentive Programme, the level of claims submitted by farmers was less than projected. No creativity! Yet we hear the Minister of Legal Affairs again talking about reviewing this incentive package. When will you do the review, Mr. Minister? Agriculture has failed; what are you waiting on? National security has failed and now you say you are coming to review an incentive programme? Billions were spent, wasted, pockets filled and now you are coming for a review taking away farmers' money and now you are coming for a review.

We do not know what happened prior to 2006, but we were told that the applications for incentive programmes were few and they became fewer and fewer and I do not know if the Minister is waiting until agriculture has finally collapsed to bring the incentive programmes. Incentives in agriculture are necessary, in fact, they are very important because of the very nature of the agricultural sector.

Governments in every country I know find ways to support their agricultural sector either directly or indirectly and we should do that as well. We therefore cannot understand why after six years in office the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources still cannot review this package of incentives even though his Prime Minister confided to that Mickey Mouse consultation on food prices and said that we need to produce more food in this country. The hon. Member knows it.

Mr. Speaker: Just for my information, are you reading your speech, or are you referring to copious notes?

Mr. H. Partap: Mr. Speaker, I am referring to some of the quotes I have to say. Do you know there is another item called “Relief for flood damage” and last week the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources retired \$4.8 million? [*Interruption*] This is another one, this is flood relief, we were talking about incentives just now, this is flood relief and I know why he does not want to talk about flood relief and I will tell you why.

Mr. Speaker, they retired money from the Flood Relief Programme so that they could pay ministry officials COLA and salaries and they told the Finance Committee that funds were available for transfer from the Flood Relief Programme since the level of claims projected did not materialize because of the extended dry season: I cannot understand them, no creativity in their untruths and excuses. Mr. Speaker, that is not the full story.

It is our view that what they call a savings had accrued because they underpaid farmers for losses in compensation for flood relief. They pinched and pinched so that they could save \$4.8 million to pay Salaries and COLA. Do you know why? They have not reviewed the compensation package since 1996; the UNC upgraded it, a caring government. After 11 years, this compensation package is battered by inflation and you are giving the farmers the same thing. What incentives are you giving the farmers to produce food? Do you really want food production to increase? I can answer it for you. No. I can tell you I do not believe it.

Mr. Speaker—I would have to refer to my notes this time—a farmer who loses a field of cucumbers may get only \$115 in the compensation package and if there is no flood and he is able to sell his produce, he can get up to \$8,000. So, why is he planting if that is what you are not going to pay him, and you are doing nothing about flood?

Mr. Imbert: Those are your figures.

Mr. H. Partap: My figures, yes. And let me tell you something that is not all; he has to pay for labour, chemicals, fertilizers and so forth and they are not helping him. A farmer will get \$750 from them in the compensation package for his watermelon field and if he has no floods and he has to sell his produce, he can get \$15,000 but they are giving him \$750. So the current flood damage compensation is not sufficient. You are paying farmers 30 cents, 84 cents and \$4 for a plant.

Mr. Imbert: Those are your figures.

Mr. H. Partap: No, Minister, I have it here; if I had time I would show it to you but what I can tell you with certainty is that you are cheating the farmers and

fooling them because you are transferring savings; you are jamming them with the compensation, you are not giving them what they deserve; you are underpaying them so you are saving. You are saving on these people's blood, sweat and toil.

Initiative No. 2 is the continuation of discussions with the Government of Guyana to secure Trinidad and Tobago's involvement in the establishment of large farms and so forth. I would not go into that.

Initiative No. 3, the introduction in the short term of a new system for making land available to farmers for agricultural purposes. That is a code word for operation "Do Nothing". You are not doing anything for agriculture. You put big words in sand and that is operation do nothing because you had an opportunity with Caroni lands and did not use it, but due to spite, and political victimization you shut down the company and you did not have a plan to operate a food programme. So you thought Caroni was sugar and that meant you could have wiped away the United National Congress, well, you have another thought coming.

Mr. Speaker, initiative No. 4, the development and commencement of implementation by the end of the first quarter of 2008, a three-year plan for infrastructure development involving agricultural access roads, irrigation, drainage and a reliable water supply; that, again you are fooling people.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources is really providing access roads, as I mentioned sometime ago, only to the treasurer of the PNM, nice hot mix but real access roads for the farmers; you cannot find them, only mud and gravel you get. So I am saying provide them with proper access roads.

Then there is initiative No. 5, the initial discussion with ammonia manufacturers to establish these 100 acres. I do not know if that announcement was made, I am hearing a lot about these 100 acres and you are saying wait until March. So everybody should stop eating until March, do not buy food at the high prices, wait until March and nine or 10 months later you will get your produce. Are you serious? You cannot even plant the cassava.

Mr. Speaker, the UNC had a plan to assist in bringing down high food prices and we have the moral authority to speak about bringing down food prices because we kept food prices low in the six years we had been in office with an oil price of less than \$9 per barrel. We know about bringing down food prices, so we have a moral authority to speak about it, not you.

3.30 p.m.

Let me run through quickly what we would have done because I have only five minutes. We said:

- we will rehabilitate agricultural access roads;
- we will make provision for farmers to access farming vehicles and equipment; training; research; extension services and export marketing;
- we will encourage investment in agro-processing and agro-business;
- we will establish a partnership with the local farming community to begin the immediate implementation of incentives to farmers aimed at the immediate reduction of food prices to customers;
- we will develop a strategy for irrigation linked with a policy on flood control to prevent substantial losses to farmers;
- we will establish technical agricultural colleges in agricultural belts and reintroduce agriculture in the school's curricula;
- we will identify and protect from development major fertile lands that serve as the backbone for our food security;
- we will lease state lands to genuine farmers in parcels of sufficient size to allow for mechanization and economies of scale;
- we will rehabilitate abandoned estates and regularize land tenure;
- we will introduce an impact system of food production utilizing new technology, such as greenhouses, hydroponics technology, grow boxes at affordable costs, which especially will aid urban agriculture;
- we will implement praedial larceny laws and strengthen the rural police service with increased manpower and equipment;
- we will develop a link with state temporary work programmes with rural development needs to provide an aggressive programme of repairs and rehabilitation of drains, watercourses, canals and rivers to support the farming community;
- we will encourage apprenticeship programmes in the farming community;
- taxes, duties and VAT shall be removed on all agricultural inputs and equipment;

- a programme to manufacture fertilizers locally shall be initiated, and we will provide guarantee to agricultural products, such as the School Feeding Programme.

These are some of the initiatives we would have put in place by now to ensure that food prices went down. But there is no doubt in my mind, in the three minutes left, that the PNM has lost its way, not only on the question of food prices but in protecting citizens against criminal elements; in providing proper health facilities and in developing the physical infrastructure and social services necessary to meet the needs of our people, the poor, the middle income and the rich. The PNM is a total embarrassment.

It has failed to contain food prices. That is a fact. There is no other way to look at it. It has failed and, therefore, I urge Members of this honourable House, including the Prime Minister and Members on that side, to support this Motion in condemning the Government on its failure to ensure affordable food prices to all our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. H. Rafeeq: Mr. Speaker, I beg to second the Motion and reserve my right to speak at a later stage in the debate.

Question proposed.

The Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Peter Taylor): Mr. Speaker, I listened with more than a passing interest to the statement of the hon. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla and what struck me more than anything is the range of inaccuracies that punctuated the hon. Member's contribution. Anyone who lived in this country for the past 15 or 20 years, in particular during the period 1995—2000, would know, without any doubt that the greatest disrespect that was paid to farmers in this country was during the regime of the UNC government. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Panday: Not at all!

Hon. P. Taylor: The evidence is well documented for all to see.

Mr. Warner: Tell us.

Hon. P. Taylor: You will see in a while. When you look, for example, at the budget speeches that started in 1996 where the then government attempted to make provisions for the agricultural sector, you see it was nothing but a series of innuendoes, “ol’ talk” and empty promises. In fact, I recall that the then Minister

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of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources referred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources as the “bhaji and pumpkin ministry”.

