

*Leave of Absence**Friday, May 02, 2008***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, May 02, 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 requests for leave of absence from the following Members: the hon. Neil Parsanlal, Member of Parliament for Lopinot/ Bon Air West, from today's sitting of the House; Mr. Vasant Bharath, Member of Parliament for St. Augustine, from today's sitting of the House; Ms. Mickela Panday, Member of Parliament for Oropouche West; Mr. Nizam Baksh, Naparima, for the period May 02—May 08; hon. Christine Kangaloo, Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, from today's sitting of the House. The leave which these Members seek is granted.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. The annual audited financial statements of the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 2006. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira)*]  
*To be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.*
2. The Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2007 (Volumes I and II). [*Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira*]  
*To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*
3. The Animal (Importation) Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2008. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
4. The Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the public accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2007. [*Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira*]  
*To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*
5. The annual administrative report of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation for the period October 01, 2006 to September 30, 2007. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

**ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce that we have responses to 10 questions today, as follows: Nos. 23, 69, 73, 86, 99, 100, 102, 109, 110, and 113. I ask that the other questions on the Order paper be deferred for two weeks.

*The following questions stood on the Order Paper:*

**Special Purpose Companies  
(Criteria and Purposes for)**

- 24.** Could the hon. Prime Minister state:
- (a) the allocations given to the special purpose companies for carrying out infrastructure works for the years 2006 and 2007;
  - (b) what criteria and/or mechanisms are used in determining the type of work and the areas in which such works are to be carried out by the special purpose companies;
  - (c) the various ministries under which each special purpose company falls;
  - (d) the criteria and procedures adopted by these companies in awarding contracts; and
  - (e) the persons and/or organizations which supervise and/or monitor the performance and the quality of work carried out by them? [*Mr. S. Panday*]

**Brian Lara Sporting Complex  
(Cost and Completion of)**

- 48.** With regard to the Brian Lara Sporting Complex in Tarouba, could the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs Minister state:
- (a) the projected cost;
  - (b) how much money has been expended on the project so far; and
  - (c) the expected date of completion of the entire project? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Constituency of Mayaro  
(Details of Road Works)**

- 54.** Could the hon. Minister of Works and Transport state:
- (a) what roads within the constituency of Mayaro are earmarked for road paving, restoration/rehabilitation; and
  - (b) when these works are expected to commence? [*Mr. W. Peters*]

**Financial Support for Needy Students  
(Details of Selection)**

- 60.** Could the hon. Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education state:
- (a) how much money was spent in 2007 to support needy students seeking tertiary training abroad;
  - (b) how these students were selected for financial support;
  - (c) whether there was any advertisement with respect to the availability of this fund for assistance to local students studying abroad; and
  - (d) if the answer to (c) is in the affirmative, could the Minister state the dates and the specific media in which these advertisements were placed? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Sangre Grande Public Market  
(Details of Construction)**

- 62.** Could the hon. Minister of Local Government state:
- (a) what was the estimated cost of construction of the Sangre Grande Public Market;
  - (b) when was construction started and when was it scheduled for completion;
  - (c) which contractor/contracting firm was awarded the contract for the construction of the market; and
  - (d) is the contractor still on the project and has there been a cost overrun on the construction project? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**Justice Monica Barnes Report  
(Recommendations)**

- 71.** Could the hon. Minister of Social Development inform this House:
- (a) if the Government has received the Justice Monica Barnes Report;
  - (b) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, when this report will be laid in Parliament; and
  - (c) what are the recommendations made in the report and whether these recommendations are being implemented? [*Mr. N. Baksh*]

**Ex-Caroni (1975) Limited**  
**(Leases for Agricultural Land)**

- 74.** Could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources state:
- (a) how many leases for agricultural land have been given out to and executed by ex-Caroni (1975) Limited VSEP-availed workers as at February 29, 2008; and
  - (b) where the lands in (a) are located? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Ex-Caroni (1975) Limited**  
**(Leases for Residential Lands)**

- 75.** Could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources state:
- (a) how many leases for residential lands have been given out to and executed by ex-Caroni (1975) Limited VSEP-availed workers as at February 29, 2008; and
  - (b) where the lands in (a) are located? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Caroni (1975) Limited**  
**(Criteria and Selection of)**

- 76.** Could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources state:
- (a) how many residential lots from land previously owned by Caroni (1975) Limited will be made available by sale/lease/rental to members of the public;
  - (b) the price at which the lands in (a) will be sold; and
  - (c) when the land in (a) will become available; and the criteria for selection of purchasers for the above lots of lands? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Passports**

- 77.** Could the hon. Minister of National Security state:
- (a) how many citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are in possession of the 'old' (non machine readable) passports;
  - (b) the deadline for changing all these passports to the machine readable passports; and
  - (c) how many passport applications are processed and new passports delivered at present on a weekly basis? [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

**Housing Development Corporation  
(Allotment of Houses)**

- 87.** Could the hon. Minister of Planning, Housing and the Environment state the process by which Housing Development Corporation (HDC) houses are allotted to applicants? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**St. Marie Emmanuel Road  
(Re-paving of)**

- 88.** Could the hon. Minister of Local Government state:
- (a) when would the St. Marie Emmanuel Road in Cumuto, Sangre Grande be rehabilitated and re-paved by the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation; and
  - (b) why was this road not previously paved? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**Major Landslips  
(Repair of)**

- 89.** Could the hon. Minister of Local Government state when would the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation repair the major landslips in Cumuto at:
- (a) Harkoo Trace; and
  - (b) Sookoo Trace? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**Transfer of Patients**

- 95.** With respect to the care of patients transferred from public hospitals to private nursing homes/medical institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, could the hon. Minister of Health state:
- (a) what was the sum paid to each institution for 2006 and 2007;
  - (b) who authorized the transfer of patients; and
  - (c) what were the criteria used in the selection of the particular private nursing home/institution? [*Dr. T. Gopeesingh*]

**Private Nursing Homes  
(Sums Paid to Doctors)**

- 96.** Could the hon. Minister of Health state what sums were paid to individual doctors working in private nursing homes for professional services rendered to public patients in 2006 and 2007 on behalf of the Ministry of Health? [*Dr. T. Gopeesingh*]

**Health Institutions  
(Staffing)**

- 98.** Could the hon. Minister of Health state the number of doctors, state registered nurses and enrolled nursing assistants that are required at each of the following health institutions, and the number of vacancies that currently exist:
- (a) Port of Spain General Hospital;
  - (b) San Fernando General Hospital;
  - (c) Mount Hope Maternity Hospital;
  - (d) Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex; and
  - (e) Sangre Grande Hospital? [*Dr. T. Gopeesingh*]

**University of Trinidad and Tobago  
(Details of)**

- 101.** With regard to the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) campuses throughout Trinidad and Tobago, could the hon. Minister of Health state:
- (a) the cost of construction of each; and
  - (b) the annual expenditure for 2006 and 2007 on (i) staff, (ii) scholarships to lecturers/professors and (iii) administration? [*Dr. T. Gopeesingh*]

**University of the West Indies  
(Status of Internal Audit)**

- 103.** Could the hon. Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education state:
- (a) whether any internal audit has ever been done at the University of the West Indies since its inception;
  - (b) if the answer to (a) is in the negative, why not;
  - (c) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, for what years, and have they been reviewed by the Auditor General; and
  - (d) has the Auditor General ever conducted an audit of the University of Trinidad and Tobago? [*Dr. T. Gopeesingh*]

**Bombardier Executive Private Jet  
(Ordering of)**

- 105.** With respect to the proposed purchase of a Bombardier Executive Private Jet for use by the Government, could the hon. Minister of Finance state:
- (a) whether a firm order has been placed for this jet;
  - (b) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, who placed the order and on what date was it placed;
  - (c) if the order was placed, is there a contract and what is the date of the contract;
  - (d) whether any money was advanced to Caribbean Airlines Limited for the purchase of a Bombardier jet; and
  - (e) if the answer to (d) is in the affirmative, how much money was advanced? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Bombardier Executive Private Jet  
(Cabinet Consideration of)**

- 106.** With respect to the proposed purchase of a Bombardier Executive Private Jet for use by the Government, could the hon. Minister of Finance state:
- (a) on what date was the matter of purchase considered by the Cabinet;
  - (b) will the proposed official executive jet be utilized by public officers for official travel; and
  - (c) was a feasibility study presented to Cabinet upon which a decision was based? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Official Overseas Travel**

- 107.** Could the hon. Minister of Finance state:
- (a) What was the actual annual Government expenditure on official overseas travel (airfares) from 2006—2007?
  - (b) What is the projected expenditure on official travel for 2008?
  - (c) How many aircraft travel hours are envisaged for 2008? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Bombardier Executive Private Jet  
(Details of)**

- 108.** With respect to the purchase of a Bombardier Executive Private Jet for use by the Government, could the hon. Minister of Finance state:
- (a) what is the financial commitment to Caribbean Airlines Limited for the annual upkeep of the jet beyond the guaranteed 600 hours; and
  - (b) what is the cost of the 600 hours to the Government? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Purchase of Blimp/Sky Ship**

- 111.** A. Could the hon. Minister of National Security give the name(s) of the person(s) and/or organization(s) which negotiated the purchase and /or lease of each blimp/sky ship on behalf of the State?
- B. Could the Minister give the name(s) of the person(s) and/or organization(s) which negotiated the purchase and/or lease of each blimp/sky ship on behalf of the suppliers?
- C. Were anti-corruption clauses inserted in the contracts for the purchase and/or lease of each blimp and/or sky ship? [*Mr. S. Panday*]

**Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited  
(Details of Projects Undertaken)**

- 115.** With respect to the Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited (PSAEL), could the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources state:
- (a) the names of those constituencies which are approved for infrastructure projects to be undertaken by that company;
  - (b) the criteria used to identify constituencies for approval for PSAEL projects; and
  - (c) the quantum of moneys spent in 2007 on projects undertaken by the company? [*Dr. R. Moonilal*]

**Constituency of Chaguanas West  
(Roads to be Paved under PURE)**

- 120.** Could the hon. Minister of Works and Transport state:
- (a) which roads in the constituency of Chaguanas West will be paved this year under PURE; and
  - (b) what is the commencement date for the paving of each such road? [*Mr. J. Warner*]



**Schools Operating on a Shift System  
(Details of)**

**124.** Could the hon. Minister of Education state:

- (a) the schools still operating on a shift basis and the number of students attending each;
- (b) the expected date by which each school listed in (a) will be de-shifted; and
- (c) the estimated cost of de-shifting each school mentioned in (a) together with a breakdown of expenditure for each in the areas of (i) construction (ii) equipping (iii) furnishing and (iv) any other costs?  
[Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar]

**Local School Boards  
(Details of Constitution)**

**125.** Could the hon. Minister of Education state:

- (a) the government schools in which the local school board has been constituted and the date each board was constituted;
- (b) whether any of the boards listed in (a) were constituted by Order in accordance with section 23(1) of the Education Act, and the date(s) of the respective Order(s); and
- (c) the government schools in which no school board has been appointed and the reason(s) for failure to constitute local school boards for each of these schools? [Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar]

**Local School Boards  
(Annual Reports Submitted)**

**126.** Could the hon. Minister of Education state:

- (a) the local school boards which have submitted annual reports in accordance with section 23(1) of the Education Act, and the date(s) of each report;
- (b) what were the major areas of concern raised in the annual reports submitted and the steps taken by the Ministry to address these concerns;
- (c) the local school boards which have not submitted the requisite annual reports and indicate what steps have been taken to have these boards act in accordance with the law; and

- (d) the amounts paid to each local school board to date? [*Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar*]

*Questions, by leave, deferred.*

**Municipal Corporations  
(Wooden Bridges Owned by)**

- 23. Mr. Subhas Panday** (*Princes Town North*) asked the hon. Minister of Local Government:

Is the Minister aware that a person was injured when he fell through a dilapidated, rotten wooden bridge in the jurisdiction of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation?

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the number of wooden bridges under the jurisdiction of each municipal corporation;
- (b) whether funds have been allocated to municipal corporations for the conversion of these wooden bridges into concrete bridges;
- (c) the allocations for conversion of wooden bridges into concrete bridges in each municipal corporation, if the answer to (b) is in the affirmative; and
- (d) the number of wooden bridges she expects to be converted into concrete bridges utilizing the said allocation?

**The Minister of Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Hazel Manning):** Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Local Government is aware that a resident of Mulchan Trace, Penal, was reported to have fallen through a hole in the Kangaloo Trace Bridge on Sunday, December 09, 2007. This bridge is located in an area which is under the purview of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation. An investigation was conducted by the Penal/Debe Municipal Police which confirmed the incident.

The Government is deeply concerned about the incident and is making every effort to try to prevent such incidents in the future. In an attempt to remedy the situation with wooden bridges, the Ministry of Local Government has prepared a note to take to Cabinet to address the conversion of wooden bridges into concrete bridges.

There are 476 wooden bridges located in areas under the jurisdiction of 10 municipal corporations, and they are distributed as follows: the Chaguanas

Borough Corporation, two wooden bridges; the Diego Martin Regional Corporation, one wooden bridge; the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, one wooden bridge; the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, seven wooden bridges; the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, 79 wooden bridges; the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, 66 bridges; the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation, 90 bridges; the Siparia Regional Corporation, 27 bridges; the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation, 58 bridges, and the Princes Town Regional Corporation, 145 bridges, bringing the total to 476 wooden bridges.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar:** What about missing bridges; "no bridge at all"?

**Sen. The Hon. H. Manning:** For the period 2002—2007, funds in the amount of over \$73 million have been expended on a comprehensive programme of roads and bridges, and the maintenance, repair and rebuilding of these bridges. This \$73.2 million represents a 69 per cent increase over the \$43.4 million spent during the corresponding five-year period, 1996—2001, when another administration was in government. [*Desk thumping*]

The allocation of conversion of wooden bridges into concrete under the Local Roads and Bridges Programme for the fiscal year 2007/2008 for the 10 municipalities with wooden bridges, is \$29.9 million, broken down as follows: Chaguanas Borough Corporation, \$1 million in expenditure; Diego Martin Regional Corporation, \$4.4 million; San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, \$4 million; Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, \$4 million; Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, \$5 million; Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, \$4 million; Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation, \$3 million; Siparia Regional Corporation, \$2 million; Penal/Debe Regional Corporation, \$500,000, and the Princes Town Regional Corporation, \$2 million, bringing the figure to a total of \$29.9 million spent on wooden bridges.

It must be noted that this vote is for the repairs and maintenance of local roads and bridges. However, investigations show that the corporations have been focussing on the repairs and maintenance of roads, ignoring the upgrading of wooden bridges. The Ministry, observing this bias and understanding the importance of this infrastructural link and the physical need of the burgesses, took the initiative to ease the people's suffering by converting some wooden bridges to concrete.

It is to be noted that the councils are responsible for the management, maintenance, repairs and rebuilding of bridges located within the boundaries of municipal corporations. It is, therefore, the prerogative of the councils to prioritize

and implement the construction of bridges under their control. The implementation programme will, therefore, depend on the council's preferred initiative and the allocation of funds. The successful execution of the construction of bridges depends on the prudent management of the councils in the municipal corporations.

The role of the Ministry of Local Government is to facilitate the process after the corporations' submitted work plans are approved. As a consequence, the Minister's role is not to usurp the responsibilities of the councillors and the chief executive officers of the municipal corporations.

Under the 2008 development programme, a total of \$2.7 million was allocated and disbursed for the conversion of six wooden bridges to concrete bridges. The Ministry of Local Government realizing the need to do more from head office has project managed four bridges, as follows: the Siparia Regional Corporation Silver Stream Bridge, completed at a cost of \$450,225; the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation Stone Street Bridge, completed at a cost of \$437,000, and the Lightbourne Bridge No. 5, is 75 per cent completed. The original contract was terminated and tenders were reinvited to undertake the remaining works, for example, the construction of the bridge depth.

In the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, the Railway Road Bridge was awarded at an estimated cost of \$376,050, a contract has been awarded. In addition, the following two projects are being managed from the respective corporations: in the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation, the Chrysostom Trace Bridge No. 1, estimated cost of construction is \$833,000, and releases have been requested; in the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, the Benjamin Drive Bridge is 5 per cent completed at an estimated cost of \$305,000.

Additionally, three Bailey bridges were installed under the supervision of the Ministry of Local Government at a cost of \$4.5 million to facilitate the replacement of the Los Iros Bridge located in the Siparia region; the Mendes Trace Bridge, located in the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, and the El Quemado Road Bridge, located in the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo region. Subsequently, the El Quemado Road Bridge has been completed.

Mr. Speaker, this Ministry is mindful of the fact that there is still a lot more to be done by the municipal corporations to convert wooden bridges to concrete bridges. To this end, the Ministry is sourcing additional funding at the midterm review to continue initiatives which target secondary road infrastructure and, in particular, bridges. The Ministry is collaborating with the Ministry of Works and Transport to assist in the rehabilitation of local bridges. The Ministry is requesting

of the Ministry of Finance funding for the procurement of five additional Bailey bridges to provide temporary access where there is none at present.

**1.45 p.m.**

The ministry is in the process of developing a comprehensive programme for the rehabilitation of all wooden bridges. It is anticipated that rehabilitation of all bridges will be completed over a period of five years.

Thank you very much.

**Mr. S. Panday:** Is the Minister satisfied that \$500,000 was a sufficient sum for 58 bridges in the Debe/Penal region?

**Sen. The Hon. H. Manning:** As I have said, Mr. Speaker, it is the prerogative of the municipal corporations, and we are concerned that they are not doing what they have to do and, therefore, the Ministry of Local Government has before Cabinet at this time a programme to repair 476 wooden bridges, converting them into concrete bridges. [*Desk thumping*]

**Foreign Consultant Stephen Mastrofski  
(Hiring of)**

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

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the sum of money it has cost the Government to date for it to hire foreign consultant Stephen Mastrofski;
- (b) whether any other foreign consultant or advisor is now employed by the Government in the police service, and if so, how many and at what cost in respect of each advisor and/or consultant; and
- (c) what is the total sum spent by the Government since it took office in 2001, to present time, in hiring foreign advisors and/or consultants for the police service and/or for the fight against crime, giving the particulars for each foreign advisor and/or consultant?

**The Minister of State in the Ministry of National Security (Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hon. Members are advised that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has not entered into a contract with Prof. Stephen Mastrofski; it entered into a memorandum of understanding with George Mason University of Virginia to undertake research, training and evaluation work

in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. This Organizational Development Project proceeds under the expert guidance of Prof. Mastrofski, a member of staff of the George Mason University. Therefore, that university bears the responsibility for remunerating Prof. Mastrofski.

The Police Transformation Team is the only foreign consultancy currently employed in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service at a total contracted cost of US \$13.1 million. The costs associated with this team which is comprised of personnel from the George Mason University, the Pennsylvania State University and Justice and Security Strategies Incorporation are as follows: George Mason University, US \$9,370,759; Pennsylvania State University, US \$2,865,264; Justice and Security Strategies Incorporation, US \$814,663.

With respect to the Police Transformation Team, hon. Members are advised that the information pertaining to the total sum spent thus far in hiring the George Mason University and the Pennsylvania State University, as well as other particulars associated with the engagement have been the subject of previous parliamentary questions and the information therefore already exists in the public domain. However, with regard to the Justice and Security Strategies Incorporation and the other foreign consultants/advisors contracted since 2001, the particulars are as follows: The Justice and Security Strategies Incorporation was contracted to support the efforts of George Mason University and are charged with the responsibility to execute the following tasks:

- (1) Employ an executive advisor to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service;
- (2) Assess the Special Reserve Police;
- (3) Develop a plan for a command college;
- (4) Develop an in-service training plan; and
- (5) Create databases for performance management, professional development and promotion scores.

The other foreign organizations and individuals employed in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service since 2001 and the respective costs are as follows:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Provider</b>	<b>Cost (\$TT)</b>
2001	Bramshill College	200,000.00
2002	Caribbean Police Officers	30,000.00
2003	Bramshill College	250,000.00

*Oral Answers to Questions*

*Friday, May 02, 2008*

2005	Pilgrim Security Group	385,000.00
2005	Taser International	25,000.00
2005	Charles Katz	174,877.29
2005	Communications Services Limited of Jamaica	1,102,500.00
2005	San Francisco State University	392,616.00
2007	Taser International	25,000.00
2007	Alpha Group Centre, USA	211,849.75
2008	August Analysis and Research Centre	226,777.75

Hon. Members are advised that while the types of training conducted by these providers just listed, vary, they are all geared at capacity building in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, with specific focus on: domestic violence training, taser training, criminal intelligence analysis and executive management of intelligence, physical surveillance training and counter-terrorism and hostage rescue.

In addition to training provided for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, other divisions of the Ministry of National Security have utilized the services of foreign consultants to assist in the fight against crime. Services provided for the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force by foreign consultants are as follows: 2007/2008, Global Leadership Development Foundation Incorporation (Leading from above the line), \$141,750; 2006—2008, Dr. Aubrey Armstrong (Defence Force Strategic Review Process), \$450,000.

Hon. Members are advised therefore, that, since 2001 the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has expended TT \$58.7 million to secure the services of foreign advisors and/or consultants for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and for the fight against crime.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

### **Street Lights (Non-functional)**

**86. Mr. Harry Partap** (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

With regard to the Government's Street Lighting Programme, could the hon. Minister of Public Utilities state how many street lights are non-functional as at February 29, 2008 and are they to be replaced by the contractor/contractors?

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid):** Mr. Speaker, Government in March 2005 took a decision to implement a National Street Lighting Programme in Trinidad and Tobago. The programme was implemented by the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC) over the period 2005—2007. It was designed to:

- (1) Install approximately 82,000 new street lights;
- (2) Upgrade approximately 36,000 lamps from 70-watt to 150-watt luminaries;
- (3) Eliminate approximately 80 kilometres of new highways and primary roads;
- (4) Adjust the street lighting needs of new housing developments; and
- (5) Ensure that high-risk areas are adequately lit.

The aim of the programme was to illuminate every shared community area, highway and major roadway throughout the country so as to improve visibility on our roadways so as to help in the reduction of night time accidents, facilitate traffic flow particularly at nights; promote business activity and positive social interaction and facilitate safety for pedestrians and other citizens.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, 2005 marked T&TEC's 60<sup>th</sup> year in the operation and during that period, the company had installed a total of 66,000 street lamps on the national electricity grid. In comparison, the National Street-lighting Programme delivered 126,032 street lamps throughout Trinidad and Tobago from December 2005—February 2008. This is an achievement that is unprecedented in our country's history. [*Desk thumping*]

The details with respect to the achievements under the National Street Lighting Programme are as follows:

The total number of new street lamps installed was 77,676, the distribution of these lamps by areas is as follows: Central Trinidad, 16,059 new lamps; East Trinidad, 21,286 new lamps; North Trinidad, 10,985 new lamps; South Trinidad, 25,756 new lamps and Tobago, 3,590 new lamps.

The total number of upgraded street lamps was 44,085. The distribution of these lamps by areas is as follows: Central Trinidad, 6,777 upgraded lamps; East Trinidad, 9,613 upgraded lamps; North Trinidad, 10,157; South Trinidad, 14,753 and Tobago, 2,785 upgraded lamps.

The total number of replaced street lamps was 4,271. The distribution of these lamps by areas is as follows: Central Trinidad, 328; East Trinidad, 1,522; North Trinidad, 1,323; South Trinidad, 1,040 and Tobago, 38 replaced lamps.



It is important to note that national parks, basketball courts, recreation grounds and arterial roads in the country's road network were illuminated under the National Street Lighting Programme.

They are as follows: Palmiste National Park, in Palmiste of course; the Leonsen Lewis Play Park in Mon Repos; Delhi Settlement Mon Desir Road Basketball Court in Fyzabad; and the Lucky Street Basketball Court in La Romaine.

Recreation grounds are as follows: the Aranguetz Savannah; Felix Fariah Ground in Arima; the Wiltshire Ground in Barataria; the Carenage Recreation Ground; the New Settlement Ground in Chaguanas; Esmeralda Recreation Ground in Cunupia, the Raghunanan Road Recreation Ground; the Dass Trace Recreation Ground in Enterprise, Chaguanas; the Invaders Recreation Ground in Felicity, La Horquette Road Ground in Glencoe; the Laventille/Success Village Complex, Angostura Street in Laventille; the Pelican Road Extension Recreation Ground in Morvant; the Russel Latapy Ground, also in Morvant; David Williams Recreation Ground in Penal; Scott Road Recreation Ground also in Penal; a portion of the Queen's Park Savannah; Buen Intento Ground in Princes Town; Matilda Recreation Ground, also in Princes Town and the Yolande Pompeii and St. Stephens College Grounds in Princes Town; Skinner's Park Recreation Ground in San Fernando; Soconusco Recreation Ground in Santa Cruz; Eco Park in St. Helena; the Tableland Recreation Ground and the Eddie Hart Ground in Tacarigua; the Tarouba Recreation Ground in Tarouba and the Goodwood Recreation Ground in Tobago.

Among the arterial roads, the M1 and M2 Link Roads, the Gulf View Link Road, the San Fernando Bypass between the Marabella Roundabout and Cross Crossing; the South Trunk Road between Gulf City and Mosquito Creek, the Naparima Mayaro Road, the Siparia/Erin Road; the Southern Main Road between Fullerton and Cedros; the Eastern Main Road between Arima and Valencia; the old and new sections of the Diego Martin Highway; the Churchill Roosevelt Highway from Nestle to Trincity Mall; the Barataria and NP Overpasses on the Beetham Highway and the Priority Bus Route from Tunapuna to Arima.

Other public places and facilities were also illuminated under the National Development Programme.

With respect to the non-functioning street lamps, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission has advised that as at February 29, 2008 out of a total of 126,032 street lamps that made up the stock of new, upgraded and replaced lamps there were 347 or 0.2 per cent non-functioning street lamps. T&TEC has also informed of the two main reasons which generally contribute to non-functioning street lamps.

**2.00 p.m.**

Firstly, as is expected with any manufactured product, the lamps have an expected lifespan. Therefore, it is expected that some of the older lamps which would have been in place long before 2005, would be close to the end of their expected lifespan, after which time the failed lamp would have to be replaced. Secondly, as is the case with any manufactured product again, there were incidences of lamps having defective components which resulted in their shortened lifespan. In such cases, the defects were made good by manufacturers' warranties.

Repairs to street lamps are done by the staff of T&TEC Street Lighting Implementation Unit and by approved contractors. All repairs and/or replacements are expected to be completed within 13 days of the request being made. T&TEC is working assiduously to have this lead time reduced to 10 days. The Government, therefore, continues to work extremely hard to ensure that all our public utilities service the country at the highest possible standard.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**Burns Unit**  
**(Construction of)**

**99. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh** (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the reasons for the non-commencement of the construction of a Burns Unit in Trinidad and Tobago;
- (b) if the Government is still desirous of constructing such a Unit; and
- (c) if the answer to (b) is in the affirmative, what are the plans for such construction, in terms of tendering, starting and completion dates, and construction costs?

**The Minister of Health (Sen. The Hon. Jerry Narace):** Mr. Speaker, in 2004, the South West Regional Health Authority recommended to the Ministry of Health that it would be more feasible to relocate the burns unit to the proposed hospital to be built in Central Trinidad. This specialty area of medical treatment is usually found within a tertiary health care environment where specifically trained clinical staff and medical technology exist.

Other factors include: proximity of location to energy and energy-related industries in the Point Lisas area and an increase in the number of burns patients

which coincide with limited space. However, in the interim, the South-West Regional Health Authority has developed a six-bed burns unit ward at the San Fernando General Hospital which would further develop the technical and administrative functionalities necessary to accommodate the larger burns unit in Central Trinidad.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** A supplemental question, Mr. Speaker. Would the hon. Minister indicate whether he is aware that this burns unit was promised in the Prime Minister's budget statement from as early as 2002, six years ago, and today you are telling us you are still contemplating having a burns unit somewhere in a new hospital in Central Trinidad which is not even on the drawing board, and you have a six-bed unit in San Fernando—[*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Can you answer?

**Sen. The Hon. J. Narace:** Mr. Speaker, there is nothing to answer. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order.

**Dr. Rafeeq:** Mr. Speaker, a supplemental. Can the Minister give us a, sort of, time frame as to when the hospital in Central will be built so that we will know when to expect the burns unit?

**Sen. The Hon. J. Narace:** We are currently conducting the appropriate studies and as soon as the studies are available I will be in a position to answer that question.

**Dr. Rafeeq:** So you are saying, Mr. Minister, that you will be reconstructing in central, a hospital with all the back-up facilities, like the intensive care unit, laboratory services, surgical operations and all of that to support the burns unit?

**Sen. The Hon. J. Narace:** That is the intention, Mr. Speaker.

### **San Fernando General Hospital (Construction of ICU)**

**100. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh** asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the reasons for the non-construction of the Intensive Care Unit at San Fernando General Hospital; and
- (b) what plans now exist for the construction, including starting and completion dates, and construction costs?

**The Minister of Health (Sen. The Hon. Jerry Narace):** Mr. Speaker, hon. Members are advised that there is already a six-bed intensive care unit at the San Fernando General Hospital. However, there are plans to upgrade this unit to an 18-bed unit by developing a critical centre which includes a six-bed intensive care unit, a four-bed high dependency unit, a four-bed pediatric intensive care unit/high dependency unit and a four-bed coronary care unit.

The critical care centre project is in its initial stage where the final architectural engineering drawings are currently being finalized and the tender documents are expected to be completed by the architects, Capita Simmons, on May 31, 2008. This project is being managed by Nipdec on behalf of the Ministry of Health. It is expected that the construction of the new facility will commence during the last quarter of 2008 and barring unforeseen circumstances, the facility should be fully operational by the last quarter of 2010. The estimated construction cost is \$37 million.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Is the hon. Minister aware that this is another promise that was made in the Prime Minister's budget statement in 2002, that he would construct an intensive care unit at San Fernando Hospital?

**Mr. Speaker:** No, that question does not come out of the answer.

**Mr. Ramnath:** They answer questions that are irrelevant to the questions asked, and you allow it.

**Dr. Rafeeq:** Could the Minister tell us with respect to the extension of the intensive care unit at San Fernando Hospital, whether you are training the necessary staff so that when the unit becomes operational you will have the necessary staff?

**Sen. The Hon. J. Narace:** Yes.

### **University of Trinidad and Tobago (Details of Salaries and Allowances Paid)**

**102. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh** asked the hon. Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education:

Could the Minister state the salaries and allowances paid by the University of Trinidad and Tobago to the following categories of staff:

- (a) Pro Vice Chancellor/ Principal;
- (b) Professor;
- (c) Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer;

- (d) Assistant Professor/Lecturer; and
- (e) Tutor?

**The Minister of State in the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Fitzgerald Jeffrey):** Mr. Speaker, there is no post of Pro Vice-Chancellor or Principal in the University of Trinidad and Tobago, neither does the post of tutor form part of the establishment. There is a President whose salary is set at a maximum of 20 per cent above that of the maximum of the range applicable to the post of Provost.