Mr. S. Panday: “Yuh doh” even have that now!

Hon. P. Taylor: What greater disrespect one could have shown to the members of that ministry and, indeed, to all the farmers in the country by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources referring to the ministry as the “bhaji and pumpkin ministry”. It tells you the type of philosophy that was pervading the regime during that time.

Also, you had at the time an ethos that embraced, what was called the “parasitic oligarchy”. They were the ones who, just at the end of 2000, had their own designs on Caroni (1975) Limited; they were the ones who had their designs to privatize Caroni (1975) Limited, but they lacked the courage to come to the national community [*Desk thumping*] and tell the country that because sugar could no longer be subsidized to the tune of nearly \$200 million per year; that all the evidence on the international market, in particular with the end of the ACP Lomé Agreements where Europe was telling the entire Caribbean that they could no longer subsidize sugar at preferential rates, that Caroni (1975) Limited, as it then existed, had to restructure or close down.

It took the courage of the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for San Fernando East to come and tell the nation that Caroni (1975) Limited could not continue.

Mr. S. Panday: And it cannot be restructured.

Hon. P. Taylor: I remember very well in October 2007, the hon. Prime Minister went to the Valleyline in Barrackpore and indicated with a great deal of humanity that no longer should farmers continue to cut cane. That was, to my mind, a demonstration, if ever there was one, that the PNM Government cares about farmers; that the Government cares enough about the standard of living of farmers in this country.

Mr. S. Panday: Let them paint stones instead.

Hon. P. Taylor: The evidence, as I said, is incontrovertible that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has taken decisive measures, as far back as 2002, to ensure that the food prices and, more particularly, that farmers in the country, are given their just due and that the stage is set—

Mr. S. Panday: Where you from—

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. P. Taylor:—to develop a proper agriculture industry. Permit me to quote some of the “ol’ talk” that pervaded this country in 1996 when the other side had the fortunate opportunity to occupy the corridors of power. I am quoting from their budget statement in 1996. They said, and I quote:

“The agricultural sector will be required to play an increasing role over the medium term given the sector’s employment creating capacity. Agricultural policies will be informed by both an inward looking and an outward looking perspective whereby production will be organized to meet domestic demand as well as to secure niche markets overseas for non-traditional agricultural products.”

Very nice-sounding:

“To facilitate this, several measures will be implemented this year, including the following:

- The distribution of 2,000 acres of land from Caroni Ltd. and at least 7,000 acres of additional State Land to private farmers.
- The drawdown of \$22 million from the Inter-American Development Bank to provide increased access to agricultural credit.”

It is interesting to know that with respect to the drawdown from the Inter-American Development Bank, which, at the time would have been a very crucial intervention in the agricultural industry, because it would have meant that they could have used that money to lay the foundation for a long-term revival of the agricultural industry—let me inform the national community what happened to that initiative.

Mr. Speaker, the IADB had it to say that the Government at the time reneged on its plan to use the \$11 million and the \$22 million. It was in two tranches. I quote from the report. This is the IADB speaking. The report by the IADB on this project stated that the UNC government was reluctant to implement many of the reforms proposed and by the year 2001, the UNC government decided to cancel the agricultural sector loan, for whatever reason, and only used the resources of the technical assistance loan to conduct agricultural studies which were less controversial but which were still consistent with the objectives of the sector reform.

So you have incontrovertible evidence that the other side lacked the courage to deal decisively, one, with Caroni (1975) Limited and to deal with any seriousness with agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. They were the ones who

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championed the cause of farmers in this country, according to them; they were the flag bearers, according to them, and when they had the opportunity at a time when food prices were less volatile than they are now, at a time when the country's volatility as far as international prices was not as significant, they sat back and did nothing.

It was left to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in 2002, when it became very apparent that sugar could no longer continue to be the mainstay of the economy as far as agriculture was concerned, to remove VAT on many basic food items, to remove and reduce the common external tariff on many food items from the region. There began a series of initiatives that, today, have ensured that food prices have remained within acceptable limits in spite of the trends on the international market.

My friend made reference to his research but he was woefully silent on the fact that all the indicators suggest that the rising prices are due mainly to the demand for corn and biofuels in the industrialized world.

3.45 p.m.

Not only that, due to climate change; the increasing demand for cereal the world over and now when we are in a world where diet globalization means that countries as India, Sub Sahara and Africa that hitherto did not demand cereal and corn, as they become more and more developed, it means that the demand invariably, would increase for these commodities. Climate change cannot be underestimated. We are in the vortex of a global warming situation which suggests that for the foreseeable future, corn, cereal and wheat would face continued pressures because of the volatility of the world's climate changes.

Trinidad and Tobago is not immune to the international realities. We continue to respond to an external stimulus because we have a relatively high import Bill. A small country of 1.3 million people can never produce all the food it needs. The Government has been cognizant of that. For those reasons, we have entered into initiatives with the Government of Guyana under the so-called "Jagdeo Initiative" to seek to develop 100-acre farms, because as we know, Guyana has the capacity in terms of land and its water supply to be certainly, the food basket of the region. I will not reiterate all the initiatives that were outlined by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources and I on the last occasion, when we sought to identify and particularize the efforts that have been made and are continued to be made to protect the consumer in this country.

The hon. Member made reference to our publication of prices in the newspaper. He also sought to trivialize or invalidate the effect of those publications and the spending patterns of consumers. I will correct the hon. Member by informing him that merely publishing those prices in the newspapers, places an onus on the supermarkets and vendors to maintain their prices within competitive limits, because the information is in the public domain as to the cheapest prices prevailing in the industry. It is not enough to say that a consumer is only saving 10, 15 or 20 cents. The fact of the matter is that as these prices are in the public domain, everyone would be aware as to the real price. No supermarket, unilaterally, can seek to raise his or her price without suffering the consequences. I will like the hon. Member to take that into consideration and not seek to trivialize the efforts of the Division of Consumer Affairs or the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has taken strategic measures to ensure that food prices remain within acceptable limits. [*Cellphone rings*] One such example is the establishment of the farmers' markets which facilitate direct trading between the wholesalers and the consumer. [*Cellphone rings*]

Mr. Speaker: Will the person with the cellphone—I think it may be a Member. All Members should take off their cellphones when they come to Parliament. Whoever it is, please take off your cellphone. Please continue.

Hon. P. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I was making the point that NAMDEVCO is a very significant intervention on the part of the Government to ensure that food prices remain within acceptable limits. There are three such farmers' markets in Debe, Macoya and Diego Martin. There is also the website of the National Agricultural Marketing Information Systems (NAMIS) which at a glance, provides significant information on the various aspects of the agricultural industry to investors who wish to come into the industry. What also struck me in the hon. Member's contribution is how he conveniently forgot during 1995—2000 how the workers of Caroni (1975) Limited were short paid and disrespected. My research led me to an interesting article which I feel is incumbent on me to share with the national community. It has to do with the treatment of those workers by the then government. It is an article by no less a person than Raffique Shah who would have been familiar with the government and then leader, since very early they were partners in the United Labour Front (ULF). Mr. Shah's article is instructive because he was able to locate the realities facing the industry and Caroni (1975) Limited back in 2000. It shows clearly, the intransigence of the then UNC government as it relates to Caroni

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(1975) Limited. Permit me to quote briefly some important statements from Mr. Shah's article dated February 2002. It states:

“The genesis of the current prices in the sugar industry lies in the inability...of...Government...to turn Caroni Limited’s fortunes around, or shut down the industry. Because of extensive losses the company has suffered for many years now, but more so over the past three years leading to last week’s strike by sugar workers over not being paid wages and salaries, did not come about overnight. The crisis began more than 25 years ago.”

The article continues to outline that at that time farmers were being paid \$170 a tonne for sugar when it was costing Caroni (1975) Limited \$500 a tonne to produce.

It is evident that while the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla sought to condemn this Government for not doing enough, the evidence is incontrovertible as I said, that so much has been done and continues to be done to ensure that prices remain within acceptable limits. It is important for me to continue to inform the national community that had it not been for the prudent management of the national economy and the prudent vision of this side, food prices would have been worse than they are today. We have no control over the prices as they exist in the national community. We have no control over the price of corn or wheat, but we have control over ensuring that the agricultural industry continues to expand. This is what this Government has set out to do.

The Government has done and continues to do a series of things geared at directly impacting the consumer on an everyday basis. The ministerial committee on food prices was a very significant intervention because it was able to afford everyone in the national community, both from the business side and the consumer side, an opportunity to inform the Government about his or her challenges. That was a classic case of a government seeking advice from its citizens, as to how to address one of the most fundamental challenges facing it. Coming out of that national consultation on food prices, the Government was then able to chart a decisive course that would inform the agricultural industry for some time to come. Out of that consultation a consumer advisory board was established to advise on all matters relating to prices and consumerism.

It was agreed that there would be a special regime of incentives for new farms. The Government began looking forward beyond the immediate crisis in food prices because it understood that food security is a sine qua non or a

necessity, if the country is to maintain its balance on an even keel. The Government entered into a government to government arrangement with Cuba for the grant of technical assistance for small farmers including the workers of Caroni (1975) Limited.

The farm at Mon Jaloux is to be made available to the small ruminant society and there will be appropriate funding from the Agricultural Development Bank in fiscal 2008, so as to afford farmers ready access to funding.

I can go on and on. I can mention the Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture which allows young persons to develop their aptitude and skills in farming which would provide a ready labour supply to farmers because the Government recognizes that agriculture is the main source. It is the only source of a reliable food supply, as we continue to look at the vagaries of the international market.

4.00 p.m.

So it is very easy for those on the other side to mouth empty platitudes, but the hard facts suggest that the Government continues to take very decisive measures that are having a direct impact on the nation's economy.

Permit me, Mr. Speaker, to mention a report of the Central Bank. It is one of the most recent which makes reference to the decline in inflation and the fact that prices have been holding steady over the last 12 to 18 months. I quote from an article headed, "Central Bank Maintains 'Repo' rate at 8.0 per cent":

"The decline in food prices in 2007 is largely attributable to the broadening of the agricultural distribution network which has created more of a direct link between farmers and consumers. This contributed to greater price awareness and facilitated comparison shopping among consumers. This decline notwithstanding, the level of food prices in Trinidad and Tobago continues to be a cause for concern and underscores the urgent need for a major expansion in domestic agricultural production."

This is the Central Bank. It alluded to the fact that there has been an increase in the agricultural incentives of this country. They have also alluded to the fact that there has been more comparison shopping due in a direct way to the efforts of the Consumer Affairs Division in ensuring that information is widely disseminated so that consumers are better informed as to where the best prices are available.

The Government did not stop there. In 2006, the Fair Trading Act was passed, which allows the Fair Trading Commission to determine and investigate whether

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there are any anti-competitive activities taking place in the business community. Once again, this places the onus on the businessmen and manufacturers to ensure that they maintain and keep their prices within acceptable limits.

When you look at the Office of Fair Trading in England, which performs a similar function, one will understand the importance of the Fair Trading Commission. It was only very recently, in London, that the Office of Fair Trading had to fine Tesco and Morrisons in excess of £116 million for anti-competitive practices.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is providing the legislative and regulatory framework to ensure that, as far as possible, consumers' rights and interests are protected in this country. The Government is very proud of the efforts that have been made and that are ongoing as we seek to develop an agricultural sector that will be the food basket of this country. We look to ensure that food security continues to be a top priority as we move towards developed nation status.

I thank you.

Mr. Vasant Bharath (*St. Augustine*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After listening to the hon. Minister, certainly last week, I thought he was a young man of some promise. I now realize that, like his predecessors and his seniors, he is a young man of many promises.

I start with an excerpt from the *Express* dated November 08, 2007. I quote:

“Reducing the cost of food is the top priority for the Prime Minister Patrick Manning Administration. Manning made the announcement after he held up a Bible and took an oath of office for the fourth time as Prime Minister, during a historic ceremony at Woodford Square, Port of Spain, yesterday.

Manning said he planned to make the best of the significant revenues the nation is earning from its oil and gas resources.

We also intend to keep down the price of food. Food security will receive greater attention in this administration.”

I will go back further in time to the *Trinidad Guardian* of July 06, 2006 and quote:

“The Junior Finance Minister Conrad Enill said yesterday that the Government planned to lower the increase in food prices from 23% to 10%.”

All of this, of course, is in addition to the continued string of broken promises

made by the hon. Prime Minister in several of his budgets over the last four or five years, most of which I elucidated on last week. For the record, let me reiterate some of them. I quote again. In 2004, the hon. Prime Minister said:

“This Government has assigned a very high priority to the modernization of the agricultural sector.”

In 2005, he said:

“Our goal is to increase the sector’s contribution to economic and social development and employment creation while providing increasing levels of food requirements for the nation.”

In 2006, the hon. Prime Minister went on to say that his Government would create eight large farms and two additional farms in collaboration with the government of Cuba.

Also speaking liberally on this matter was the then hon. Minister of Legal Affairs, in the *Trinidad Guardian* of April 27. I quote:

“Legal Affairs Minister Christine Kangaloo says Government has taken action to deal with rising food prices.

To combat soaring prices, Kangaloo said, Government of Trinidad and Tobago would increase the supply of food in the country by importing food items from cheaper sources with savings being passed on to the consumer.”

This afternoon, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister talked about farmers' markets, but in Minister Kangaloo’s recommendations she mentioned that the Government will be setting up seven such markets. I am not aware of any of those markets being set up in the last two years.

Minister Kangaloo also went on to address the issue of inflation and said that the Cabinet had set up a ministerial task force and they had the responsibility to deal comprehensively with the increased food prices in this sector. That task force at the time comprised, Ministers Kenneth Valley, Christine Sahadeo, Jarrette Narine, Anthony Roberts, Colm Imbert and, of course, the Minister herself, Christine Kangaloo. That was established, she said, last November, which is November 2006.

Of course, three of those Ministers are now history. Two of them still sit there; one at the back here. I ask the Minister responsible what has become of that task force. Is it still alive? Have they done any work? They have lost three members. With whom have they been replaced?

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The Minister at that time said that the objective of that programme is to facilitate the retail trading by farmers directly to consumers, which is what the Minister said earlier on. But if we do not open these markets, we cannot do the facilitation; we cannot distribute food at a lower price.

The other initiative was the National Flour Mills importing foodstuff also to bring the price of food down. We now read in horror that there is \$4 million worth of goods sitting of the port of Trinidad and Tobago, belonging to the National Flour Mills, which has not been cleared for over six weeks, simply because that company has not been able properly to price the product. *[Interruption]* That is correct! They cannot price the product so it is sitting there rotting, when the simplest thing would be to get it off there to the consumers of this country.

While we are looking continually for ways and means of making recommendations as to how the price of food should be reduced, the other side is preoccupied with making food a luxury item for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Very soon, few people in Trinidad and Tobago will be able to put food on their tables; all this in the context that they are now considering a gas price increase, which everybody knows is a surefire way of putting prices further up and ensuring that further segments of the population will suffer starvation.

All across the Caribbean, people are celebrating the winds of change that are blowing across their political landscape. We are not blessed with that divine intervention; but only for now. We in Trinidad and Tobago have sown the seeds of this wind and anxiously await the whirlwind, which will come in the form of higher gas prices, higher water rates and, obviously, higher food prices.

We have filed this Motion, not because we are interested in parliamentary “gallerying”; not because we want to fill 30-odd minutes before tea time, with me standing to speak, but because we are genuinely concerned with the plight of the ordinary man in Trinidad and Tobago. We are genuinely concerned with those people who are unable—and a number of PNM supporters also—to put food on their tables when the day comes.