In respect of other categories of staff set out in the question posed, the salary range for the several posts is as follows:

Provost – Head of the Professorships and Chairman of Academic Council	\$40,000 to \$50,000
Full Professors (Titular and Programme)	\$32,000 to \$45,000
Associate Professors	\$25,000 to \$40,000
Assistant Professors	\$22,000 to \$34,000
Senior Instructors	\$18,000 to \$26,000
Instructor	\$15,000 to \$18,000

All of these positions carry allowances ranging from 20 to 40 per cent on the basic salaries as outlined. The monthly allowances for each position are as follows:

<u>Positions</u>	<u>Allowances</u>
Provost	Housing: 20% of basic salary Travelling/Vehicle: \$10,000 or Vehicle fully maintained by UTT Cell Phone: Unlimited Allowance in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Professor	Housing: 20% of basic salary Travelling/Vehicle: \$10,000 or Vehicle fully maintained by UTT

	Cell Phone: \$690 Vat inclusive Allowance in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Associate Professor	Housing: 20% of basic salary Travelling/Vehicle: \$6,000—\$10,000 Cell Phone: \$690 Vat inclusive Allowance in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Assistant Professor	Housing: 20% of basic salary Travelling/Vehicle: \$6,000 Cell phone: \$690 Vat inclusive Allowance in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Senior Instructor	Allowances in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Instructor II	Allowance in lieu of pension: 20% of basic salary
Instructor I	Allowance in lieu of pension: 20 per cent of basic salary.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Mr. Speaker, could the hon. Minister indicate that in total amount, the post of Provost and Professor, amounts to approximately \$80,000 to \$100,000, based on their allowances and salary? [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Hon. F. Jeffrey:** Mr. Speaker, I believe that my good friend from Caroni East, from the figures outlined, would be able to make that calculation himself.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** They are working for more than you, Prime Minister. [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Caribbean Airlines Limited  
(Details of Expenditure)**

**109. Mr. Jack Warner** asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

With regard to Caribbean Airlines Limited, could the hon. Minister of Finance state:

- (a) what was the revenue in its first year of operation;
- (b) what was the expenditure for the same period;

- (c) how did this match the projections for the airline; and
- (d) what was the income earned by Government during the first year of operation of the airline?

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira):** Mr. Speaker, Caribbean Airlines commenced operations on January 01, 2007. It is in the process of completing its annual audit exercise for its first financial year of operations which ended on December 31, 2007. These statements are in an advanced state of preparation but since they are not yet complete it would be inappropriate to quote unaudited figures which may be subject to correction. As soon as the financial statements are available they will be laid in Parliament in the normal manner.

**Mr. Warner:** Mr. Speaker, can the hon. Minister of Finance give this honourable House any indication of when these finances shall be audited?

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, they are at an advanced stage of preparation. As soon as they are ready they will be presented to the Parliament in the usual manner.

### **Caribbean Airlines Limited (Details of Employment)**

**110. Mr. Jack Warner** (*Chaguanas West*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

With regard to Caribbean Airlines Limited, could the hon. Minister state how many foreign companies and foreign individuals are now employed by the airline and at what contracted costs?

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira):** Mr. Speaker, there are numerous foreign companies contracted by Caribbean Airlines Limited to provide a host of airline-specific services and, therefore, it would be impractical to state the number of foreign companies and individuals contracted by the airline.

Further, it would be inappropriate to disclose detailed particulars on the contractual agreements with these foreign entities because in many instances this would involve disclosure of trade secrets. There are two foreign nationals directly employed by the airline in Trinidad and Tobago: the CEO and the director of marketing. There are also three foreign consultants with the airline on a short-term basis to assist in the completion of restructuring works commenced in the period 2006—2007. All individuals are contracted at current commercial rates for their services. It would be inappropriate to disclose details of their contracts with the airline for reasons of privacy. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Mr. Warner:** I feel offended; I feel hurt. But I would like to remind the hon. Minister of Finance again of what I asked. How many foreign companies and how many foreign individuals are now employed at the airline and at what contracted cost. Tell us, then, the CEO, what is the contracted cost for the CEO? [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** As I indicated, it would be inappropriate to disclose details of their contracts with the airline for reasons of privacy.

**Mr. Speaker:** I think what the Member is asking is the number. I do not think he is asking about the details of their contract. Perhaps if you have that information you can pass it on to the Member at a later stage.

**Mr. Ramnath:** You spending taxpayers' money and saying it is a secret? You getting very rude!

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**2.15 p.m.**

**Aerus 40 Blimps/Sky Ships  
(Specifications)**

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

With regard to the Aerus 40 blimps/skyships, could the Minister state:

- (a) whether the specifications were obtained for each prior to the purchase and/or lease;
- (b) if the answer to (a) is negative, why were they not obtained; and
- (c) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, what were the specifications?

**The Minister in the Ministry of National Security (Hon. Donna Cox):** Mr. Speaker, hon. Members are advised that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago purchased one Aerus 40B Sky Dragon air ship. Prior to its purchase senior officials from the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago provided worldwide Aerus Corporation with specific performance criteria which the supplier used to develop a list of specifications which was negotiated with the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago, to ensure that they could fulfil the agency's performance criteria.



Section B is not applicable.

Due to national security considerations, no further information can be provided with respect to the specifications of the air ship.

**Mr. S. Panday:** Mr. Speaker, I will like the Minister to indicate whether after all those specifications were sent to the manufacturers, that the Aerus 40B sky ship was still found unsuitable for our environment?

**Hon. D. Cox:** Mr. Speaker, I believe that the Member should pose that question.

#### EXPIRATION OF QUESTION TIME

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, we have passed the period for question time. One question was listed in the name of the Member for Naparima for which an answer is available. I ask that you pass that to the Clerk for circulation to Members. [*Interruption*] You did not call 91 before. Do you have an answer for 91?

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes.

**Mr. Speaker:** The answers to questions Nos. 73 and 91 would be passed to the Clerk for circulation to Members.

#### WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

*The following question was asked by of Mr. Nizam Baksh (Naparima):*

#### **Barrackpore Regional Complex (Board of Management)**

- 73.** Could the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs state:
- (a) the period/s during which the Board of Management of the Barrackpore Regional Complex was appointed and functioned for the last five years;
  - (b) if he is aware that there is no functional Board at present; and
  - (c) if the answer to (b) is in the affirmative, when the Board will be appointed and become functional?

*Vide end of sitting for written answer.*

**National Social Development Programme  
Penal/Debe**

*The following question was asked by Dr. Roodal Moonilal (Oropouche East):*

- 91.** With respect to the National Social Development Programme, could the hon. Minister of Public Utilities state:
- (a) The number and type of projects undertaken in the Penal/Debe area between January 01 2006 and December 31 2007;
  - (b) The total expenditure on each of these projects;
  - (c) The names of all contractors employed to undertake these said projects in the Penal/Debe area;
  - (d) The status of these projects; and
  - (e) What new projects are being proposed in the Penal/Debe area and when are they scheduled to commence?

*Vide end of sitting for written answer.*

**DEFINITE URGENT MATTERS**

(LEAVE)

**Escalating Murder Rate  
(Inability of Government to Control)**

**Mr. Subhas Panday** (*Princes Town North*): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 12 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the Adjournment of this honourable House for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance namely, the incompetence and inability of the Government to reduce and/or control the escalating murder rate in Trinidad and Tobago, despite the large sums of money allotted to solving crime.

The matter is definite because it pertains to a specific matter, namely the murder of over six persons during the last 24 hours including—

Mr. Speaker, I humbly seek your leave to amend. It is over seven now. From the time of writing to the time of reading, it has gone to seven persons including a state witness who was supposed to testify in a murder enquiry today.

The matter is urgent because the recent state of murders has not only traumatized the citizenry, but also undermines severely the criminal justice system and the administration of justice.

*Definite Urgent Matters (Leave)*

*Friday, May 02, 2008*

The matter is of public importance because of the increase in crimes, in particular, murder which causes distress on the society.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, this matter does not qualify under this Standing Order. Let me refer Members to the Standing Order which says that you can ask an urgent question. Make use of it.

**North Central Regional Health Authority  
(Inability to Provide Adequate Health Care)**

**Dr. Tim Gopeesingh** (*Caroni East*): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 12 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the Adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the inability of the North Central Regional Health Authority to provide adequate and necessary health care to patients requiring emergency and acute treatment, within the last few months and particularly, this week.

The matter is definite as it pertains to a specific matter, namely the absence of nursing staff; unacceptable working and seriously deteriorating conditions for health care professionals and lack of security at the institution.

The matter is urgent because thousands of poor patients are unable to receive care as a result of the inability of the Regional Health Authority to provide the immediate short and medium-term comforting and satisfactory resolution and amelioration to these urgent, life-threatening and disastrous medical problems.

The matter is of public importance because adult public patients are unable to access urgent care on a reliable basis at the priority care centre of the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex.

**Mr. Speaker:** Again, this matter does not qualify under this particular Standing Order. It will qualify under Standing Order 11. Look at the Standing Order that relates to an urgent question.

**Collapse of Multi-million Dollar Projects  
(Failure of Government to Resolve Issues)**

**Mr. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC** (*Tabaquite*): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 12 of the House of Representatives, 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 current reported threat to the collapse of several multi-million dollar public projects currently being managed by UDeCott and the failure of the Government to take adequate steps to resolve the related issues.

The matter is definite as it pertains specifically to the portfolio of projects for public work currently being implemented by the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, (UDeCott).

The matter is urgent because it involves the absence of project management; project planning and the lack of approval on the part of UDeCott in regard to the projects within its portfolio.

The matter is of public importance because positive action is required on the part of the Government as it involves the expenditure of billions of taxpayers' dollars by UDeCott.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, again, this matter does not qualify under this Standing Order. It is eminently suited to be raised under Standing Order 24(2).

**CHILDREN'S AUTHORITY (AMDT.) BILL**

Bill to amend the Children's Authority Act, 2001 [*The Minister of Social Development*]; read the first time.

**CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY RESIDENCES, FOSTER HOMES AND NURSERIES  
(AMDT.) BILL**

Bill to amend the Children's Community Residences, Foster Homes and Nurseries Act, 2000 [*The Minister of Social Development*]; read the first time.

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

[Third Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question* [January 22, 2008]:

*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. H. Partap*]

*Question again proposed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** On the last occasion, that is on Friday, February 22, 2008, the hon. Member for Caroni East, Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, was on his legs. He has 20 minutes left of extended time.

**Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** (*Caroni East*): Mr. Speaker, I had planned to come here today and complete my contribution on the debate on the Motion on food prices and the suffering of people of this country that was raised by my colleague. A ridiculous clueless statement by the invisible Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, Arnold Piggott, has caused the citizens of this country huge consternation and distress. Recently, I saw on television that people seem not to be able to recognize this Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources. They do not know who he is, so you could imagine the public when they saw him appear out of nowhere that week and announced that there was no food crisis. Imagine the shock and disgust of the people of this country because the Houdini of this Government appears from out nowhere to tell them that the months of suffering under the increasing food prices is not due to a food crisis. How stupid and clueless can this Minister and the Government be. Sorry. How clueless can this Government be on this issue.

**Mr. Ramnath:** “Like we on Sunday school here or what?”

**Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** I always say that PNM Ministers try to outdo each other by their ignorance. The more they speak the more they seem to portray ignorance and prove the population the right. To show who the clueless person is in charge of this Government, the Prime Minister came out a day after the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources spoke and said that there is a food shortage, not a food crisis. One said there is a food crisis and the next day, the Prime Minister said that there is a food shortage, not a food crisis. Get your act together! You are the Prime Minister. If the Minister of Agriculture said that there is no food crisis and you said that there is a food shortage, what do you mean?

The people are unable to get the food that they need and they cannot buy food and they are starving. It is nonsense like this that makes people throughout the country have no faith in this Government at this moment. More than 700,000 people did not vote for this Government. They are telling this Government that they do not want them anymore. More than 350,000 persons voted against this Government. This is the type of bilge that is spewing out of this Government on a day-to-day basis.

Hon. Prime Minister, do like former minister, Dr. Rowley, and tell the truth. Even though you know the facts for a long time, you know that there has been a food shortage and what did you do about it? No food crisis, when two days ago the United Nations held a news conference in Geneva to announce the intention to have a comprehensive plan by the beginning of June to tackle the global food crisis. We are a member of the nationals of the world. The world is having a food

crisis. Are we not in the food crisis? The Prime Minister says that there is a food shortage, not a food crisis. The United Nations said that there is a global food crisis, but this Prime Minister and the PNM Government says food shortage, not crisis.

The United Nations is looking for \$755 million in emergency funds which it needs to feed millions of hungry people worldwide. Perhaps, the hon. Prime Minister and the Government could lend that money to the United Nations because the money is coming out of the Treasury. This Government is plundering and emptying the coffers of the Treasury by billions of dollars in corruption in almost all sectors of infrastructural development in this country. Imagine one person, Calder Hart, is responsible for these projects listed on the 2005 annual report. This is the last report that UDeCott has. There are almost 34 projects under this person and a board with three or four persons on it. The former minister behind said that there is corruption in UDeCott.

**Mr. Speaker:** We are dealing with food crisis.

**Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** What I am saying, Mr. Speaker, is that the money is being spent and squandered on 34 projects under whose integrity is questionable and people are starving. They do not have money to purchase food. The Government is squandering the money. There is no procurement process in any of these areas.

Trinidad and Tobago has been awakened by the massive corruption in all these projects particularly under UDeCott. A sum of almost \$20 billion is spent by one person. We have been calling for a public commission of enquiry into all these infrastructural developments under UDeCott so that people can get some money to buy food.

**2.30 p.m.**

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, Standing Order 43(1). The Member has been spoken to by the Speaker and is now engaging in tedious repetition. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** First of all, let me deal with—[*Interruption*] Order! Order! I will address, firstly, comments to the hon. Member for Couva South. If you continue to disturb this House, I will ask you to withdraw.

**Mr. Ramnath:** I am withdrawing.

**Mr. Speaker:** Very good.

**Mr. Ramnath:** I am not going to tolerate all this nonsense in this place. You think I am some kind of PNM stooge? [*Leaves the Chamber*]

**Mr. Speaker:** I hear you, but on this occasion the Member has made his point and is about to move on.

**Dr. T. Gopeesingh:** Mr. Speaker, it was the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, who warned at a news conference that without full funding of emergency requirements, the world risks the spectre of widespread hunger, malnutrition and social unrest on an unprecedented scale. We run the risk here as well. The same situation is occurring in countries around the world, but this Government says that there is no food crisis. Throughout the world people are dying in protests and riots over high food prices, but this Government says there is no food crisis.

Ban Ki Moon says that if this is not managed properly, the global food prices could touch off a cascade of related crises affecting trade, economic growth, social progress and even political security. The Prime Minister must understand that even his own political security is under threat and has been for a long while. He must understand that he has to do something about the food crisis situation in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Not even the PNM supporters are comfortable with what is happening. They feel unsafe with this vicious Government.

I want the Government and the Prime Minister to provide real statistics to prove to this country that there is no food crisis. Where are the statistics from the Government? Just last week, the Central Bank released the latest inflation rates. Guess what? Inflation moved to 9.8 per cent again. Remember the Government said that inflation would be 7 per cent by this year? It has moved from 9.4 per cent to 9.8 per cent. It is coming nearer to double-digit figures once more and the Central Bank said it is due to high food prices.

It is interesting that the Central Bank information comes from the Central Statistical Office (CSO). I alert the House and the country that the situation may be more serious than what the Central Bank is saying. I will explain why. The CSO does not give up-to-date information on anything in this country. My information is that it is understaffed, under-resourced and lacks the manpower and technology to give accurate statistics on any sector in this country.

When I went to their website, the backwardness of the CSO was appalling. On their website, [www.cso.gov.tt](http://www.cso.gov.tt)—I invite all Members opposite to open their laptops—Mr. Speaker, you are giving them permission—and log on to the site. The most recent reports date back to 2004 for agriculture. For four years the CSO has not published any figures on agriculture. In some cases, reports from 1997 are the most recent ones available.

Here are some details from the website:

Agricultural statistics, 2004;

Most recent date economic statistics, Index of Retail Prices, February 2007, 18 months ago.

How can we determine what is happening as far as food is concerned when these things are outdated?

Agricultural report: latest available annually, 2001;

Food crop bulletin: semi-annually, available 2001;

Pig bulletin available quarterly, 2005;

Poultry bulletin, bimonthly, March 2005;

Population, Social and Vital Statistics: births, deaths, marriages, divorces; latest available 1999, nine years ago;

Crime: number of serious crimes by cases reported, cases detected, persons arrested and persons convicted, 1999;

National Income of Trinidad and Tobago, 1995—2001;

Index of Producers Prices, 2006, two years ago;

The country obviously does not know what is happening with food. When they quote statistics, the Prime Minister knows the facts but tries to fool the population in terms of the statistics. That is statistical conmanship by the Prime Minister about the real situation with food.

I say that when the Central Bank releases its frightening figures on inflation and food prices and gets the figures from the CSO, what is even worse and scarier is that the statistics are outdated because the CSO remains backward.

Hon. Prime Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker, in reality the statistics could be much higher, which is why I am calling on the Government to provide the true statistics on food prices. If they cannot do that by next week, they should tell the country why the CSO is not working because the situation is much worse and the country is being denied the true knowledge of what is going on. That is frightening. People know what is happening, but the Prime Minister and the Government are trying to fool the population.



I call on the Prime Minister to give the assurance that the figures from the CSO and the Central Bank are true and then provide the proof of it or tell us the truth because they are hiding information from the population. They are starving us of vital information and food, which reflects the sad state of our country today.

On that topic, Mr. Speaker, when will the Government announce real measures to combat food prices? We hear the rehashing of old plans budget after budget from 2002—2007/2008, with no implementation. They give thousands of promises and are unable to implement any. Other countries have taken tangible steps and measures to fight food prices. What has the Trinidad and Tobago Government done? When will this incompetent Government do the same to check food prices?

Here are some measures that have been put in place around the world. India is reported to have raised its export prices to cool food inflation? The one I like most is that Cameroon has cut official costs to fund food prices help. They have suspended the purchase of government vehicles and cut official travel abroad to fund the public sector wage increase aimed at contouring food prices. Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni said in a statement that he had ordered a reduction in the number of government missions abroad as well as the size of delegations.

Mr. Speaker, all the Prime Minister has to do is to cut out the \$1.2 billion corruption in the EMBD by Uthara Rao; cut out the \$1.2 billion corruption in UTT by Ken Julien; the \$500 million corruption in ETecK; the \$1.5 billion in BWIA; the \$1 billion wastage in BWIA; the \$1.2 billion in CEPEP; the \$1 billion in the Brian Lara Stadium; the \$300 million corruption in the Scarborough Hospital; the \$600 million in the National Performing Arts and the billions of dollars in the Special Purpose State Enterprises without any procurement regime; more than \$22 billion spent in corrupt practices in the infrastructure development processes in this country.

All the Prime Minister has to do is to correct that and make sure money is available to subsidize poor people. What has he done? Nothing! They do not know about priorities. It is all about improper government by them. They truly lack the competence and capability of governing this country. The majority of people are saying now that the Government ought to go. They are asking us on a daily basis what we are doing to make the Government fall. This Government will fall on its own because the people do not want them. The people say they are starving; crime is at its worst; medical care is at its worst; the education system is falling, and this is the Government that wants to continue.

Collectively, they have to tell the Prime —do not be afraid. Former Minister Rowley told him that there is corruption in UDeCott; to get the money out and

free the people. You must tell the Prime Minister that you are not sitting in a Cabinet when there is \$22 billion in corruption in this country. You cannot preside over that. You would be as guilty as anyone in corruption. You know these things are happening. They know they can get the money to feed the people. Former Minister Rowley told them that he is not going to be part of the corruption in UDeCott and he put his political career on the lifeline to disprove him because he knows there is corruption in UDeCott.

Mr. Speaker, why, when the Government had warning after warning about the rising food prices that would affect the world, they did nothing to counter it? Just remember all the economic experts around the world were saying that social chaos would result when increasing food prices would engender poverty.

In his recent book, *The End of Poverty*, world renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs noted what differentiates those countries that escape the poverty trap from those who remain in food productivity. He further noted that the biggest difference between Africa and Asia is that Asia has had high and rising food production per capita in the past decades.

Mr. Speaker, drastic times call for drastic measures. I want the Prime Minister to remember that when the peasants of France could not afford bread, like the Patrick Manning regime, Queen Marie Antoinette ignored their cries and said with contempt: "Let them eat cake." The Manning regime is doing the same; telling people to eat cassava and "blue food". I want the hon. Prime Minister to know that the queen lost her head in the French Revolution. The country is watching, waiting and losing patience. Be warned, Mr. Prime Minister, that local government elections are coming. Look at how Gordon Brown lost. The people have revolted against him. The clock is ticking on him. His time is coming.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira):** Mr. Speaker, on the Motion brought by the other side, the Opposition has made allegations of the Government's failure to contain food prices, but it is critical to put this debate into context and into perspective. I refer specifically to the contribution, on January 25, 2008, of the hon. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. I quote:

"High food prices is not a partisan issue; not a poor people issue; it is a national issue..."

We agree with that. It is a national issue. But what he neglected to mention, perhaps he forgot, is that it is an international issue. The point, therefore, is that containing food prices is not by any means unique to Trinidad and Tobago. It is

global in its scope and its causes are exogenous, that is independent of Trinidad and Tobago. In other words, the factors responsible for the current situation with regard to food prices are factors that are not of Trinidad and Tobago's making.

### 2.45 p.m.

In support of what I have said, I heard the Member for Caroni East quotation and I would like to join him in quoting, perhaps, from a different point of view, *The Economist* of December 2007, in an article entitled: "The End of Cheap Food", had this to say:

"For as long as most people can remember, food has been getting cheaper and farming has been in decline. In 1974—2005 food prices on world markets fell by three-quarters in real terms."

That is why this year's price rise has been so extraordinary.

"Since the spring, wheat prices have doubled and almost every crop under the sun—maize, milk, oilseeds, you name it—is at or near a peak in nominal terms. *The Economist's* food-price index is higher today than at any time since it was created in 1845...Even in real terms, prices have jumped by 75 per cent since 2005. No doubt farmers will meet higher prices with investment and more production, but dearer food is likely to persist for years."

The article goes on to give some of the reasons and causes which I have indicated are causes that are exogenous to, independent of Trinidad and Tobago.

One of the reasons given is the growing wealth of emerging economies. They gave the example of China and India, where there has been great demand and consumption of beef and meat, but biofuels have added to that discussion.

On a point of interest on that, this year biofuels would take one-third of America's maize harvest. That affects food markets directly. Fill up an SUV fuel tank with ethanol and you have used enough maize to feed a person for a year.

That is not only *The Economist*. In the *Express* article entitled, coincidentally, "The End of Cheap Food" was written in July 2007 by Gwynne Dyer who stated:

"The era of cheap food is over. The price of corn has doubled in a year, and wheat futures are at their highest in a decade. The food price Index in India has risen 11 per cent in one year, and in Mexico in January there were riots after the price of corn flour...went up fourfold..."

Cheap food lasted for only 50 years. Before the Second World War most families in the developed countries spent a third or more of their income on food..."

After the war, with raised agricultural productivity, et cetera, those prices fell. It continues:

“For the global middle class, it was the Good Old Days, with food taking a tenth of their income.”

The article goes on to state the point that I am making, that the question of food prices is not an issue simply for Trinidad and Tobago. It is not of Trinidad and Tobago’s making. That is something I know that the other side—*[Interruption]* I know you will listen and learn. I am happy to educate you if you listen. I would get to that point in due course. The point I am making is that the question of high food price is not something peculiar to Trinidad and Tobago.

Just recently, again, the President of the United States of America, I think it was last Monday, when he was talking to the American people about the state of the economy and the stresses of that economy said:

“The money...”

They gave a rebate to the people of the United States, because unlike Trinidad and Tobago, the United States is dealing with a credit crunch from a lack of consumer confidence and slowing growth. In fact they only registered 0.60 per cent growth in the last quarter. America is experiencing difficult times and a credit crunch. One of the things that the Federal Government has done, in order to stimulate the economy, is that it has made an injection of over \$400 billion into the economy. He was talking about that. This is what he had to say about that money.

“The money is going to help Americans offset the high prices we are seeing at the gas pump, the grocery store, and also give our economy a boost to help us pull out of this economic slowdown...”

The story is the same whether it is India, Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, Japan or the United States, the problem is the same. The difficulty is the same.

In fact, recently—I turn from the spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund—among the three topics that were high on the agenda were food, fuel and finance. I am going to contain my comments to the issue of food. What came out of that meeting was that every single country—there was not a country that was not concerned about the higher food prices—talked about the usual things that we already know that were the reasons for the impact on higher food prices, biofuels, climate change, emerging economies and the consumption coming from those economies. The point is that it is for some countries.

I heard the Member for Caroni East speak about a food crisis. There is a food crisis for some countries, not for Trinidad and Tobago. The reason I can say that is that in some countries the issue of food prices has reached the issue of even starvation.

In fact, in the IMF report, speaking about the millennium development goals, some of the countries in Africa which, surprisingly have registered over 7 per cent annual growth over the last five years—they are saying that those countries, particularly the Sub-Saharan region, are in a situation where they are in danger of having their developmental thrust being set back by as much as seven years; what they call seven lost years. That is the situation for some of the countries in this world, not Trinidad and Tobago.

When the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Marine Resources spoke about Trinidad and Tobago not having a food crisis, he is correct. There is a crisis for some countries. A crisis is an emergency situation. That is not the case for Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And he knows that well.

For example, just as a point of interest, when we speak of the issue of food prices—I gave a quotation from the President of the United States of America—last Monday he made that statement—I spoke about the International Monetary Fund. The Central Bank recently did a survey and compared a like basket of food with that in Barbados and the outcome of that is that the cost of that same basket of food is one-third higher than in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Interruption*] It was one-third higher than in Trinidad and Tobago. When we talk about what the Government is doing about food prices, we have to start from the point of view that it is a global phenomenon. It does not matter what country you go to, you would find yourself with the same difficulty.

Contrary to what the Member for Caroni East has been saying—I join with the Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Marine Resources on this point—the issue of food prices in Trinidad and Tobago is not a crisis, it is an issue of a standard of living. What that means is the extent to which the increased food prices impact on one's standard of living. Because the more you have to spend on food, clearly, the less you have to spend on other items of expenditure.

In determining what a household spends, the monthly budget for a household, we looked at the consumer price index. I heard the Member for Caroni East speak on that. The consumer price index is the index that is used for determining inflation. But more importantly, it is the index that is used to determine what constitutes or comprises the monthly budget items for the average household. The index that is used does not represent a sector in Trinidad and Tobago, the wealthy,

the poor, or the middle class. I am reading from the report. The index represents the whole of Trinidad and Tobago.

Secondly, it represents all income groups. The revised index of retail prices will cover all income groups. I am reading from the report:

“...thereby ensuring that the index measures inflation for Trinidad and Tobago and not a subset of its population.”

The point I am making in that regard is that the consumer price index/retail price index is the index that is used to determine, among other things, inflation. It is representative of all incomes in Trinidad and Tobago.

When we look at that index, we look at what that index comprises. But before we look at exactly what that index comprises in particular, I would go through the items, generally speaking, the items comprise: food; meals; drink and tobacco; clothing and footwear; housing; health and personal care; transport; communication; recreation and culture; and education. Those are the items that you will find in a monthly budget of the average household in Trinidad and Tobago. What is instructive on that point and is very telling is—there is a correlation between what I am going to say in relation to developmental thrust—is the percentage of the household budget that is allocated to food. As I have indicated, the more that you have to spend on food, less that you have to spend on other things such as transport, health, education and recreation and it is used as a measure of development.

For Trinidad and Tobago, it is 18 per cent. But for you to appreciate what that means and put it again, in a context that I like to put these things in, we have to look at other countries. The other countries that I wish to refer to are what we call developed countries. We would look at others that are developing. For example, in the United States, the percentage of food represented in that basket is 14.9/15; the United Kingdom, 10.9/11 per cent; Canada, 17; India, 46; St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 54; and Trinidad and Tobago, 18.

**Mr. Imbert:** “Yuh making skylark.”

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** No, I am not making “skylark.” “Yuh know I doh skylark.” With respect to the percentage that the food represents in our household budget, there is a correlation with that and a correlation with where we have reached in our developmental position.

One would wonder why it is Trinidad and Tobago can reach the point where our food prices, as a part of your household expenditure, can be 18 per cent, so closely aligned to the developed countries like Canada and the United States. The reason is clearly, the strength of our economy.

I want to mention some of the macroeconomic indicators. I do not get tired of speaking of them. I know that the other side does not like to hear it, but I never get tired of speaking of it. With respect to the foreign exchange reserves—we have 11 months of import cover; over \$7 billion in foreign exchange reserves. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Prime Minister, you were reading my mind? I was just about to go to unemployment. In fact, two days ago, at the TIC Conference, do you know what the unemployment rate was at the end of the last quarter? It was 4.5 per cent— [*Interruption*] Sorry, Mr. Prime Minister. That was the lowest in the history of this country, ever. [*Desk thumping*]

The poverty index—I speak specifically of what the poverty index was in the 1990s. It was over 35 per cent; today, it is 16.7 per cent. I can go on and on speaking about the excellent macroeconomic indicators for Trinidad and Tobago.

### **3.00 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, I want to bring it more directly to the man in the street and to his budget. As you noted, when I started talking about the consumer price index, I started talking about that budget. What is an average household budget? I talked about food, education, health and transportation. I may not have mentioned public utilities but, certainly, that does factor into the picture. Why do I mention those? This is particularly noteworthy after 2003, because a number of things happened and continue to happen.

With regard to public utilities, water and electricity rates in Trinidad and Tobago are among the lowest, not in the region, but in the world. [*Desk thumping*] And if we have any doubt—you know, I like to get my data together—I am going to give you some comparisons. I always like to look at developed nations, because there is where we are going, developed nation status by 2020; First World. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I am going to look at water pricing, USD per cubic metre: Germany, \$1.91; France, \$1.23; United Kingdom, \$1.18; Ireland, 63 cents; United States of America, 51 cents; and Trinidad and Tobago, 21 cents. [*Desk thumping*] I do not mind sharing this information, because what it would tell you—I did not read out all—is that Trinidad and Tobago has the lowest rates. That goes for water.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to electricity rates, again, let us do some comparisons. This is in US cents per kilowatt. If you look at Barbados—I am only looking at residential figures. I have figures for commercial and industrial, but I am going to focus on residential rates, because we are looking at budget per household—it is 20.41 cents; Bolivia, 6.80 cents; Brazil, 9 cents; Colombia, 7.67 cents; Guyana, 5.88 cents; Grenada, 22.14 cents and Suriname, 17.8 cents. Do

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you want to know what the figure for Trinidad and Tobago is? It is 2.82 cents. [Desk thumping] I want to round it off, so I am putting it to three 3 cents. Mr. Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, water and electricity are amongst the lowest in the world, and there is no question why that has happened.

Mr. Speaker, we can also talk about gas for the transportation fuel. We all watch television and international news, and we are all familiar with the cost of transportation fuel in the United States of America and, very recently, we know what the prices are like. So, when we look at transportation fuel, electricity cost and the cost of water, we have to ask ourselves: how come Trinidad and Tobago can do that? It is not only because we have an energy economy, but it is because this Government fuel subsidy is to the amount of \$1.8 billion. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Speaker, if you wonder why in the average household, we do not have to talk about a crisis in Trinidad and Tobago—I heard on the last debate on the Caribbean Court of Justice (Headquarters) Bill, the hon. Member for Siparia was talking about revenue foregone, in the context of an international court. I know the hon. Member is an attorney-at-law herself and was an Attorney General, and she very well knows that with respect to international organizations and international courts, it is the practice and the norm to exempt them from the payment of income tax. That is the norm. The Member talked about revenue foregone, but I want to talk about revenue foregone in the context of income tax. Mr. Speaker, this Government, the caring and compassionate Government that it is, has forgone income tax for any person earning an income of less than \$60,000 a year. [Desk thumping] That is revenue foregone. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Speaker, the story does not end there with water, electricity and transportation fuel, but the story goes on with the non-cash benefits. I mentioned them, because they are relevant to that household budget. This caring Government, particularly since 2003, has ramped up its non-cash benefits to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We are all familiar with them, but they are worth repeating: nursery to tertiary, free education—as I indicated, not even the United States of America can boast about—free textbooks; free transportation for our school children; balanced meals—I am looking for the Member for Fyzabad—breakfast and lunches for our school children and housing. We did not build 461 houses. In the last term of office we built 26,000 houses, and we are going to be delivering another 20,000 in the next three years. [Desk thumping] That is performance and not “ol’ talk”!

We have CDAP; free drugs for a variety of ailments. I personally know of persons who are the recipients of the CDAP programme. [Interruption] Someone in the back here is saying to me even her mother, but I know many persons who are recipients of CDAP.