We know that most of our concerns will fall on deaf ears, not necessarily the deaf ears of the founding father of the PNM, but certainly the deaf ears of our friends across the table here today, particularly the deaf ears of our current Prime Minister, who so geologically—

Mr. Speaker: You are dead. You are referring to the deaf ears of the founding father, then you refer to the current Prime Minister.

Mr. V. Bharath: Mr. Speaker, I said deaf, not the deaf ears, but the deaf ears of our current Prime Minister, who is so geologically programmed in terms of hard-headedness that he is unable to see to the plight of the people.

Of course, the hon. Prime Minister does not have to worry about food prices. He has many functionaries at his beck and call to cater for his whimsical gastronomic delights at any time of the day or night. All he has to do is to ring the little bell next to his bed or press the buzzer and they are there to provide him with whatever he requires. If the Prime Minister wishes to have caviar from Russia, I am sure that is at his beck and call. I am sure he just has to order it and it is there for him. Such is the good life that he lives. Great is the PNM! Of course, that is why the Government is unable to take into account the hardship the country is facing, particularly now that there is talk about an increase in gas prices.

The Prime Minister and the Government do not take into account the ordinary citizen who wrote in the *Express* of January 22, 2008, with regard to the increase in gas prices that “all goods and services would automatically increase if there is an increase in gas.”

4.15 p.m.

“Manufacturers will automatically increase the price of their products, citing that transport to supermarkets has increased.”

This is no Keynesian economist. This is an ordinary regular citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, with bread and butter issues who, when he goes to the supermarket in Trinidad and Tobago, is unable to afford the cost of food on the shelves of the supermarket. This private citizen knows that every time he goes to the supermarket, the price of food sometimes does not only go up by a single digit, but increases, as my friend from Cumuto/Manzanilla would say, by 100 per cent from week to week.

The irony of this entire gas increase, as was mentioned earlier on, is that today we have some of the worst roads in Trinidad and Tobago. Driving across a lot of Trinidad and Tobago is like participating in the Dacca rally, if you have ever seen it. It is almost like car manufacturers putting their cars on the roads of Trinidad and Tobago as some sort of test to show that their cars can stand up to the sturdiness and rigors of driving in Trinidad and Tobago. I think we should invite people like General Motors and Ford Motors to bring their cars and test them in Trinidad and Tobago and allow them to then say that these cars are now able to be driven anywhere in the world because, you know what, they survived driving on a

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road in Trinidad and Tobago. We should invite people like Which? magazine and Auto Trade to come and do their tests here in Trinidad.

If our roads are so bad, can you imagine our agricultural access roads? What has become of them? Nothing! They have not been repaired or rebuilt. This is the means by which our nation is going to be fed.

When the Government talks about all the plans and actions they have taken, it has resulted in nothing. All the grand plans that they have that are stored in desk drawers all over the country, are of no use to the population. When a manufacturer has to add the burden of transportation to the cost of his goods and services, it is hard to blame him. It is hard to blame him when he has to make a living out of his day-to-day life. When, therefore, there is a shortage of crops in the market, we cannot blame the farmer for that. He does not have access to his farms and he does not have the proper infrastructure to ensure that he gets into those farms and harvests his product. Because commuting and transportation is such a torture and an expensive one, we now have to pay for every facility in Trinidad and Tobago through our noses and every other anatomical crevice and cavity that we have.

Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if this Government is serious about looking to reduce the cost of food prices because, obviously, they have not thought through their plans properly. This ridiculous notion of reducing subsidies on gas and increasing the cost of gas to the ordinary consumer is a sure-fire way of ensuring that food prices go up even further.

Everybody knows that if the Caroni (1975) Limited lands were handed back to the ex-Caroni (1975) Limited workers, not only would we have a food bonanza in this country, we would have sufficient leftover even to export to foreign markets.

Nice going to the other side, but we must remember that the hon. Prime Minister did make a promise before election. The promise he made was that he was going to flog the people of Trinidad and Tobago. He was going to flog them in the east; he was going to flog them in the west; he was going to flog them all over the country. That is the only promise that this Prime Minister and this Government is going to keep to. In the last five years it was the only promise they kept and in the next five years it is the only promise they are going to keep. They are going to flog the people of Trinidad and Tobago. They are going to brutalize the people of Trinidad and Tobago. They are going to brutalize them; one and all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, including their own supporters who so masochistically say: "We like it so."

We have become a society overrun by cars on the road for the simple reason that we have had a never poor public transportation system since the PNM has come in. The PNM has been here for 50 odd years. Therefore, we know that in other countries where there are buses, trains and rails, many farmers are able to find cheap transportation, via these other modes of transportation, to get their products into market.

In the old day, Mr. Speaker, you remember when the train used to run; farmers from Guayaguayare and deep South would put their produce on the train. For them, it was an outing. They mix and blend their commerce and pleasure on that day. Today all of this is done. It is relegated to the dustbin of history all because of the PNM. They talk about 2020 vision, but their vision for 2008 is myopic. We cannot see beyond 2008, let alone 2020 vision.

We have a situation where many commuters, on a daily basis, are wasting hours upon hours sitting in their cars in gridlock in Trinidad and Tobago. They leave before sunrise to get to work and they get back home after the sun sets, and they are now being asked to pay more, in terms of a higher gas price, for this insufferable situation, when they probably should be given a travel allowance by the Government. They should be given some kind of subsistence for the suffering that they incur on a daily basis.

In the good old days, these people would hurry home and they would plant a little market garden. That would save them a lot of money having to go to the grocery and pay the high prices. Because the commuters' precious time—he would have spent on this recreational productivity and the therapy that it also incurred—is now lost, that part of the market is lost to us too. That culture has gone. That, again, is ancient history. The loss of a market garden and kitchen garden greatly affects our food supply and it is something that is a great loss to our country and our economy. It may never, ever come back to us again.

This Government is spending money like—I was going to say water but, water, of course, is now in such short supply. Of course, with water rates going up it now becoming a luxury item. Obviously I cannot say that they are spending like water. Maybe it is more appropriate to say that they are spending it like it is going out of style. That is the reason they wish to have a further \$2 billion in their hands, because they are spending money like it is going out of style.

I remember the fables of Robin Hood of Nottingham Forest, who used to take from the rich and give to the poor. This Government today takes from the poor and does not even wear a hood or a mask to do it. They are barefaced and boldfaced in the way they steal from the poor.

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Mr. Speaker, so that what I am saying today does not appear to be an affectatious posturing, let me take the liberty to quote from several persons within the industry who have recently commented on the increase in gas prices:

- “• From the Penal/Debe Chamber of Commerce, Rampersad Seeraj says on a gas price increase: ‘that could cause an effect on all goods and services. It would have a multiplier effect, in terms of cost to consumers.’
- Raj Jadoo of the Arima Business Association says: ‘This will send everything sky high.’
- Feroze Khan of the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber says: ‘Reduction or removal of subsidy would have significant negative consequences.’
- Daphne Bartlett of the South Business Association says that she was amazed that the Government was even considering removing or reducing the subsidy, considering the hardship citizens were experiencing with the increasing cost of living.
- Leonard Bradshaw of the Point Fortin Chamber says: ‘It will heavily impact on the cost of living, with an increase in the cost of goods and services.’”

Everybody in this country knows exactly what we need to do to feed this nation and to have a comfortable level of food security, except the Government, whose policies reflect those of Mugabe in Zimbabwe; starving Zimbabwe, whose inflationary rates have now reached 8,000 per cent.

The solutions to our high food prices are not the promises and panaceas that gleam like false teeth in the PNM manifestoes and the PNM’s pronouncements in their budgets.

Do you know what? If they stop telling lies to the population, we may even stop telling the truth about them. The solution to our high food prices is a simple one. It is no rocket science or statistical legerdemain. Just give the lands to the farmers who need it and who want it. Let us provide them with the basic infrastructure, irrigation, access roads, capital allowances, cheaper fertilizers and access to markets. Let us keep transportation costs down and in no time, one million tomatoes, peppers, pumpkin, eddoes, cassava, dasheen, “zaboca”, et cetera, will come into bloom in Trinidad and Tobago.