Mr. Speaker, I have spoken about water rates, electricity rates, income tax and non-tax benefits because they are directly related to the budget of the average household in Trinidad and Tobago. Those very items that I spoke about form part of the average household budget.

What is interesting—I did some adding up—is that when I looked at the household budget before 2003 under the heading: recreation, education and reading, there was an item for drink and tobacco. What has happened since 2003 is that recreation and culture have been given its own subset, and the population of Trinidad and Tobago spent in the allocation of their monthly budget 8.5 per cent toward recreation and culture.

With respect to hotels, cafes and restaurants, 3 per cent; alcohol, beverages and tobacco, 2.5 per cent, which is a total of 14 per cent. The reason I have pulled out those specific numbers is that those items referred to the special spending. Mr. Speaker, no country that is experiencing a food crisis can speak about spending money on culture, going to hotels, recreation, cafes and restaurants if they cannot feed themselves.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Minister, would you give way?

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Yes.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Those statistics that you are quoting, would you be kind enough to tell us the source, and whether there is any direct relation with the Central Statistical Office? Are these statistics related to the CSO's data?

**Dr. Moonilal:** When was the last time you cook?

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Mr. Speaker, perhaps, my friend, the Member for Caroni East, was not paying attention to me. I said that those figures were taken from a composition of Trinidad and Tobago's retail price index after 2003, and they came from the Central Statistical Office. It was no magic. I said that it was after 2003. I do not know if you know that 2008 is after 2003, but the last time I checked it was. [*Laughter*] What I do know is that after 2003, all of these things that I spoke about—water, electricity, income tax, CDAP, nursery to tertiary, free textbooks, free transportation and free meals and housing—have come and they are a part of this Government's commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

In fact, I heard the hon. Member for Caroni East—I am going to agree on this—said that in the context of dealing with inflation, to a large extent, the inflation that we are experiencing in Trinidad and Tobago is being driven by food inflation. As I would remind the other side and the national community, food prices are exogenous to a large extent and independent of Trinidad and Tobago.

We can say that because it would not be on the front page of every newspaper, magazine and on the television and on the radio that the entire world is talking about it. If the entire world is talking about it, this means that if you go to any other country in this world you are going to be confronted with the same issue that Trinidad and Tobago is being confronted with, which is higher food prices. So, when we talk about inflation, there is a correlation between food prices and inflation. For Trinidad and Tobago, perhaps, we can say too much of a good thing.

This morning I had to speak at a conference, and the issue was dealing with the sub-prime mortgage crisis and its impact on the economies of the Caribbean, in particular, Trinidad and Tobago. What was very telling is when one looks at the United States of America and what they are grappling with, it is almost the exact opposite of our situation. They are dealing with a lack of consumer confidence—in fact, the President of the United States of America spoke about that—they are dealing with a lack of consumer confidence; and a tight credit crunch, because people are not spending. That is why the federal reserve rate had to go down to 2 per cent. I think it was dropped two days ago, and they expect it to go down shortly to another 1 per cent. So, the United States of America is dealing with serious issues with regard to consumer confidence and a tight economy. There is no liquidity in the economy. However, Trinidad and Tobago has the opposite story to tell.

In fact, one of the issues that we are confronted with is bank credit expansion at the annual rate of 22 per cent. Credit card expansion over the last year grew by 35 per cent and we also have food inflation. There is no question that food inflation is an issue.

In fact, in the last publication of *The Economist*, it talked about "The silent tsunami" and it says:

"Today's pictures are different. 'This is a silent tsunami,' says Josette Sheeran of the World Food Programme, a United Nations agency. A wave of food-price inflation..."

It is not Trinidad and Tobago, but it is the entire world.

"is moving through the world...For the first time in 30 years, food protests are erupting in many places at once. Bangladesh is in turmoil...even China is worried..."

In fact, when you read the media releases coming out of the Central Bank, and all other media releases in recent times, the one recurring theme with regard to the issue of inflation is food inflation. I speak to the last release dated April 25, 2008 and it says:

"This up-tick in the rate was led by food prices which rose on a year-on-year basis to March by 19.7 per cent from 18.8 per cent in the previous month."

What were the main contributors? The main contributors were bread and cereals, fish, oils and fats.

Again, the media release in March says:

“...The main driver of headline inflation, increased on a year-on-year basis in February by 18.8 per cent...”

Again, the reasons are strong increases in milk, cheese, eggs, bread and cereals. Mr. Speaker, I can go on with several examples, but each media release coming out of the Central Bank repeats the same theme, and that is food inflation.

So, what are we doing? I want to put it on the table, because it has to be clearly understood that when people talk about food prices and the rise in food prices, as if this is something that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is responsible for, that is not so. That is absolutely not so. That is an issue of a global scope.

This Government has proven through its track record that it can confront this issue, and put measures in place to contain food prices. I can say that with confidence. The reason I can say that with confidence is because of this Government's proven track record. This is a Government of vision; this is a Government of foresight; and this is a Government of compassion. [*Desk thumping*]

### **3.15 p.m.**

On that note, I really want to start with our energy sector. You know if you listen to people talk about the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago, you would get the impression that it is like manna from heaven; luck and chance; it just happened; nothing could be further from the truth. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, our economy is an energy-based economy, but it is more gas-based than oil-based. That was because of a deliberate decision, a deliberate policy of successive PNM governments.

I want to start with the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. [*Interruption*] I do not know if the other side can boast of any—oh, yes, the airport, I forgot—other complex or any contribution.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Minister, just let me warn you to be careful you are not opening this debate wider than it ought to be opened, and if you are talking about Point Lisas, make sure it is related to the Motion before us.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and it is related, because the point I am making to the other side and rightly so, the Motion has asked what is the Government doing to contain food prices. It is important to show the national community and by extension, the other side, that this Government has a

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proven track record, and when we are confronted with issues and challenges, we overcome them. The best way to demonstrate that is to show the track record. When I speak about the energy sector it is only to explain and to illustrate the competence of this PNM Government, successive governments, to inspire the national community because we do not want any hysteria; we do not want any alarmist approach. We want to tell the national community that this is a Government that has a proven track record; this is a Government that has shown itself capable and competent in successive PNM administrations.

When I speak of the energy industry and Point Lisas Industrial Estate, we know that in 1968, that was when the first gas deposits were discovered. In 1972, the then Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams decided to monetize and commercialize the gas flares and convert them into ammonia and methanol. For those of us who do not know, Trinidad and Tobago is the largest exporter of ammonia and methanol in the world. [*Desk thumping*]

We did not stop there, because we have a proven track record. Under the stewardship and leadership of Mr. Patrick Manning in the 1990s, a decision was made to commercialize and monetize the gas into LNG. The first Atlantic based LNG plant in 25 years was located in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, 70 per cent of the United States LNG requirements come out of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And I can go on with many other examples, the manufacturing sector, when we removed restrictions; the balance float of the dollar.

**Mr. Speaker:** Order, please!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** The point is this, we have done it before and we will do it again. [*Desk thumping*]

The measures—what measures are we taking to deal with the issue of food prices? Well, at one end, we looked at—as I indicated and it is accepted that the food prices are connected with the issue of inflation—the demand side of inflation and the measures that we are taking to dampen that liquidity and at the same time address the issue of food prices. We know that in a very broad sense we have taken a number of initiatives, open-market operations and financial literacy programmes, in conjunction with the Central Bank.

In relation to food, in particular, I believe that the hon. Minister of Legal Affairs has spoken to this on several occasions, but I just want to mention some of the initiatives that have been mentioned. One of them, in consumer measures, removal of VAT and CET. From 2002 and continuing over the years, this Government has been removing VAT from food items. In particular, 29 basic food items and those items are

zero-rated and they include bread, flour, rice, sugar, milk, cheese, soya bean, oil and pasta. You know what that is a case of, Member for Siparia? Revenue foregone. That is a good case of revenue foregone. We have foregone the VAT revenue for a good cause because we, on this side, are a compassionate government. [*Desk thumping*]

That is not where we have stopped, not only on the removal of VAT; the debit card. In 2006, this Government launched a debit card, now known as the TtCard Programme. This programme provides social protection by promoting nutrition and food security to vulnerable households, by allowing the recipients to receive monthly cash credits towards their grocery purchases. Thereby, not only enhancing the security and dignity of these households—

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Madam Minister, I heard you quoting that you have removed duties and VAT on a number of food items, but the real statistics show that between 2003—2006, the Government charged over \$900 million on import duties on food items. Would you be kind enough to indicate to this House and to the country, whether you intend to remove this approximate \$300 million per year of import duty on food items?

**Mr. Imbert:** “He talking about champagne.”

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** That may be so, it might be champagne. Mr. Speaker, in order to respond to that question, it will be important, relevant and appropriate to see the items to which the hon. Member is speaking. What I can tell you is the items we have removed the VAT from are the basic food items. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, I did not intend to give the statistics, but you know I like to give my statistics; I want to start with the flour. I was speaking—I would not call the person's name, but she said to me the other day, when I went to the TIC convention, “You know I have a brother living in Canada”—he is a baker, and when she rang her brother in Canada he said to her that flour is more expensive than it is in Trinidad—that is Canada. We do not produce wheat like in Canada and if one has any doubt about that, let us look at the comparison—[*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:**—in US dollars per kilogramme on the issue of flour. The United Kingdom, \$1.21; United States of America, \$1.41—[*Interruption*] that is true—Canada, \$1.56.

**Hon. Member:** What weight?

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** US dollar per kilogramme. Grenada, \$1.00; Barbados, \$1.24; Trinidad and Tobago, 76 cents. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Speaker, as I continue with the debit card, we target those who are the most vulnerable in our society and over 22,000 persons are benefiting from this programme, which is being supported by 150 supermarkets across the country. In addition to those measures, the Government has established the Farmers' Market and there are five locations put in place by NAMDEVCO. The most recently launched in conjunction with the Point Fortin Borough Corporation and the Ministry of Agriculture is in Point Fortin.

In addition to Point Fortin, other markets were launched last year: Debe, Macoya, Diego Martin and Valencia. The intention of the Farmers' Market is this: to bring the farmer and the ultimate consumer together so that they can barter the price. The farmers then get a higher price for their produce, while the consumers are called upon to pay a lower price than would normally be the case, to the mutual benefit of both farmer and consumer; cutting out the middleman.

Then we have Consumer Awareness and what we call comparison shopping. The Ministry of Legal Affairs publishes the weekly poultry prices; weekly food and vegetable prices and weekly publications of selected food items. The point on that, it allows the consumer to comparison shop. In fact, the Central Bank, in its monthly media releases has alluded to this phenomenon of comparison shopping and its attendant benefits to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

We have taken many measures on the demand side, but we all recognize that the issue of food is an issue about growing food, addressing the supply side requirements. Before I itemize some of the initiatives that have been taken and continue to be taken by this Government, I think it is very instructive to realize this. I read and I mentioned an article from *The Economist* called "The silent tsunami".

The point about speaking about it as a food tsunami is to really capture the scope of the global issue with regard to food; not only the scope but the suddenness of this; it crept up like a thief in the night. And if we have any doubt about that I am sure the Member for Siparia—we were in class together; we did the MBA; foreign affairs, remember Peter Drucker? He was one of the persons that we had to look at when we were doing a course by the late Lloyd Best.

Why I mentioned it, Mr. Speaker is this; he spoke about the issue of food and what he said is this.

**Hon. Members:** The date!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** In 1986. [*Laughter*] [*Crosstalk*] But the question at that point in time was this, no one expected the food situation to reach where it had; it was almost like the perfect storm. What he had to say, "In the 1950s, up to

80 per cent of the grain harvest in India fed rats and insects rather than human beings. Today”—that is 1986—“most part of India, the wastage is down by 20 per cent”.

They spoke also about vast tracts of land that had hitherto been barren, now becoming fertile. The reason is—and it was relevant in 1986 as it is in 2008—because of advances in technology. In fact, they said import markets for food have all but disappeared. As a result of its agricultural drive, Western Europe has become a substantial food exporter plagued increasingly by unsalable surpluses of all kinds of food, from dairy products to wine, from wheat to beef. I spoke about a 1986 article but I would go to 2007.

**Mr. Warner:** Christopher Columbus.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** 2007, you got the century wrong, but I understand, I understand.

I speak now of an article I mentioned earlier in the debate coming out of *The Economist*, written just a few months ago. I want to repeat the point because I think it is particularly relevant to this debate. It says:

“For as long as most people can remember, food has been getting cheaper and farming has been in decline. In 1974—2005”—is that late enough, 2005?—“food prices”—on world markets—“fell by three-quarters in real terms.

That is why this year's price rise has been so extraordinary.”

The point I am making, on the other side is this, no one expected what has happened; not the developed countries; not the less developed countries; no one expected this.

The reason for that, as I speak particularly on the measures taken in agriculture, one wonders why more was not done in agriculture; why people were not involved in agriculture. This is not an issue for Trinidad and Tobago; it is a recurring theme in the developing countries. If you have any question as to why, I would like to point to you, Eason, and they talked about the subsidies and trade barriers that United States—

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Minister of Finance has expired.

*Motion made,* That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. P. Manning*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**3.30 p.m.**

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The point I was on is this, that this international food prices issue, this phenomenon was unexpected, as I said it came like a tidal wave. One of the reasons that developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago have not put that kind of energy into agriculture—the reasons are multiple but I would just mention some of them here:

“Most of the subsidies and trade barriers—that developed countries have put in place—have come at a huge cost. The trillions of dollars spent supporting farmers in rich countries have led to higher taxes, worse food, intensive farmed monocultures, overproduction and world prices that wreck the lives of poor farmers in the emerging markets.”

Mr. Speaker, the point is, and the article goes on to give the reasons why developing and emerging economies, agriculturally based economies have not pursued agricultural policies with any level of intensity because simply the market was not there. In fact, coming out of the IMF conference another thing that was very telling was the DOHA rounds of negotiations which really deal with the removal of the subsidies that the rich countries enjoy, that has been stalled for several years. Because of what is happening globally there is a commitment this year to putting the DOHA round of negotiations on the front burner and to bringing the negotiations to fruition because there is an understanding that the issue of food prices had become an international phenomenon and the issue as it is now, but we dealt with it, with the level of urgency that it requires.

I mentioned that I would speak about some of the measures in agriculture. I do not know if the other side is aware of this, but the most incentives in any sector exist in agriculture. [*Desk thumping*] Quite apart from the \$1.4 billion in the budget for agriculture I have a document here and I do not want to go through it in detail because it will take up more than 20 minutes. It deals with the incentive programme for agriculture and it mentions, and I just want to highlight some of the things, “Tax concessions for agriculture” and it deals with incentive for vehicles for agriculture. They talked about subsidies for wheel tractors, subsidies for pickups and vehicles, a subsidy of 15 per cent for trucks; it talks about incentives, machinery and equipment; a subsidy of 50 per cent of the purchase price of a trailer, a subsidy of 50 per cent of the purchase price of machinery to a maximum of \$25,000; a subsidy of 50 per cent of the establishment cost of solar drying units.

Then there are incentives for water for agriculture, a subsidy of 25 per cent of the cost of establishing wells, dams and ponds for agricultural purposes up to a maximum of \$20,000; a subsidy of 50 per cent of the cost of water pumps up to a



maximum of \$7,500; a subsidy of 50 per cent of the cost of irrigation equipment up to a maximum of \$25,000, then there were incentives for soil conservation, incentives for land preparation, incentives for the crop subsector, incentives for coconut, cocoa and coffee; incentives for floriculture, rice, sorrel, sugar, dairy, and I can go on and on with the incentives. Incentives for the forestry subsector. The point is there is no end. There is no end of incentives for agriculture [*Interruption*] that this Government has given to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, before I end my contribution to this debate, I want to speak to the contribution of the Member for Caroni East, because learned perhaps, you will be the judge of that. [*Laughter*] But, Mr. Speaker, when he made his contribution on the last occasion, he made certain, what I consider mischievous and irresponsible statements. [*Interruption*] But with respect this time, with respect to Caroni (1975) Limited, and I want to quote some of the things that he said, first:

“In 39 out of 50 years that they run this country they failed the agricultural sector. They have destroyed systematically the agricultural sector over 39 years.”

**Mr. Imbert:** UNC.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** No, they are saying that, but we will deal with that:

“You destroyed the agricultural sector in Caroni—because they thought that they were the sustenance for United National Congress.”

Thirdly, and this is the last quotation:

“They closed down Caroni (1975) Limited which was producing sugar cane and we were still able to get almost \$500 million per year from selling sugar cane—they said—Caroni (1975) Limited was a drain on the Treasury.”

So, Mr. Speaker, I think we need to put that issue to bed once and for all. What is the truth? What is the truth behind that statement? Starting in 1975 when Caroni (1975) Limited was formed under this PNM Government a decision was made from that time not to mechanize the sugar industry and the reason was a policy decision, one founded on compassion. Because this Government recognized that to mechanize the sugar industry would mean the social displacement of thousands of workers. So a decision was made not to mechanize the sugar industry in 1975.

The hon. Member for the other side talked about contribution to GDP, and what the hon. Member of the other side is not saying to this honourable House, is for three decades—not for one year, not for two years—that the sugar industry ran

at a loss, at a deficit. When we talk about Caroni (1975) Limited and the sugar industry, we are talking about an industry, a sector which the intention is apart from providing employment, intended to contribute to the revenue of this country. What has been proven over 30 years, is that the sugar industry, for a number of reasons which I think we are familiar with, the Lomē convention, removal of the preferential treatment, the reality is, the harsh and stark inconvenient truth is that the sugar industry is unsustainable. That is the harsh reality.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, when we look at the cost of production in sugar producing areas, we look at the cost of production in other countries that go into sugar production and we look at the Caribbean. The cost of production per tonne in US dollars: for the Caribbean US \$537; Africa US \$340; the Pacific US \$266 and the 10 lowest cost producers US \$271. Do you know what the cost is for Trinidad and Tobago? US \$679. That is the reality.

**Mr. Manning:** Cost per tonne?

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Yes, per tonne, US per tonne. When we look at the cost of—so that is the cost of production when we compare it. But, we looked at the yield, because we have to look at the yield. [*Interruption*] What is the yield per hectare? When we looked at Africa it is 82 tonnes per hectare; the ACP countries 73 tonnes per hectare; for Trinidad and Tobago 52 tonnes per hectare. It is a harsh, it is a sad reality but that is the reality.

Mr. Speaker, what the other side is not saying to you is for three decades we operated at a considerable loss, over \$4 billion and in spite of all of this, this PNM Government, the caring and compassionate government that it is, bailed out Caroni Limited, not once but twice. [*Interruption*] In 1990 we bailed out Caroni Limited at the tune of \$2.2 billion. The next time was 2001 after—they had their turn in government; they could have done all the right things; they could have gotten it right. You had the five years to get it all right, what was the sad reality. In 2001 when we came into Government we had to bail out Caroni Limited again to the tune of \$2.3 billion. That is the harsh reality.

So, Mr. Speaker, the writing is on the wall, but this Government is a caring Government.

**Mr. Manning:** Do not finish yet; let me give you one more sentence. [*Laughter*]

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Okay. This Government is a caring Government, so the decision was made—

**Hon. Member:** Hold on.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** I will incorporate it, have no fear. Have no fear; let your heart not be troubled.

**Mr. Manning:** Let not your heart be troubled.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister. So, let us look at the reality of Caroni Limited and the decision. What did this caring Government do?

**Hon. Member:** Look at CEPEP.

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Voluntary separation—you see that is the mischief. That is the mischief comparing—I am glad he said it you know—Caroni Limited to CEPEP. I do not know if he has something confused but I know that CEPEP is a social sector programme; I know that URP is a social sector programme. Its strategic objective is completely different. It is not intended to generate revenue; it is intended to provide employment to those who are, either vulnerable or unemployed and that is the responsibility of any caring Government. [*Desk thumping*] [*Interruption*] Caroni Limited, the last time I checked was supposed to be a sector in the economy just as the manufacturing sector and its strategic objective was not only to provide employment but revenue to this country.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Caroni East mentioned that. He said they contributed \$500 million the last year but he forgot to tell you the deficit it was running. Inconveniently you forgot to mention that but we know for the last three decades that Caroni Limited has operated at the deficit. For almost three decades of operation, Caroni has never generated a profit but incurred a loss—what is it—as an enterprise. It is an enterprise. Understand? URP and CEPEP, the last time I checked they are not enterprises. [*Interruption*] Caroni Limited provided employment and it was supposed to generate revenue for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. How long do you continue to operate a sector? Not one year, 30 years that it has been done, but this Government is a caring Government, because when the decision, the hard decision was made to close down Caroni (1975) Limited it was done in a caring and a generous way.

If we have any doubt I have the figures here before me. For example, the enhancement: Monitoring enhancement based on employees age and years of service ranged from 10 per cent to 50 per cent. I know that there were some workers whose pension benefit—I do not know who negotiated, I do not know what union represented them—was \$150. Do you know that this Government enhanced and lifted it up to over \$650? This is not a caring Government? [*Desk thumping*] That is not all we did. [*Interruption*] [*Inaudible*]*—*acres of land for

[HON. K. NUNEZ-TE SHEIRA]

residential purposes; we allocated two acres of land for agricultural purposes, and I heard the hon. Member for Caroni East talking about, “imagine they put the land quite quite and they living here”, but he is not telling you that a technical team went out there and did a technical survey of all the lands to determine what land was most capable or appropriate for use. And in that context that is how the determination was made.

He is also not telling you that the farmers were given a choice of what kind of farming they wanted to get into. He is not telling you that there was a random selection and that farmers were given the opportunity to make a swap if they wanted to. He is not telling you that this Government provided each of those Caroni workers with residential plots; he is not telling you it cost the Government \$100,000 to put in the proper infrastructure and this Government is subsidizing it because it is given to the Caroni workers for \$20,000 to \$30,000. He is not telling you that. [*Desk thumping*] He is not telling you—they are not telling you that the Government has put in a retraining programme.

[*Dr. T. Gopeesingh stands*]

**Hon. Member:** Sit down.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Madam Minister, will you give way? [*Crosstalk*] Madam Minister, would you be kind enough to tell the House how many of the 7,000 two-acre plots that you promised, how many of these people have land titles to the two-acre plots? [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:** Mr. Speaker, I am glad he mentioned that because the intention is to give them the leases, [*Interruption*] but what he is not telling you is that they can register with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, and once they have registered with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, not only can they use the land and develop the land but they can access loans from the Agricultural Development Bank. [*Desk thumping*] That is what he is not telling you! [*Desk thumping*] He is not telling you about the training programmes; he is not telling you about the counselling programmes that this Government put on for the Caroni workers. In fact, someone said to me and I was really impressed, 56 former Caroni workers took part in the cross-country when they laid a pipeline across the country 56 of them participated in that. That is the kind of training; that is the kind of training that this Government is committed to.

This Government did not just close down Caroni Limited. This Government is a caring Government; we have spent billions of dollars, not only in bailing out Caroni Limited twice; not only in 1975 not mechanizing it, but today, to the tune

of billions of dollars this Government has provided them with land, and that is the right thing. I want to say that is right to do. [*Desk thumping*] And this Government is always about doing the right thing, because this Government is a compassionate caring Government.

I want to end by saying maybe we have a little amnesia; you know when the other side comes they like to wave red card and all kinds of cards. I do not have a red card, I have a green document, and for those on the other side—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order!

**Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira:**—who may be suffering from amnesia I have a document here, because they want this honourable House and the people of Trinidad and Tobago—what did he say, nothing. People reveal so much of themselves, because in the contribution I believe the hon. Member for Caroni East made this statement: “You destroyed the agricultural sector in Caroni because you thought it was the sustenance for United National Congress.” That was an interesting statement, but I just want to say this in concluding my contribution. You see this document, this document entitled, “Summary of Implementation Plan for Phased Private Sector Participation”, do you know what the date is? July 21, 1999. They had plans, Mr. Speaker, because they knew that the sugar industry was unsustainable. They knew it! They knew it and they understood it. [*Desk thumping*] But you see, unlike them we had the courage of our conviction, we had the confidence to do what we have to do and we do not only do it with confidence, [*Crosstalk*] we do not only do it with conviction, but we do it with compassion. We continue to deliver because we continue to care.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**3.45 p.m.**

**Dr. Hamza Rafeeq** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in support of this Motion moved by my colleague, the Member for Toco/Manzanilla, with the hope that by the time this debate is concluded, we would not have to vote on it because the Government would have done what is required and what is necessary, to bring some relief to the population of Trinidad and Tobago as far as the escalating food prices are concerned. But before I go into my own contribution, I must respond to some of the things that were said by the Minister of Finance and I must say that I am very disappointed in her contribution because I was really looking forward to hearing something new. She rehashed all the things that the other Ministers had said, and of course, she retreated into the comfort zone of increased food prices is a global phenomenon.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has always taken that position. When crime started increasing in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of National Security came to this Parliament and said, "The crime is an international phenomenon—" [*Interruption*]

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Old problem.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** It is an old problem—"therefore, you should not worry." There was a dengue outbreak in Port of Spain sometime ago, the Minister of Health came to this House and said, "That is an international phenomenon, therefore, we should not worry." Now this Government is taking the position that increases in food prices is a global phenomenon, therefore, we should take comfort in that and do not worry.

We know that the international factors are causing food prices to go up. We are aware of that and we are aware of all the factors that are causing this, the global warming, the biofuels and all of that. We are aware of all of that. We are a small country and we cannot influence what is happening abroad; we cannot influence what is happening in the international arena, but at least we can influence what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago and chart our own course [*Desk thumping*] so that our population can get cheaper food.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has to decide whether in its opinion it is important for Trinidad and Tobago to have some sort of food security, and if they decide that, then they have to tell us what they are doing about it. Because when the last Minister spoke, it was clear that there is a total disconnect between this Government and the ordinary people of Trinidad and Tobago. I can understand a Senator making that kind of contribution because they do not interact so closely with people at the grass roots level, but when you have a Member of Parliament who is representing approximately 20,000 or 25,000 persons or maybe more than that—and if they interact with the people at the ground level, they would not be making statements like this Minister made today.

Two years ago, there was a debate in this House and the Minister of Consumer Affairs, the present President of the Senate, came and said the same thing. Two years ago, he said that it is an international phenomenon and that we should eat cassava instead. So the Government was warned two years ago that there was a crisis in food, and up to now they have not—and the Minister was saying that it came like a thief in the night. Therefore, it is hypocritical for this Government to come here today and say that this is something new, [*Desk thumping*] this is something that just came upon us. Tell us what you have done for the last two or three years or for the last five or six years. Go to Beetham, go to Barrackpore, go to Laventille and go to Gran Couva and tell the people there that high food prices is a global phenomenon. Go down there and tell them that.

The Minister said that 18 per cent of people's salaries are spent in buying food in Trinidad and Tobago, but that is the same kind of information that gave rise to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources saying that there is no food crisis. There is no food crisis for people who are working for \$40,000 a month and more, like the Ministers in this Government. There are hundreds of thousands of people in this country who are working for minimum wage. [*Desk thumping*] Minimum wage is \$10.00 per hour, that is, \$80 per day; \$80 a day is \$400 per week, \$1,600 per month. That is the salary of hundreds of thousands of people in this country; old age pensioners, people who are working for minimum wage.

When you are getting a salary of \$1,600 per month, you are not spending 18 per cent on food, you are spending approximately 100 per cent on food because if you look at the prices at present, you would see that the price of sugar is \$2.45 per pound; white rice, \$17.95 for two kg, whereas a year ago it was \$7.95; Ibis flour, \$11.95 for two kg, whereas a year ago it was \$6.95; cheese, \$24 per pound; powdered full cream milk, \$51.95 for a 2 kg powdered full cream; Klim baby milk, \$105.95, one year ago it was \$55.00; split peas, dhal, \$3.95, a year ago it was \$1.75 per pound; lentils, \$4.25 a pound, a year ago it was \$2.95; Blue band margarine, \$5.00 for one pack, that is 240g, one year ago it was \$3.00; Brunswick tuna, \$7.95 per tin, one year ago it was \$4.45; frozen chicken, \$45.95 for one, whereas one year ago it was \$23.45. This is what the consumer has to face and while the Ministers who are working for \$40,000 and more, have to face that same price, the people who are working for \$1,600 per month have to face the same prices.

Mr. Speaker, this is about the third or fourth time that a Minister has mentioned about the debit cards and 22,000 persons—and the Minister repeated it today—are in receipt of those cards. Do you know what is the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line? If one year ago it was 20 per cent, today it would be double because of the increase in the price of food. But even if we take 20 per cent, 20 per cent will be 300,000 persons; 300,000 persons living below the poverty line and you are giving 22,000 persons debit cards. That is just a drop in the ocean. What about the rest of 278,000 persons? The Minister mentioned that they had removed VAT on some items and why when we were in Government we did not do the same.

Mr. Speaker, we were in Government for six years and the very first year we went into Government—I want to quote from the Budget Statement 1996:

"In order to reduce the cost of basic foods to the population, I propose to extend the list of basic foods zero-rated for Value Added Tax purposes to include such items as cheddar cheese, corned beef, curry, fresh butter, salt,

macaroni, peanut butter, salted butter, tinned sardines, smoked herring, yeast and baking powder. In addition, I propose to remove the import duty on those items which ... attract import duty at present."

Thirteen items and they are talking about the 40 years that they were in Government, they removed it on some items.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister went on to say that there are a lot of incentives given in the agricultural sector, tax concessions for vehicles, tractors and subsidies on items and so on. To qualify for these incentives, you have to be registered as a farmer, and to be registered as a farmer, you have to have some kind of title, some kind of paper, saying that you own or you are renting, or you have been leased a parcel of land, five acres of land. There are lots of people who are planting who do not have a lease for five acres of land, so they cannot access the agricultural incentive programme. To access the agricultural incentive programme, you have to be registered as a farmer and this is the requirement to be registered as a farmer. So while the incentives are there, a lot of people cannot access the incentives.

She mentioned also that the Caroni (1975) Limited workers were given VSEP by a caring Government. I want to put on the record today that in the voluntary separation of employment package (VSEP) there was absolutely nothing voluntary about that programme. That is something that was forced on the sugar workers, [*Desk thumping*] there was no element of voluntariness in that. They were told you either accept this or you leave and get nothing. You either take this or you leave and get nothing, that was the choice that the workers had. How come that was voluntary? They were told that you either take this money and go or you go and get nothing. So there was nothing voluntary about this separation package.

They said they raised the pension for the sugar workers from \$150 to \$600. Do you know what that did? That was one of the cruelest things ever done by this Government. Do you know what that did? By giving them \$600 per month instead of \$150, the sugar workers were not able to get old age pension. They were deprived of getting old age pension because they got \$600 per month pension. If they had gotten \$150 per month and if the pension had remained at that level, they would have been able to get old age pension. Today, it is \$1,650 and they would have been able to get that, but instead, they raised it to \$600, in order to deny and to deprive sugar workers from getting old age pension.

Mr. Speaker, they talked about the lands. I will deal with the lands in Caroni (1975) Limited in more detail a little later, but suffice it to say at this point, that not one sugar worker has gotten a lease from the Government for the parcel of



agricultural land. Nobody has got that. Not one sugar worker has gotten a lease or title to a residential plot. Five years have passed and not one worker has gotten a lease for either a residential plot or an agricultural plot.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** [*Inaudible*]

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** Yes, we are waiting on June 30 to see if the Government will comply. I think I have dealt with the contribution of the Minister of Finance. There is nothing more that she said—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Warner:** That makes sense.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:**—but I think as I said, this Government has to decide whether it wants food security in this country and what it is going to do about that.

Mr. Speaker, since this Motion was filed and that was four or five months ago, the situation has worsened. The situation has worsened in that the prices of food have escalated, and in addition, there is another element that has been introduced in the debate, and that is, shortage of food. When this Motion was filed about four or five months ago, you could have gone to any supermarket and you could have bought anything you wanted in any quantity once you had the money, but today that is not so.

Today, there are quite a few items that are not available and even when they are available, you are restricted in the amount you can get. There are still some supermarkets that are saying that you must buy a certain amount of other groceries before you can access these basic items, like flour, rice and so on. So that is another dimension to the debate that we are in at present.