We do this and we will not only feed ourselves, but we will feed the rest of the Caribbean.

I thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker: There are four minutes left.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (*Fyzabad*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You would remember some years ago when you sat on this side of the House, I made the observation that it was reported that the greatest pain a human being can suffer is a woman giving birth to a child. Later on, the social researcher said that there was still a greater pain and that was for the mother to see her children go hungry. I am certain the Member for Chaguanas East has not gone through this pain, because he was involved in activities that allowed him to eat for free, dress for free and to take from people, goods and services that did not belong to him.

The point I want to make in the two minutes that I have is that Trinidad and Tobago today finds itself unable to feed its population. Simple things that we once had—Mr. Speaker, when last did you have a glass of cow's milk or dahi? Kids today do not know what is "penus". It really tells you that the country is going down.

The fact of the matter is that our history tells us that our forefathers came from Africa, India and elsewhere, to work the lands of Trinidad and Tobago. This country should never find itself without food.

I heard my distinguished colleague from Princes Town South/Tableland. I want to give a small word of advice to Ministers, my colleagues opposite, you run the risk when you sit in an office because you have endless support behind you. They prepare all kinds of things for you to come and say in the Parliament; oftentimes it makes no sense, as we observed a few minutes ago. Really, what you need is to ensure that you maintain contact on the ground. You are from an agricultural area and you must know the crisis that people find themselves in. We all want to feed the nation. This is not the responsibility only of the Government. We represent people on both sides of the fence and we see all the time.

Today when you go in the market, people are unable to purchase food stuff. To hear my colleague from Princes Town South/Tableland say that we are keeping prices within reason, what does that mean? You are working for \$60,000. Does it mean that you can afford it and that is how you measure reason? That is not the way to go. There are 300,000 persons earning less than \$3,000 per month and 200,000 earning less than \$2,000 per month. Do you know the cost of a tin of KLIM? No, you do not know. Many people cannot afford it. Do you know the cost of 25 pounds of flour? No, you do not know it. In fact, the minimum salary in this country cannot buy three meals for the average worker today. The average breakfast costs \$10.00 and a lunch costs \$14.00. That is a total cost

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\$24.00. If someone is working for \$10.00 per hour, he has to work two and one-half hours to get two meals. This is what you have reduced this country to. Should I stop? Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Presumably you will be continuing on the next Private Members' Day.

4.30 p.m.

DENGUE FEVER OUTBREAK

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, earlier on, I had granted leave to the hon. Member for Caroni East to move a Motion of Definite Urgent Importance. I just want to point out that in addition to Standing Order 10(2), we have to move it also in Standing Order 12(3). So the *Hansard* would record that we would have suspended Standing Orders 10(2) and 12(3). I now call upon the hon. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): Mr. Speaker, today is another sad day in the history of the poor health care that has been given to this country by this administration, particularly within the last six years. It seems that this present administration that has been just voted into power is going down a more precipitous path than the predecessor administration, in terms of not caring for the population in almost every aspect of health care.

Health care is a fundamental pillar of any civilized society, and when that falls, the civilization of that society falls. It is very sad that as a developing country, we have spent almost \$200 billion in six years, and we cannot take care of a simple situation of the prevention of dengue hemorrhagic fever.

Within the last six years, this country has been bombarded with the lack of care and attention to this simple communicable disease as with other communicable diseases like tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. There is plenty talk, no action and people are dying like flies throughout the country with these communicable diseases.

Developed countries have moved away from communicable diseases as the leading causes of death, but Trinidad and Tobago seems to be a country where communicable diseases are killing most of the people in terms of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and now dengue. So, today, it is not surprising that you see on the front page of the *Trinidad Guardian* "Dengue downs 12 Chinese workers" and on the *Newsday* "12 Chinese workers sick". [Interruption]

Mr. Ramnath: Just be quiet. You do not have any respect.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The first thing we want to know—

Mr. Ramnath: Shut up!

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member—

Mr. Ramnath: He has a habit of disturbing everybody.

Mr. Speaker: You cannot sit there and tell him to shut up.

Mr. Ramnath: You should tell him that, not me. [*Laughter*] I apologize.

Mr. Speaker: Yes, apology accepted, I would imagine. Hon. Member, continue, please.

Mr. Ramnath: He does not have any respect for anybody,

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, in today's *Daily Trinidad Express*, there is an article written by Kimberly Castillo "Chinese Workers hit with dengue" and it says:

"Twelve Chinese construction workers had to seek treatment for dengue fever during the first two weeks of January.

The workers who are contracted with the Shanghai Construction Group (SCG) International Trinidad and Tobago Limited were believed to have been exposed to the deadly *Aedes aegypti* mosquito whilst at their living quarters on Keate Street, Port of Spain—a stone's throw from the Port of Spain General Hospital and the Queen's Park Savannah—one of the main venues for Carnival festivities.

The workers were among those who worked on the Prime Minister's residence and Diplomatic Centre at La Fantasie, St. Anns, and are working on other construction sites..."

I see the hon. Prime Minister is raising his eyebrows. He is probably wondering whether he is in the process of contracting dengue from the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito, but we hope not. We hope that his staff and his family are not going to be affected by dengue.

"Six workers were sent to Westshore Medical and the other six were sent to St. Clair Medical..."

These are all private hospitals. They were sent by the Shanghai Group of Companies.

In addition, there were three members of a family in Corinth Village, Ste. Madeline, who were warded at the San Fernando General Hospital as a result of

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dengue fever. These were confirmed cases of dengue fever. This was reported in a *Newsday* article dated Sunday, January 06, 2008. “Dengue fever sends family to hospital”, and there was another article “An outbreak of dengue fever in south Trinidad”.

What is even worse is that this is not only affecting people in central and south Trinidad, but this is affecting an urban area in Port of Spain. One of our colleagues on this side of the House came in late a while ago, because his family was affected by a health situation. His daughter had to be admitted a while ago. Living on The Petrotrin compound, the laboratory confirmed a case of dengue fever by the daughter of our Member for Couva South who is now hospitalized at the Augustus Long Hospital. There is a possibility of dengue hemorrhagic fever.

Mr. Speaker, there are three strains of dengue; type I, type II and type III, and type III is the one that causes dengue hemorrhagic fever and you bleed. Your platelets go down, your blood count goes down, and if one does not get adequate transfusion in time one can die. I do not want to scare my hon. colleague, but this is the reality of the situation in Trinidad and Tobago.

Here it is, right on Keate Street in Port of Spain, in an urban area, there are construction workers from the Shanghai Group of Companies living in rooms—five persons living in one room. There are 100 construction workers on that site and the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes are right there. Mr. Speaker, do you know where that is? It is next to the Port of Spain General Hospital and the Queen’s Park Savannah. So, what happens to mosquitoes that can fly into Port of Spain General Hospital from Keate Street near to the Queen’s Park Savannah and infect inpatients at the Port of Spain General Hospital? I am sure this is why you understood the necessity for a discussion on this matter. You saw the urgent importance of this for the Government to take active priority, in terms of dealing with this whole dengue situation as it exists at the moment. Mr. Speaker, this is not only existing now, but this has been existing during their five or six years in government. Scores of people have died under this administration from dengue hemorrhagic fever as a result of a number of things which I would speak about very shortly—negligence by this Government.

In fact, this Government should hold itself accountable in terms of being legally responsible for the deaths of so many persons who have died as a result of dengue fever should sue this Government for its negligence and not taking care of the population.

Mr. Speaker, the company that is employing the Shanghai Group of Companies, UDeCott—the same Mr. Calder Hart who has over \$15 billion under

his belt without any transparency and accountability in spending it—has the Shanghai Group of Companies huddled together—100 of them is in a small building living like animals. Is this what we have been reduced to in a society like Trinidad and Tobago? Does the Chinese Ambassador know what is happening to his workers? What is the Government doing about overcrowding in a home when 100 persons are living together in rooms of five? That is Chinese slavery. That is abominable! How could a Government that is spending \$200 billion in six years have people living like that in Trinidad and Tobago? They have our own people living like that far less foreigners.