#### **4.00 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that the crisis is international. In Pakistan there have been demonstrations and marches up and down the streets. In Thailand it is the same thing. In Haiti there have been demonstrations and so on, but they removed a prime minister because he was not doing anything about the escalating food prices. We are not so lucky in Trinidad and Tobago at present.

Mr. Speaker, the important thing is that governments all over the world have recognized that there is a crisis situation. They have recognized that the world is facing a crisis, as far as food is concerned, and are taking urgent steps to deal with the situation. At best, in Trinidad and Tobago, we have had a very lukewarm response. As someone mentioned a while ago, the United Nations (UN), at the very highest level, has established a high level task force to deal with this problem

of food shortage throughout the world. In Belize the Prime Minister has appointed a committee, and he himself is heading it, to deal with the problem of escalating food prices. Many other Caribbean countries are doing the same.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The Canadian Prime Minister, just a couple days ago, announced that he would be giving \$40 million to deal with this problem. Governments all over the world have recognized the urgency of this problem. They have recognized that we are in a crisis situation and are dealing with it like that. But this Government is in a state of denial, "There is no crisis", and that is why we have seen the lukewarm response they have given to this very, very important issue.

Over the last five years, the price of food in Trinidad and Tobago has risen by 165 per cent, at least. Over the last four or five years, no worker, no employee in this country, has had that kind of increase in his take home pay. Some of them have gotten 15, 20 or 30 per cent over the last four or five years, but no worker in this country has gotten a 165 per cent increase. It means that as far as food is concerned people today are worse off than they were five years ago.

We have had three responses. We have had a response by the Minister of Consumer Affairs; he went in the Senate one or two weeks ago and read a statement. We have had a response from the Prime Minister, and we have had a response from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, belated as it was.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the things that all of them continue to say is that there are 7,000 farms which have been established. Even the Prime Minister said that the Government has already established 7,000 new farms from the land of former Caroni (1975) Limited. This was repeated by the Minister of Consumer Affairs, and he went one step further in saying that 1,000 of these farms were already in production. That was far from the truth, because we do not have 1,000 farms under production. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Taylor:** Madam Deputy Speaker, on a point of clarification. Concerning the 1,000 plots referred to, there are, in fact, 1,000 farmers who are operating without their leases being regularized. It was in that context the 1,000 was referred to. I wish to inform the hon. Member of that.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** Madam Deputy Speaker, even that is not correct. We do not have 1,000 farms in production. I will give way again or we can wait until the next time we debate this, but the Minister must tell us where in Trinidad and Tobago those 1,000 farms are. He must tell us what parts of Trinidad and Tobago those 1,000 farms are in production.

**Mr. Taylor:** For the sake of clarity, I am making the point that there are 1,000 farmers operating, albeit without leases being regularized; and that is clear.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** That is not true. Whether with or without leases, we do not have 1,000 farmers operating on Caroni (1975) Limited farms; that is not so. The Minister must bring the evidence, bring the documents, tell us which areas, how many farms are being operated; tell this honourable House.

I have a paper that was written just last year by Mr. Seunarine Persad, Ian Rampersad and Hugh Wilson. They were looking at the difficulties and impediments in the 7,000 two-acre farms that were supposed to be given out to the sugar workers. They said:

"Eight restrictions influencing land use including land clearing and leveling (94%); absence of irrigation infrastructure (88%); low nutrient NPK levels (76%); inadequate drainage (67%) and high soil acidity...(57%)..."—and what was needed—"Soil amelioration, nutrient management, drainage, tillage and micro-irrigation were discussed as critical success factors..."

That is if these farmers were to be able to plant food in these areas. These things have not been done, as we speak; so it would be difficult for these farmers, even if they were willing to do so, to operate on those farms.

The report also said:

"...with modest investments in irrigation, increased production, better crop quality and increased farm incomes can be realized, and farmers can easily adopt and manage micro-irrigation and fertigation systems..."

There are irrigation challenges that require consideration by planners including sub-surface water sources, mini-dams, raw water supplies, micro-irrigation and water economy practices. The dry season is considered the most appropriate season for vegetable and food crop agriculture..."

I want to repeat that:

"The dry season is considered the most appropriate season for vegetable and food crop agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago, with higher photosynthesis, better use of agricultural inputs, less pest and disease problems, quality crops and increased farm income."

The point I am making is that even if the farmers are allocated the land and they do not have proper irrigation, then they would only be able to cultivate those lands in the wet season, and that is not the most appropriate time to do your farming.

We know that we have a lot of flat land in Trinidad and Tobago; we know that many of those areas are going to flood. What is required is a proper water management policy and implementation of that policy so that farmers could plant food, not only in the wet season, but throughout the year, and especially in the dry season when they could get better results.

Madame Deputy Speaker, one of the issues that is always brought up in debates like this is Caroni (1975) Limited. I want to spend some time today in dealing with this issue.

Just a while ago, the Minister of Finance waved a document talking about private sector participation in Caroni (1975) Limited. I want to say to the national community that we in the UNC, we in the Parliament here, recognize and accept that Caroni could not continue the same way it was going for many years. We recognized and accepted that Caroni had to be transformed; that was part of our programme, that Caroni (1975) Limited needed to be transformed, but not in the way this Government has done.

When this Government talked about transforming Caroni, we asked them on many occasions to bring the plan to the Parliament. We begged them; we even walked out of Parliament, because we protested the fact that the Government did not bring the plan to the Parliament. The Government went ahead and closed Caroni (1975) Limited, and after doing so they decided what they were going to do with the land. You have 77,000 acres; you have a lot of other assets; what are you going to do with them?

We said that Caroni (1975) Limited needed to be diversified; if you could not plant sugarcane, no problem. But the mistake the Government made was that it equated Caroni (1975) Limited with sugar. It need not have been equated with sugar. It could have been so much in addition to sugar; so much besides sugar.

We would have recommended deciding what areas of activities Caroni should get involved in: rice production, livestock production, vegetable production, and so on. Having decided that, we would have invited private sector participation in these business units; rice would have been one, the distillery would have been one and livestock would have been one. We would have invited private sector participation remembering that, at that time, we did not have the kind of finances this Government now has. Private sector participation would have brought in two things: first of all, capital and, secondly, management expertise, which Caroni (1975) Limited did not have. That was the way we were going to diversify Caroni (1975) Limited.

If it was 1,000 acres for rice production, we would have excised that. We would have put in the necessary infrastructure, decided which farmer would farm that, how many farmers, excised that from sugarcane production and left that as one business unit. When we decided that we needed 500 acres for citrus production, we would have done the same thing; we would also have done the same thing for the other business areas; so in about five years we would have transformed Caroni (1975) Limited. It would have been a holding company with all these subsidiaries, and you would have had private sector participation in all of them. By today, we would have had Caroni (1975) Limited transformed into a food producing enterprise, rather than sugarcane.

That is what we told the Government. Even if you did not want to get private sector participation, involvement, and you wanted to give the farmers the land, then you could have done that even while the farmers were employed with Caroni (1975) Limited. You could have decided that the same way in which you wanted 1,000 acres in rice production, after you did a soil test and so on, you could have decided where you wanted this rice to grow, you could have decided how many persons you wanted in that and moved the workers laterally. So at the end of four or five years, no worker would have had to be separated from Caroni (1975) Limited; all of them would have been absorbed in the new food producing enterprise.

We were not against diversification; we were not against the transformation of Caroni (1975) Limited from sugar to producing food, but not in the way this Government did it. This Government closed down Caroni (1975) Limited and then five years after, up to today, none of the workers has gotten a lease to the land. Many of the ex-workers, after they had their voluntary separation of employment (VSEP) money, went ahead. Some of them bought a little maxi-taxi, some of them opened a shop; they found themselves in different kinds of activities.

It is extremely difficult to get all these workers back on the land. So when you talk about getting involved in agriculture, when you talk about growing more food, one of the greatest challenges we will face, as a country, is getting persons to work on those farms. That is as a direct result of this Government separating those workers from the agricultural industry, and up to five years after have not had the leases given to them.

#### **4.15 p.m.**

Madam Deputy Speaker, having said all this; what can the Government do? I am saying that we cannot affect what is happening in the international arena, we are too small for that. We cannot affect global warming, biofuels and all those things, but we can affect what is happening here at home and there is a lot we can do. The first thing we can do is subsidize food for poor people, give subsidies to people who cannot buy food to feed their children.

The Prime Minister said that he will not entertain the idea of subsidizing food because that will be encouraging corruption. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you believe a Prime Minister that you cannot subsidize food for poor people because if you do that you will be encouraging corruption? Imagine that! This Prime Minister presides over a Government where there are so many allegations of corruption on so many projects and yet he cannot subsidize food because he is afraid of corruption. We have a Minister who has been fired because he asked the Prime Minister to deal with corruption.

Madam Deputy Speaker, how much money will it take to subsidize food for poor people? We have had corruption taking place at the Scarborough General Hospital; the Brian Lara Stadium; the Waterfront Project; the Monorail; the Oncology Centre; the Renal Dialysis Centre; the Centre for Performing Arts; the University of Trinidad and Tobago and CEPEP. In all these projects we have had corruption and UDeCott has been at the centre of most of these projects and Calder Hart, of course, has been at the centre of UDeCott up to now. That is one person who has more power than a Minister of Government and no one person in this country should be given that amount of power.

**Mr. S. Panday:** He is king of kings!

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** I am saying, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the two are linked. If you can cut out the corruption in all these activities, you can subsidize the food for poor people. I cannot understand why the Prime Minister and his Government cannot put a system in place to subsidize food for poor people and put the necessary checks and balances so there is no corruption. Can you not deal with corruption? Is it an endemic part of your Government that you cannot deal with it? Imagine the Prime Minister is saying to the poor people of this country that he cannot give them subsidy because there will be corruption in it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I was saying, many people in this country are working for exorbitant salaries, but there are hundreds of thousands of people who are working for minimum wage and getting a pension of \$1,000 and less and they are feeling the pinch. If you visit some of the supermarkets in some of the rural areas, not those in the urban areas where the Ministers shop, you would be surprised to see what people are buying and what they have in their trolleys. If you go to Freeport, Preysal, California, Barrackpore, look at the trolleys of people who are shopping in these supermarkets you will see they are having great difficulties buying basic foodstuff and yet there are people who are milking this Government of billions of dollars and nothing is being done about it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am saying that the two things are linked and we are in full support of the call for a public independent commission of enquiry into the activities of UDeCott and Calder Hart. [*Desk thumping*] The Prime Minister should announce this afternoon that there is a public independent enquiry into the activities of UDeCott and Calder Hart.

**Hon. Member:** “He ’fraid, he ’fraid.”

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** Mr. Prime Minister, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, you called for commissions of enquiry into things that were less important than that. Do not say that it is business as usual because a Minister has lost his job because of this and I am asking that you institute a commission of enquiry so that the truth can eventually come out, and the moneys you save from there can be used to subsidize food for people who cannot afford to buy. I am seeing there are billions of dollars of taxpayers’ money that are going down the drain financing corruption. The country needs to breathe again. It needs to have that satisfaction that everything is above board, and the only way that can be done is to have a public commission of enquiry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I said the first thing the Government should do is to subsidize food for poor people in this country and I cannot understand why poor people must suffer because the Prime Minister says if he subsidizes food there will be an element of corruption in it. He is in charge of the Government; can he not implement a programme without corruption? Can you not do that, Mr. Prime Minister just to help poor people? Can you not implement a programme that will not have corruption in it? Put systems, checks and balances in place so that you can help people. Can you not do that?

**Mr. S. Panday:** Put Calder Hart in charge of it.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** You Mr. Prime Minister, through Madam Deputy Speaker, boasted that you got your house built, \$148 million in eight months within budget and within time and so forth. Was there corruption in that? If there was no corruption in that, then why can you not implement such a programme in order to give poor people some relief so that they can eat?

Madam Deputy Speaker, that is the first thing the Government must do. Whatever this Government implements in terms of growing food, will not materialize for another six months and that is if they start today. If they give out the lands today, that will bring in food in about six months’ time. What are people who are starving going to do for the next six months? This is why I am asking to have some compassion on those poor people who cannot buy food and subsidize it that they can eat like everybody else. That is all I am asking.

The second thing they must do—and there is no magic bullet in this—they must grow more food in Trinidad and Tobago and Government must be the facilitator for the farming community in Trinidad and Tobago to grow more food. Madam Deputy Speaker, you see this Government has had a philosophical problem with agriculture in this country. It has always held the view that it will develop the energy sector, get enough money and it can always buy food. That is not necessarily so. The day will come, Mr. Prime Minister, when we will get up one morning, have a lot of money and no food to buy, we will not be able to eat and drink our money. You must put this country in such a position that there will be a degree of food security. No country can be independent if there is no degree of food security, and I am asking that even though there is much oil money now, now is the time to invest in the agricultural sector because that should be one of the main pillars of diversification of the economy, apart from having cheap and reasonably priced food for the population, that should be one of the planks for diversification of the economy. I do not know what is keeping it back. Five years have passed and nobody has yet got a lease of land to plant food.

Madam Deputy Speaker, agriculture has never been a priority for this Government. Throughout its years of existence from 1956 to now, but even though it has never been a priority, I am sure if Dr. Eric Williams were alive today the situation would have been different because he had a different kind of vision from this Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker, during the first oil boom in this country, many make-work programmes were created like DEWD, URP and so forth and they attracted people who were unemployed, but they also attracted people who were employed in the agricultural sector because those who were in this sector were working very hard and their remuneration was not as high as they would have got in the DEWD programme so many of them left and went to work in these make-work programmes. That was what started the decline in the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago. Today it is no different.

When this oil boom started, again, this Government started a lot of the make-work programmes and gave high salaries which attracted people out of the agricultural sector and brought them into these make-work programmes. The final nail that was driven in the coffin of agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago was when Government closed Caroni (1975) Limited. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I said, the Government should take a concerted decision that it is going to grow more food and if it takes that decision, then there are many things that will follow from that, a few of which I will mention today.

The first thing Mr. Prime Minister, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, you cannot do agriculture without land and you must take the decision that you will immediately make lands available to all who are interested in food production. I



am saying that it is going to be difficult to attract people in the agricultural sector, but you must take that decision and implement it. Mr. Prime Minister, I want to tell you something about what is happening in my constituency. There is a farming community of about 40 persons and they have been farming a block of land of about 100 acres for the last 50 years, and for the last 25 years they have been approaching the government asking it to regularize the tenure and the government has agreed. There are no issues about government not agreeing; it had agreed to regularize the tenancies of those persons and 25 years later their tenancies have not been regularized and I will tell you what has happened.

**Mr. Manning:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank the Member for Caroni East for giving way. He raised the question of an outstanding arrangement of 25 years, I wonder if he will be kind enough to tell this honourable House what interventions his government made in the six-year period in which it was in office, by his own admission.

**Dr. H. Rafeeq:** Madam Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister is also in denial that he is in office, he cannot accept that he has been in office for the last seven years, four years before that and the PNM has been in office for 45 out of the last 55 years.

I will tell you what we did. When the farmers approached us, we took up their plight and implemented the surveying of those lands and the allocation of the plots to the different farmers, and up to now your Government cannot move it from there. The lands have already been surveyed; the plots have already been allocated. Why does it not move forward from there to the point where they can get their leases? You must not find comfort in the fact that the UNC was in office for six years; you are in office now; you are running this country; you are the Prime Minister and you must accept your responsibility.

**4.30 p.m.**

#### ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise under Standing Order 90(1) and ask that Standing Order 10(2) be suspended to allow us to do the matter on the Motion for the Adjournment without going for tea.

*Agreed to*

#### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to

Friday, 09, May 2008, at 1.30 p.m. and we will follow the Order Paper. If you look at the Order Paper, we will continue the debate on the Caribbean Court of Justice and if we have time, we will go to the Pensions (Amdt.) Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members, before I put the question as it relates to the adjournment, there are four Motions on the Adjournment but there is an agreement to the Motion on the adjournment on the cane farmers raised by the hon. Member for Caroni Central.

### **Cane Farmers (Unfair Treatment of)**

**Dr. Hamza Rafeeq** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to raise the plight of the cane farmers who previously supplied canes to Caroni (1975) Limited.