They are tolerating Calder Hart bringing in people who are living like that in slumps, and then saying that it is a good deal for the construction of the high-rise buildings in Port of Spain. Is this what you are proud of? You are proud of the fact that you are bringing workers into Trinidad and Tobago, and you are causing infection of your own people in Trinidad and Tobago. Did these Chinese workers come with this or was it acquired here in Trinidad? Who is checking the epidemiology of it? Who is checking this when these workers come to Trinidad and Tobago? Mr. Speaker, the days for this should be finished. We should not be a country that is supposed to be developing, and want to look for first world status by 2020, and have people dying from dengue hemorrhagic fever.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what the authority is saying? They are saying that in the current case, they are going to be spraying 150 meters. They are going to do dyna-fogging. This is the type of mist that they are supposed to be spraying with. The entire country should be sprayed on a regular basis, because mosquitoes have been invading this country by virtue of the climate change that we have. When there is high rainfall or low rainfall or high temperatures these mosquitoes breed and they breed in fresh water. It is not dirty water; it is fresh water.

Do you know that this Government is suffering the people in this country from a lack of water? If you go to Biche, along the Biche Main Road, you are going to see green barrels at the side of the road where people have to get water from water trucks. Is this the type of society that we want to live in? Dengue fever is spread by the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes living in fresh water. So, when people collect their water in barrels for drinking purposes and so forth—the Government is unable to provide running water for a significant percentage of the population, and people have to get water from lagoons and ponds. They have to wait until the trucks pass by. When the trucks put water in these barrels, the barrels would get the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes and the people would get dengue.

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What have they done about the influx of mosquitoes in this country? CAREC has been telling the Caribbean that there is *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes in the Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago is one of the leading countries in the Caribbean that is infected with the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes. Do you know why? The Government has not been doing anything about eradicating these mosquitoes from Trinidad and Tobago.

I am sure that the hon. Minister knows that his predecessor did nothing about improving the Insect Vector Control Department in Trinidad and Tobago. That is a department that is left without finances, resources, vehicles, dyna-fogging machines and personnel. The number of persons in the Insect Vector Control Programme has been reduced.

We understand that this present Minister is looking for loopholes of his predecessor. He is looking for areas to see where his predecessor went into corruption and corrupt practices and so on. I also want him to look at where his predecessor made sure that this thing did not work at all. I will come to something that happened in 2004, but one of the real problems is that this country is not putting resources into the Insect Vector Control Department; the number of persons needed to go around in these vehicles to spray Trinidad and Tobago on a regular basis, does not have the pharmaceuticals to spray the country. When a person is infected with dengue then they want to spray 150 metres around the area.

My poor colleague has to suffer the emotional trauma of his daughter being in a hospital with dengue fever, and now he does not know what is going to happen. Hon. Prime Minister, this could happen to you and your family. God bless you that something like this does not happen to you, because these people worked on your home. You do not know how many of these construction workers were affected before and how many visitors to your home or the diplomatic centre would have been affected. When you were bitten by a mosquito, you would not have known what mosquito would have bitten you, so you should probably make sure that you and your family are tested and also the visitors to your home. Where is the education programme with respect to the prevention of dengue fever? Where is the education programme?

4.45 p.m.

Yet still when you talk about spending money for public relations and public relations gimmickry, a Minister of Health want-to-be a movie star—You know what I always say? The paparazzi run down people, but that previous Minister was running down the paparazzi. I hope this Minister does not run down the

paparazzi. They all want to be movie stars. But hear the expenditure, hon. Prime Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker; your expenditure by your last Minister of Health on public relations, \$11.1 million in one year in 2006. That money could have been spent on buying the fogging machines and employing people to spray throughout Trinidad and Tobago. That does not even include the details of salaries and allowances for all personnel employed for public relations purposes in the Ministry of Health and all the advisors to the Minister. This is in response to a question that was asked in the last Parliament. And you know what, a public relations officer's salary per month, \$6,244; manager advisor communications, \$16,000; communication policy implementation officer, \$19,500; secretary/office assistant, \$6,000; communications specialist, \$15,000 per month.

Hon. Prime Minister, do you really feel comfortable sitting, as a Prime Minister in charge of governance in Trinidad and Tobago, and have your Ministry of Health employed in massive public relations campaign about themselves and nothing for the people. Where is the education programme for the prevention of dengue? Where is the education programme for the prevention of tuberculosis? A little we get on HIV/AIDS and he said he was going to spend \$500 million on HIV/AIDS and he spent probably less than \$100 million and they come to try to boast and fool the population that the incidence of HIV/AIDS and so on is getting less in this country.

After you have contracted dengue haemorrhagic fever you have to go to hospital. What resources do we have within the hospital system for dealing with cases like this, Mr. Speaker? We have no beds at the hospital. These Chinese workers went to private nursing homes, because their employers took care of them. What about our poor people in Central and South Trinidad who are in rural areas who do not have any money but have to end up in public institutions? Public institutions which have failed this country; where the hon. Prime Minister himself, had to appoint a Commission of Enquiry into the operations and delivery of health care in Trinidad and Tobago, and Volume One shows a woeful state of the health sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

It took three years for this Commission of Enquiry to come together and after three years they brought the report and made a number of recommendations; the recommendations are all there. Almost 38 recommendations and you have a Minister of Health coming today and saying that he has a 100-day plan. Follow the recommendations that have been given out in the Gladys Gafoor Commission of Enquiry; deal with it; implement them as early as possible and then we would see some improvement. Some of these are short term and implementable.

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What has happened after eight months? The Prime Minister promised that he would have sent this Gladys Gafoor Commission of Enquiry Report to the Integrity Commission, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Commissioner of Police, and up to now, eight months later, we have not heard anything about those criminal investigations. Which personnel from the Ministry of Health have been interviewed by the Police Commissioner or by Mr. Virgil Wellington or whoever?

Mr. Speaker: I think you need to come back to the Motion before us.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I was just alluding to that, Mr. Speaker, because to show that the health sector, the hospitals, cannot cope with any outbreak of dengue as we are seeing now in Trinidad and Tobago, if these patients had to go to the public hospitals there were no systems in place for mobilizing them or moving them away from the mainstream of the rest of the patients because you have to screen them, nurture them and take care of them in a different way.

Are our institutions capable of dealing with what is needed for the treatment; the blood bank. These patients platelets go down and to improve their platelets they have to get some blood. So we thin down the blood, get the platelets and transfuse the patients. The blood bank in Trinidad and Tobago cannot take care of any emergency situation like that, because one patient may need about 8 to 10 units of blood or platelets. They need syringes; IV infusions, tests and they need nurses to give it. Our health care institutions are crumbling and we cannot deliver the type of health care, so our people go to hospitals and they die. And you know who go? The poor people go to the hospitals and the poor people die.

Those of us who are in Government can go abroad and have all sorts of medical care, in vitro fertilization and heart surgery and so on, but the poor people dying from the lack of health care. One of the recommendations of the Gladys Gafoor Commission—that is why I went to it—was that a national blood policy should be established and enforced through an Act of Parliament. A national blood committee should be set up and charged with the responsibility for increasing the prevalence of voluntary blood donors and the blood bank should be an independent body with institutional autonomy. This has direct implications in a situation where there is dengue being brought throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, the Carnival season is here. We have Keate Street, where there are *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes. How comfortable would people be around the Queen's Park Savannah and those who are walking around the hospital and so on? You could be driving down the street right around the savannah with your glass

down, and a mosquito comes into your car—and mosquitoes feed by day and they feed off the blood of individuals during the day. So, it does not have to be in the night.

All those visitors coming from abroad, if they know that there is an outbreak of dengue in Trinidad right on Keate Street, near the Queen's Park Savannah, you know what is going to happen to your Carnival? "Is real ole mas", because people not coming into Trinidad and Tobago. What is the Government doing about it? The hon. Minister did not even know that there was an outbreak of dengue. He had to be told by reporters after the usual press conference by the Cabinet at 2.00 p.m. in the evening. Where are his officers? Where are his departments? What are they doing? This is supposed to be monitored.