When the Government decided to close Caroni (1975) Limited, it did not take into consideration one of the most important stakeholders in the industry, that is the cane farmers. There were about 6,500 cane farmers who supplied canes to Caroni (1975) Limited and directly working for these 6,500 cane farmers, there were about another 3,500 persons. So you had about 10,000 persons being cane farmers and workers for cane farmers supplying canes to Caroni (1975) Limited. They were really the lifeline for the sugar industry because they produced almost half of the canes that were processed by Caroni (1975) Limited.

Many of them had incurred expenses by way of loans for equipment, for buying their homes, for educating their children, and so on, and when the company closed its doors there was very little they had to live by. What the Government then did was to discourage the farmers from planting cane in an active way. It told them that, "There was nothing more for you in the sugar industry and the quicker you get out of planting cane the better it will be for you", and encouraged the cane farmers to get out of production.

By the year 2005, 3,000 of those farmers had stopped producing cane and so you were left with about 3,500 cane farmers who were still in the cane production sector. The Government then announced a decision—the Prime Minister himself went down to Barrackpore and told the workers there that his Government would give them a golden handshake. Remember by that time there were only 3,500, because 3,000 had already left the industry. That was a great injustice to those 3,000 who had already left the industry because they were not taken into account when this golden handshake was being spoken about.

The Government made available \$80 million to the farmers who were previously supplying canes to Caroni (1975) Limited—\$80 million to be distributed among the 3,500 cane farmers, and remember that the other 3,000 farmers got nothing. They went home without anything and they had to fend for themselves. Among these 3,500, the Government took a decision that the formula that they will use to pay these farmers would be that they would take an average of the amount of canes that they supplied in 2005, 2006 and 2007. So if they supplied 500 tonnes in one; 600 tonnes another and 700 tonnes the following year, they would pay on the basis of 600 tonnes, being the average for the three years. As I said, they also took a decision that only those farmers who were supplying canes in 2006 and 2007 would benefit from the \$80 million.

Then something else happened. When Caroni (1975) Limited was closed and they were no longer producing cane, the company gave the areas that you had cane to some of their friends and families and some of those persons were able to sell for the first time in their lives, 3,000 and 4,000 tonnes of cane to the company. Having sold 3,000 and 4,000 tonnes of cane, the Government did not apply the formula to them, in that they did not take an average for the three years; they just took that one supply, that is, in 2007 and paid them on the basis of the amount of cane they supplied in 2007. So there was a special arrangement for those people who were given equipment and Caroni (1975) Limited canes and so they got the bulk of that \$80 million. The other farmers were at a great disadvantage, in that they had to apply a formula of a three-year average, whereas these people, coming into the industry for the first time, were paid on the basis of one crop that they sold.

First of all, \$80 million is a small amount of money for people who have given their entire lives to the sugar industry. Remember that the Prime Minister always boasts that he built a house for \$148 million; that is for one person, and 3,500 persons had to share in \$80 million in that golden handshake the Prime Minister spoke about.

There is another issue, and that is that the European Union decided that in order to make the transition for these farmers a little easier, they would also put some money to ensure that that transition is made without too much difficulty. Trinidad and Tobago was one of the countries—and a few other countries—that would have benefitted from that European Union grant. That was a grant; that was not a loan. There were no strings attached to that money; that was a grant. But the Trinidad and Tobago Government, of course, had to do certain things before they could have accessed those funds, and those funds would have been used for the benefit of the cane farmers who were exiting the industry.

The Government was supposed to develop a national adaptation strategy, accept it in Cabinet and then transmit that to the European Union. That was not done. The national adaptation strategy was not developed; it was not accepted by the Cabinet. If it was, certainly, it was not transmitted to the European Union, and so the first tranche—I think it was US \$6 million, because I think the entire amount of funds that would have been available would have been about TT \$360 million—which was about US \$6 million, Trinidad and Tobago did not fulfil the requirements and so that was given to Guyana.

There is another tranche that is about to come, but again, the Government has to meet the obligations. I just want to quote from an article by Andy Johnson in the *Sunday Express* of April 20. He says here, in part:

“To meet the EU deadline for consideration of the local proposals, further discussions must be concluded in Port of Spain in time for the EU parliamentary agenda at the end of this summer.

Stelios Christopoulos, the Greek-born diplomat who is Charge d’Affairs at the EU delegation in Port of Spain, said last month that missing this second round would result in a review of the entire package of assistance for Trinidad and Tobago.”

He then went on to say:

“This could mean the withdrawal of the programme altogether.”

I am saying those are grant funds from the European Union in order to assist the farmers to make that transition and the Government, as I said, already lost the first tranche.

Again, I want to quote from another article from the *Sunday Express* of March 09, 2008 where it said:

“The EU office in Port of Spain was hoping, however, that Government would this time meet the deadline for submission of the Strategy, to meet the complex set of approvals necessary in the EU administration, if a disbursement is to be made in the next fiscal year. This process needs to begin by the end of this summer,... When the deal is approved, a financing agreement has first to be settled.”

The article went on to say that the EU representative here was clueless as to this country's apparent indifference to the funding proposals. He said:

“But as late as a year ago, when the EU’s sugar subsidy was discontinued, ‘contrary to our expectations, the Government was still not ready with the strategy’...

‘We feel we have not had the opportunity to present the case’ for the grant aid programme...”

That is for the farmers of Trinidad and Tobago. I do not know why the Government has not done what it was supposed to have done in order to access these funds to benefit the cane farmers in Trinidad and Tobago. I am saying these are grant funds; it is not that the Government has to pay this back; they are funds that were coming for free to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. It is beyond me as to why the Government has consistently not done what it was supposed to do in order to access these funds for the cane farmers. I can only say that it is not only a case of incompetence, that there must be some measure of vindictiveness in this programme that has caused this Government not to put systems in place that would access the funds for the benefit of the cane farmers.

They will also be pursuing this issue at different levels and they have asked me to raise it and see if we can elicit a response from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources.

Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Sen. The Hon. Arnold Piggott):** Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to respond to the Motion raised by the hon. Member for Caroni Central which alleges that the Government has failed to adequately compensate and look after the interest of cane farmers who previously supplied sugarcane to Caroni (1975) Limited.

I wish to state that this is certainly a misrepresentation of the facts. Trinidad and Tobago has been transforming its sugar industry, a process that was initiated in 2003 when the Government decided to restructure Caroni (1975) Limited. At that time, European Union reforms pointed to a situation where the sugar industry would have been adversely affected and, this, against the background where the sugar industry in Trinidad and Tobago had a record of decades of losses and demanding substantial support from the Treasury of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

It is recalled that Trinidad and Tobago exported sugar to the EU under the sugar protocol. Under this agreement, there was access to preferential prices from the EU for sugar imports from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries—the ACP countries. This certainly included Trinidad and Tobago. The 2005 reform of the EU sugar regime called for a 36 per cent phased reduction in the price of sugar in the EU. That change in the EU protocol on sugar prices made sugar production and export from Trinidad and Tobago uncompetitive. This action, therefore, gave impetus to the Government's restructuring programme and to charting a new course for sustainable livelihoods for those involved in the sugar industry.

**4.45 p.m.**

The restructuring agenda for Caroni (1975) Limited was as comprehensive as it was decisive and growth creating. The programme involved inter alia the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited and the provision of termination benefits to 9,007 employees. The Government's expenditure for the restructuring exercise was of the order of TT \$7 billion. The sum of \$3 billion and counting has been spent already.

In 2006, the Government decided that the production of raw sugar and the development of the sugar cane industry will be private sector led and driven. The Government also decided that support for sugar cane farming and any associated industries will be through incentives and ancillary support. This is in keeping with the policies for the agricultural sector and the agri sector programmes. This decision allowed anyone desirous of supplying sugar cane to do so as a business. In keeping with the vision of the Government for the private sector led sugar industry, the sale of the sugar factory to the Sugar Cane Farmers Cooperative Society Limited will be finalized soon. This would facilitate sugar cane farmers in charting their course and becoming engaged in entrepreneurship.

In 2007, Cabinet mandated the ministerial committee for the restructuring of Caroni (1975) Limited to negotiate a soft landing and exit package with the five cane farmer groups. A very attractive package was negotiated and developed for the sugar cane farmers who wished to exit the industry. In this regard, in 2007, the Government agreed to pay \$80 million to sugar farmers for transition out of the industry. Benefiting from this sum were 3,420 eligible farmers who were cultivating and sold sugar cane during a one and two-year period, 2006—2007.

Eligible farmers were paid \$70 per ton utilizing the production base of the average tonnage supplied to Caroni (1975) Limited during the period 2003—2006. The Government also agreed that the period for providing transitional earnings will be two and a half years. The Government has kept its promise of transitioning sugar farmers by assisting in a number of ways. Contrary to the Motion raised that this Government has not adequately compensated and looked after the interest of the sugar cane farmers, I can report that 95 per cent of eligible farmers have received payment to date. About 3,249 claims out of a total of 3,420 have been settled at a grand sum of \$79,501,187. Meanwhile, those who have not yet been settled and are yet to receive their money have failed to submit the required documentation to facilitate payment by the State.

The Government is committed to its resolve to regularize the status of the eligible sugarcane farmers to ensure that all the incentives and other support programmes in agriculture can be properly accessed. Sugarcane farmers stand to

benefit from the low interest window of the Agricultural Development Bank and the enhanced Agricultural Incentive Programme of the ministry. This programme allows the farmer inter alia subsidies and equipment, vehicles and infrastructure, such as for the establishment of wells, dams, ponds and other areas for agricultural purposes. The Commissioner of State Lands is working currently on the process of regularizing the status of those sugar cane farmers who had tenancies with Caroni (1975) Limited or who were squatting on State lands. The Government is committed to granting agricultural leases to eligible sugarcane farmers under applicable terms and conditions. These leases would be issued as this Government delivers what it promises.

In addition to financial assistance, the Government has provided training opportunities for former sugar workers and sugarcane farmers. Thus far, an estimated 3,415 farmers have completed the training programmes. Training is provided in technical areas including welding, mechanic, secretarial services, accounting and administration to help those workers to transition out of the industry. Additionally, sugarcane farmers will benefit from the Agri Business Development Programme spearheaded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources and the Trinidad and Tobago Agri Business Association. This programme is designed to assist sugar cane farmers in their drive to diversification of production.

Under this programme, ten key commodities with good market potential have been identified for development and agro processing. They include cassava, sweet potato, pumpkin, coconut, dwarf pommecythere, hot peppers, herbs, spices—*[Interruption]* blue food is good for us—tilapia, rabbits and paw paw. Farmers would be given guidance on demand for specified commodities and a ready market will be made available for their produce with the assistance of TABA. Already, several sugarcane farmers are diversifying into production, processing of targeted commodities and many have expressed optimism with respect to the profitability of these commodities.

The Government has provided assistance to sugar canefarmers in making the transition to food crop farming. To this end, assistance in areas such as infrastructural development; upgrade of access roads; research, product development and marketing are being provided. The ADB will come into action. The allocation to the ADB for this fiscal year has gone up by \$45 million, from \$30 million to \$75 million. The ADB will be adding an additional window for loans specially targeted to the sugarcane workers and farmers for vegetable and food crop production. The ADB will be making loans possible for those farmers in particular. This is with respect to developing 14,000 acres plus of land that would be allocated to those workers in two-acre parcels.

I wish to reinforce the fact that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to the sustainable development of the agricultural sector. The records show that sugarcane farmers have been compensated adequately and are being given support by the Government.

In closing, I wish to emphasize the fact that the Government has the interest of sugar cane farmers at heart and will continue to support these farmers in attainment of their personal goals and those of the country as a whole. My Government recognizes that sugarcane farmers have a vital role to play in the achievement of food and nutrition security for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This caring Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago will do all it can to empower them so to do.

Thank you.

**Mr. S. Panday:** What about the EU grant?

**Mr. Maharaj SC:** The three motions are by the Member for Tabaquite dealing with crime; the motion by the Member for Tabaquite dealing with the Brasso/Tabaquite Road and the motion by the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla dealing with the failure of the Government to provide adequate support to the farmers in the Plum Mitan rice field in the Nariva Swamp.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Those three motions are to be dealt with next week.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 4.55 p.m.*

#### WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

*The following question was asked by Mr. Nizam Baksh (Naparima):*

#### **Barrackpore Regional Complex (Board of Management)**

- 73.** Could the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs state:
- (a) the period/s during which the Board of Management of the Barrackpore Regional Complex was appointed and functioned for the last five years;
  - (b) if she is aware that there is no functional Board at present; and
  - (c) if the answer to (b) is in the affirmative, when the Board will be appointed and become functional?



*The following reply was circulated to Members of the House:*

**The Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs (Hon. Marlene Mc Donald):** The Board of Management of the Barrackpore Regional Complex was appointed and functioned over the period January 2003—October 2004, when the period of appointment ended. Subsequently, in the absence of a board, the facility was managed by a contract manager who assumed duties in March 2004. The manager reported to the Community Development Supervisor I responsible for Victoria East, a public officer in the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs.

In respect of parts (b) and (c) of the question, I am advised that the Instruments of Appointment of the Chairman, Vice Chairman and eight other members of the Board of Management of the Barrackpore Regional Complex were signed by the former Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs in September, 2007. The appointments cover the two-year period October 01, 2007—September 30, 2009. However, through inadvertence at the level of the divisional office, the letters were only delivered to the members in early March, 2008. The inaugural meeting of the board took place on Thursday 20 March, 2008 and the board is now fully functional.

**National Social Development Programme  
Penal/Debe**

*The following question was asked by Dr. Roodal Moonilal (Oropouche East):*

- 91.** With respect to the National Social Development Programme, could the Minister of Public Utilities state:
- (a) The number and type of projects undertaken in the Penal/Debe area between January 01 2006 and December 31 2007;
  - (b) The total expenditure on each of these projects;
  - (c) The names of all contractors employed to undertake these said projects in the Penal/Debe area;
  - (d) The status of these projects; and
  - (e) What new projects are being proposed in the Penal/Debe area and when are they scheduled to commence?

*The following reply was circulated to Members of the House:*

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid):** For the period January 01 2006 to December 31 2007, a total of 3,141 NSDP projects were

undertaken in Trinidad and Tobago at a cost of \$150.3 million. For that same period, a total of 491 NSDP projects were undertaken in the Penal/Debe area at a cost of \$33.6 million. Of those projects undertaken in the Penal/Debe area, 174 were completed and 317 are in progress. The breakdown of this information is provided in the table below:

Projects		Trinidad and Tobago		Penal/Debe Area			
Category	Type	No.	Cost \$	No.	Cost \$	Completed	In Progress
Water	Pipeline	235	82,069,648	22	22,005,088	9	13
	Wells	8	22,691,216	0	0	0	0
	Booster stations	1	159,125	0	0	0	0
Electricity	Electrification	665	21,858,582	76	3,361,706	76	0
	House wiring	2,232	23,505,213	389	5,577,302	86	303
	Recreation Grounds	0	0	4	2,643,320	3	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>3,141</b>	<b>150,283,784</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>33,587,416</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>317</b>

(c) The names of the contractors employed to undertake NSDP projects in the Penal/Debe area are provided hereunder:

1. Randolph Boyce
2. Premchand Bridgelal
3. LV/Electrical Services
4. Ratiram Gayapersad
5. Carl Rampersad
6. Clint Harris
7. Simon Rampersad
8. Rodney Houlass
9. Bruce Electrical & General Contracting 2005 Ltd
10. Vernon Harewood
11. Ramphal Lal
12. Subashe Ganpat

13. Rennie Samaroo
  14. Daren Hosein
  15. Terrence Ragoonath
  16. Maniran Sonny
  17. Ricardo Ellis
  18. Donn Andrews
  19. Sidial Mahipat
  20. Kishor Dabiram
  21. Chester Ayers
  22. Basdoe Moonilal
  23. Anslem Alexander
  24. S.K. Jadoonanan
  25. Nigel Holder
  26. Joseph Titus
  27. Jason Gopie.
- (e) The new NSDP projects proposed for the Penal/Debe area and the schedule for their commencement are still under review.