You know, there are so many areas that could be improved in terms of helping to prevent this whole dengue epidemic. If you have your workers working together; your county medical officers of health; your Ministry of Agriculture; your Environmental Management Agency; you get the assistance of PAHO and you have your Insect Vector Control working with you, you can stamp out and put the resources that are necessary; you can eradicate this whole question of dengue in Trinidad and Tobago. But no, there is nobody competent to do that within this Government. They do not have the capability for implementing anything whatsoever; so everything is left to naught. No collaboration whatsoever between the relevant agencies that could look after it.

And if there was an epidemic and these people were sent to the hospital, there is already an overcrowding. People are lying on the floor; people are delivering babies from benches; children are dying; people are dying from a broken leg; children are dying from asthma; children are dying waiting for surgery. So, where are these people going to be put? Wards are being overcrowded and the Minister comes and he says that the 100-day plan has measures for dealing with the overcrowding of wards. People are sleeping on trolleys for 72 hours.

Hon. Prime Minister, you are head of this Government; you have the responsibility if your Minister is not performing. You had two Ministers in the last regime and both of them failed you. I do not want to cast any aspersions on our new hon. Minister and we would give him his chance to see whether he would succeed or fail. If he does not, I want to see how your 100-day plan—He needs to tell this country what is his 100-day plan; come out and clearly—The practitioners in the health care system have told him that this 100-day plan is a failure before it even starts. And you have recommendations from the Gladys Gafoor Commission and you do not want to implement it.

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Mr. Speaker, you know in the *Sunday Guardian* newspaper, dated November 23, 2003, there was a story. It said:

“South sickness was dengue. Study exposes cover up.”

It was an epidemic in Trinidad and Tobago on the same dengue. The ministry had acquired knowledge of this dengue epidemic in Princes Town in 2003. They covered up the report. There were consultants at San Fernando General Hospital who did a two-month survey and found that 60 per cent of the patients that they had taken blood from had dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever, confirmed by CAREC. But yet the hon. Minister of Health, at that time—who is our colleague now today sitting as Leader of Government Business—covered up and said that there was no epidemic although the consultant doctors were telling him that there was a dengue epidemic in San Fernando, and 100 people had been affected at that time in 2003.

We are wondering whether there is going to be another cover up of a similar situation in Trinidad and Tobago. They covered it up and said it was a mystery virus, and he placed politics before the lives of people; the innocent lives that are being taken away.

So, we want to ask a number of questions, through you, Mr. Speaker, to the hon. Minister and to the Prime Minister who is ultimately responsible for all his ministers, and if you do not hold them accountable week after week, Prime Minister, you are not doing your job as a Prime Minister in terms of governance; bring them accountable and if they are not accountable, fire them as you have fired almost all of them—you have kept two. How is the Government preparing to have increased bed space? You need to answer those questions.

Is the Government putting contingency plans in place to have adequate supplies of materials in the institutions to deal with any situation like this; like IV fluids, blood, plasma and so on? There is something called fresh frozen plasma, which we are short of in this country. When people develop bleeding disorders they die because we do not have fresh frozen plasma. What is the Government doing to educate and sensitize the population about the prevention of dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever? How is the Government going to increase its spraying programme with dyna fogging? What is the Government doing to deal with the increase of mosquito population in terms of the spraying, the insect vector control and collaboration between the agencies of the ministries, local government, EMA, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, et cetera? We need to have answers to these.

How is the Government entrusting the support of PAHO and CAREC, which are two major organizations which could help them because of their experience and knowledge? Has the Government and the RHAs brought on the resources at the nation's laboratories and hospitals to deal with the investigations of some of these? And how is the Government dealing with the negative fallout of an outbreak of dengue fever and that affecting the influx of visitors to Trinidad and Tobago for this Carnival?

So, Mr. Speaker, in closing, even PAHO in a report in 2006, said:

“There is poor supervision in the hospitals leading to indiscipline, demoralization, and poor personnel performance.

There is poor hospital sanitation and hospital compounds are laden with discarded furniture, etc.

There is insufficient and at times lack of supplies...and equipment in the health care facilities, which impedes good work practice necessary for appropriate and safe patient care.

The findings suggest that patient care management is poor as is evident by the poor infection prevention and control practices.”

It is in this context, that an overall fallout in the health sector and the deplorable state of the health sector as a country, that I bring this Motion in terms of the dengue and bring it to the attention of the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me this opportunity.

5.00 p.m.

The Minister of Health (Sen. The Hon. Jerry Narace): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You granted leave under Standing Order 12(3) “Definite Matters of Urgent Public Importance” which is, of course the dengue situation for the distinguished Member of Parliament for Caroni East to raise this matter here today. I thought it would have been a difficult task dealing with it, but as my colleague and friend from Diego Martin North/East would say, “this is suckeye”.
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, it is amazing that the Member should speak about the lack of care, because successive PNM administrations have always demonstrated care for people through education and healthcare programmes, in particular. In fact, PNM administrations are the only administrations that have ever had policy documents

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[*Desk thumping*] I would like to refer the Member to two pages of this document called *The Draft National Strategic Plan Vision 2020*—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: How is that dealing with dengue?

Hon. Member: Excuse me; excuse me, one moment please?

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: I am dealing with the matter of lack of care, and we have a policy document and that policy document will tell you on page 33—I would not read all of it. But on Page 33—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: I would refer him to see about [*Interruption*] creating a caring and a nurturing society, which is where the health care sector falls. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: My friends on the other side always want to make the “sky falling” and all these kinds of statements and sometimes they do not recognize the damage that they do to Trinidad and Tobago, internationally. They would say to you, “dengue outbreak in Trinidad”, 10 days before Carnival, a most important occasion, not just for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but indeed, for the country. And you are talking about small people, all those very small people who vend and make a little money and so on for Carnival, when you come and bring misleading statements to this House [*Interruption*] you are placing those very small people's livelihoods in jeopardy, because they may have invested their little money hoping to benefit from the—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: What constitutes an outbreak? [*Interruption*] We must go to the fact. In 2004—and by the way, Mr. Speaker, there is a National Surveillance Unit in the Ministry of Health that tracks all of these cases. [*Interruption*] I answered a question at the post Cabinet conference yesterday and said, “there were no inordinate reports brought to me”. Because in January 2008 there were 47 reported cases; in January 2007 there were 48 reported cases. Mr. Speaker, let me give some figures on dengue, not just in Trinidad, but in the region.

In 2004 in Trinidad and Tobago there were 594 reported cases; 2005, 401 cases; 2006, 517 cases and 2007, 650 cases. I would like to quote the figures from 1995—2001, I believe at that time our very distinguished friend was the chairman

of a regional health authority. He was part of the whole system of health care, the very system we have been trying to improve. I quote:

“In 1995”—when a caring and a Government that can deliver demitted office we had—“282 cases; in 1996”—you would never believe that was the figure, in your wildest dreams you would not believe—“3,688 cases.”

Hon. Member: “Ooh”, lord. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: In 1997, 2,081 cases.

[*Dr. Gopeesingh stands*]

Hon. Member: No, no, do not get up.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: In 1998, 2,084 cases.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, a point of order for clarification.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: In 1999—

Hon. Member: This is a matter of definite urgent—

Dr. Gopeesingh: Quote your source. Quote your source.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: I am not giving way.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Quote your source.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: The CMO.

Dr. Gopeesingh: The CMO is your source?

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: Yes—In 1991, 100 cases.

Mr. Imbert: What?

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: In 2000, 2,335 cases. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: Mr. Speaker, he can bring me to the—which committee could he bring me to if it is wrong?

Hon. Member: Privileges Committee.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace:—the Privileges Committee; use that source.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: Hold on, Mr. Speaker, let me finish, it does not end there. You would imagine that this is the best government that ever—

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Mr. Speaker, I am not coming here to interfere with anybody. The Prime Minister and political leader asked me to see if I could help to organize the health sector and I did not come to get in any war with anybody. I just come to do the best I can to see if I can—[*Desk thumping*] So, I am not interfering with anyone. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, hear the deaths: in 1997, 14 deaths; in 1998, 19 deaths; in 1999, 13 deaths; in 2000, 13 deaths; in 2001, 20 deaths and in 2002, 12 deaths. Let us compare this to when the benevolent and caring PNM Government came into office in 2002. [*Desk thumping*] I know the party to which I belong, they would never tolerate this. [*Interruption*] Of course, I am going to be fired for this! In 2003 there were in 2,300 cases; in 2004, 494 cases; in 2005—[*Interruption*] From 2002 to now there has been zero deaths. [*Desk thumping*] No deaths, not one single death. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Sharma: Not yet.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: They brought me here, they have made out a case and I would like to answer the case. What we have here is sporadic cases of dengue, and just for the record, the 12 Chinese workers have all been discharged and sent home, so that matter is now over. [*Desk thumping*]

I listened to them and just smiled and said nothing because I am just trying to do a little work here and if I get through I get through and if I do not get through, well, I would be very sad. I am not here to get into any argument with anyone.

Mr. Speaker, look at the number of reported cases, the reported cases now, when the PNM returned—2003, 2,300 cases, because obviously a situation like that will take some doing, but by 2004 it was 494, and of course in 2005, 401 cases; in 2006, 517 cases; in 2007, 650 as I said before. Just sporadic. It is some sporadic cases of dengue right now.

Mr. Manning: Nobody was accused of any outbreak at anytime.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: It was not sporadic in that period when they presided. It was an epidemic, and nobody did anything. [*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, were there any Motions discussed at that time? I am sure not.

Hon. Member: PNM was sleeping.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: Mr. Speaker, I would like to be permitted to answer the question. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: I have been in constant contact with the Minister of Local Government and we have put technical teams together. In fact at 2 o'clock today all the mayors and chairmen, including your regional corporations, all the chief executive officers and the Ministry of Health held a meeting. At that meeting they identified a plan to—because we believe one case is too much, because after all, we are pursuing First World status and therefore in those circumstances we would like to really move to zero cases. But just to inform you, to tell you that in Barbados with a population of 280,000, there were 557 cases in 2003; 349 cases in 2004 and 320 cases in 2005, and in Barbados, they will never say anything. Do you know why? Because their tourism industry will be affected.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: You understand. In Puerto Rico, 3,735 cases in 2003; 3,288 cases in 2004 and 5,701 cases in 2005, with a four million population. In Suriname, 2003, 285 cases; 2004, 375 cases and 2005, 2,852 cases; a population of 478,000.

Mr. Speaker, we understand what we have to do. We are about bringing First World status to this country and we are about bringing health care. I heard him mention my 100-day plan, I do not want to talk about that. We have a long-term transformational plan that the basis is not just the Gladys Gafoor Report, but all of the other stakeholders and my technical team, we have been meeting and we have been listening to people. More than that, the commission of enquiry was the greatest piece of consultation ever done in this country. We have volumes of it, we now know all the facts and we are now in position to—Mr. Speaker, let me just make it clear, I have heard people make claims. I recognize that successive 0 administrations have brought Trinidad and Tobago to higher levels of service and I wish to publicly put on the record that I want to thank all those who have brought something before me and my job is to take it to the next level. [*Desk thumping*] In other words, I am stepping up.

Hon. Member: He stepping up to—[*Inaudible*] [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: The substantive point is going to be the fact that we have established that there has been collaboration between the regional corporations and the Ministry of Health. I can outline that we have the measures that we have taken: the spraying of areas with high *Aedes Aegypti* population; during the 30-day period an aggressive public education campaign aimed at source reduction strategies to reduce the mosquito population, particularly, the *Aedes Aegypti*; national clean-up campaign formerly managed by the Ministry of

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Health, Ministry of Local Government and SWMCOL; enforcement of the Litter Act and yellow fever regulations and establishment of a committee between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Local Government to define the framework for cooperation and action at local level.

Mr. Speaker, we are working with the people, for the people. We are working together with them so that we can bring this whole matter of the “dengue outbreak” to some kind of quick resolution. The first thing I would like to tell the entire world is there is no dengue outbreak in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] I believe that I have quite adequately made that case here this afternoon. We will continue to strengthen collaboration, as I said, and joint efforts to try to ensure strategic progress in realizing cleaner environments and providing clean-up education. As I said, we are working with CEPEP and all of these people, we are working with PAHO. Incidentally, through you, Mr. Speaker, we are working with the PAHO and they are providing the support; we have purchased ULVs and we have done a number of things. I would not wish to overly detain these new very distinguished Members; I realize I am only a guest.

The Ministry of Health has provided the necessary resources to ensure public education campaigns are aired through the mass media so as to educate the general public on preventive measures to be adopted. This morning the CMO was on CNC 3, he was on TV6 and he was on several radio stations speaking to the population, ensuring that we do not start any panic and all of that.

What I think this can serve as—I think that since we have been asked to answer something that we ought not to really answer, I can use this to do three things: one, I can use this occasion to tell the world that there is no dengue outbreak.

Mr. Imbert: Say it again.

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: Yes, I think I should say it again. I would like to tell the world that there is no dengue outbreak. I would also like to tell people who might get dengue—because as you know we have some cases—what the symptoms are: It is high fever of sudden onset; generalized body aches and joint pains; pain in and around the eyes; rashes or small red spots in palms and other parts of the body; a bluish/purple discolouration of the skin; bleeding from the nose, gums, unitary track or bowels; [*Interruption*] abdominal pain, usually in the

right upper abdominal area—[*Inaudible*] [*Laughter*] nausea and vomiting and generalized weakness.

5.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, what we have done—I am not saying that the UNC Alliance asked anything, I am not saying that—we have alerted all the RHAs and we have beefed up our measures to make sure that should people seek treatment, they are in a position to get some level of service as we seek to become more client focused and more oriented to service delivery to the national community.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. J. Narace: To any facility. Mr. Speaker, I will also use this opportunity to do one more thing. Now that we have brought this issue to some control, now that dengue is no longer a major problem for Trinidad and Tobago, I would like to tell the national community that as we move to First World status we must do certain things. Therefore, I remind the public that the main intervention to prevent dengue fever is through environmental control by keeping surroundings clean throughout the year and removing all unwanted receptacles that are liable to hold water which would allow the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes to breed. This is known as source reduction and includes the following measures:

- disposal of all unwanted containers such as old tyres, cups, bottles, et cetera in the yard or in the environs which when exposed, to the rain can collect water;
- cover all water containers such as barrels, drums or buckets with a mosquito proof covering;
- check gutter to ensure water flows freely and free from debris;
- empty pans under refrigerators;
- empty and scrub side of water vases;
- ensure drains in the compound allow free flow of water.

The Ministry of Health will continue to carry out its vector control programmes, community blitzing, its health promotion campaigns via the media and encourage community participation in clean-up campaigns.

Mr. Speaker, I have heard the Member talk about public relations. This Government is about public education. [*Desk thumping*] This Government is about showing people how they can live longer, healthier, more productive lives,

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and therefore, you require public education, and that requires some intervention of the media so. I make that point.

Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat, I wish to say that coming out of the Eastern Regional Health Authority, I saw a very lovely initiative and it is called, "Brighten your corner." I think I really fell in love with that initiative. Because what it really says is that in the health sector, if everyone brightens their corner, then the entire facilities will be brighter. So, I think we want to take that initiative to the communities and we want to tell them to brighten their communities and brighten their homes, and in those circumstances, I am sure that we will have improved cleanliness and the kind of environment that would be conducive to a healthier and more proper lifestyle.

Mr. Speaker, I think that I have clearly made out and brought clarification to this matter and I wish to thank you very sincerely. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: In other words, take that.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I beg that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday, January 30, 2007 at 1.30 p.m. and on that day, the Government will be continuing Motion No. 1 on the Order Paper.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.19 p.m.