

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, June 12, 2020*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I have received communication from Ms. Marlene Mc Donald MP, Member for Port of Spain South, who has asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE  
(CHANGE OF MEMBERSHIP)**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, correspondence has been received from the President of the Senate dated June 09, 2020, which states as follows:

Dear Hon. Speaker

Re: Change of Membership to Joint Select Committees

Reference is made to the subject at captioned. I wish to advise that at a sitting held on Wednesday, June 03, 2020 the Senate agreed on the following resolution:

*Be it resolved* that this Senate agree to the following appointment to the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Representation of the People (Amdt.) Bill, 2020.

Mr. Nigel De Freitas in lieu of Mr. Robert Le Hunte.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the House of Representatives be informed of this decision at the earliest convenience please.

Respectfully

Sen. The Hon. Christine Kangaloo.

**UNREVISED**

President of the Senate.

**MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (REGISTRAR GENERAL,  
REGISTRATION OF DEEDS, CONVEYANCING AND LAW  
OF PROPERTY, REAL PROPERTY, STAMP DUTY  
AND REGISTRATION OF TITLE TO LAND) BILL, 2020**

Bill to amend the Registrar General Act, Chap. 19:03, the Registration of Deeds Act, Chap. 19:06, the Conveyancing and Law of Property Act, Chap. 56:01, the Real Property Act, Chap. 56:02, the Stamp Duty Act, Chap. 76:01 and the Registration of Title to Land Act, 2000, brought from the Senate [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken on Wednesday, June 17, 2020.  
[*Hon. F. Al-Rawi*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Errata to 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 ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Consolidated Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Unit Trust Corporation for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Annual Report and Consolidated Financial Statements of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

*Papers 1 to 3 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*

4. Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to the Progress of the Proposals to Restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended March 31, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. Sector Wide Approach Programme Loan Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Corporación Andina De Fomento in the amount of US \$200 million for the Development of the Sea and Air Transport and Tourism Infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
6. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Works and Transport to the Eighth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Measures in place to reduce Traffic Congestion on the nation's roads. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
7. Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards for the year ended September 30, 2017. [*(Hon. C. Robinson-Regis)*]
8. Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago National Schools Dietary Services Limited for the fiscal year 2016/2017. [*The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia)*]
9. Immigration (Amendment) Regulations, 2020. [*The Minister of National Security (Hon. Stuart Young)*]
10. Notification of Her Excellency the President in respect of the nomination of Mr. Vincel Edwards, for appointment as a Member of the Police Service Commission. [*The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)*]

## **JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **(Presentation)**

#### **Human Rights, Equality and Diversity (Male Academic Performance in Public, Primary and Secondary Schools)**

**UNREVISED**

**Mr. Esmond Forde** (*Tunapuna*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have the honour to present the following report:

Sixteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on Male Academic Performance in Public, Primary and Secondary Schools.

I thank you.

### **Finance and Legal Affairs**

#### **(Negotiating/Creating Trade Opportunities outside of Caricom)**

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the Member for Oropouche West, I have the honour to present the following report:

Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on the Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of CARICOM.

### **Standing Finance Committee**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:

Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Fifth Session (2019/2020), Eleventh Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Supplementation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2020.

### **PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS**

#### **Ministry of Education Online Teaching Platform (Percentage of Students Logging On)**

**Dr. Fuad Khan** (*Barataria/San Juan*): [*Desk thumping*] Is the Prime Minister concerned that less than 30 per cent of the nation's students are able to log on to the Ministry of Education's online teaching platform?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, I have no understanding of the basis for the 30 per cent except that it is an exaggeration when compared with the information available at the Ministry of Education. The information from the Ministry of Education indicates that 90 per cent of the students, in fact all students who have access to a cell phone would be able to access the platform and we do acknowledge, Madam Speaker, that the 10 per cent that would not have access to the platform and where there were difficulties were largely around the access to Internet services.

Madam Speaker, so therefore to say that less than 30 per cent can access the programme is grossly misleading and inaccurate and the Ministry's position in terms of determining what percentage of the students are accessing or can access the programme would have been arrived at by information coming to the Ministry from the principals and other stakeholders across the country.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much. Prime Minister, are you concerned at all with the statement from the TTUTA that they issued today, in which TTUTA has rejected the Government's inducement for teachers and principals, and have also categorically rejected the August date for the SEA, and they have raised serious questions concerning the process being used for that?—in the context of the lack of preparation of the students.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, Member for Oropouche East, I would not allow that as a supplemental question to the question asked. Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Dr. Khan:** Prime Minister, many students are having difficulties accessing the Internet services because of cost. Would the Prime Minister consider free broadband access to the students because of the COVID at this point in time?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** I do know that there are students in various parts of the

country who would have difficulties of one kind or another. In fact, in assessing the situation, one of the other difficulties we faced was that even where access was available and students could have accessed it, some students are not accessing this for other reasons, either discipline or other reasons which may not deter us at this point in time. However, I would leave that question to the Ministry to determine the logistics of any such proposal.

**Dr. Khan:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Would the Prime Minister consider looking at the free laptop service to students who are unable to afford cell phones and otherwise.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** I am not aware of what free laptop services he is talking about, Madam Speaker.

#### **Venezuelan Migrant Registration (Status of)**

**Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Given that the Government undertook a registration process of Venezuelan migrants in an effort to provide them with Registration Cards which would allow them to live and work in the country for one year, could the Prime Minister provide the status of these individuals as the one-year period comes to an end?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, I thought the Opposition had forgotten that and the expulsion of these people would have gone off their agenda. However, Madam Speaker, yes, thanks for reminding us that we did intervene and allowed approximately 16,000 Venezuelans to reside in Trinidad and Tobago. They were registered and that was done last July. And as of today, none of those registrants have seen their registration expire and going forward from July there will be an expiration on the original one year offering. But, Madam Speaker, given what has

happened in the intervening period with the COVID and all that we are experiencing, we anticipate that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will continue to extend this facility to the Venezuelans within our border up—and we can probably say that Cabinet would be asked to do so up until December 2020.

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, based on what you just said about the Venezuelan individuals living in Trinidad during the COVID period, do you feel that this Government, your Government, is responsible for the sustenance of these individuals during this COVID period?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** No, we are not. There are lots of Trinidad and Tobago citizens all over the world, and those countries are not responsible for the sustenance. What we have been responsible for is giving them the facility to reside within Trinidad and Tobago and to make their living here by being productive citizens of Venezuela temporarily domiciled in Trinidad and Tobago.

#### **General Election Date (Status of)**

**Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): To the hon. Prime Minister: Given the statements of the Minister of Finance that “it is likely, possible that there may be an election before the end of this fiscal year by September 30<sup>th</sup>” at the Standing Finance Committee on Wednesday June 10, 2020, would the Prime Minister state the specific election date?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** [*Laughter*] Madam Speaker, I am very happy to notice that my friend is paying attention to the Finance Committee meeting. I have given a lot of information on this matter, Madam Speaker, and the information remains valid. And that is, in Trinidad and Tobago, elections will be called when they are due. It is not this Government's intention to not call elections when elections are due. And I have assisted my friends before and I could assist him further. The election

in Trinidad and Tobago will be called no later than December 23, 2020, as per the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Arima Hospital  
(Construction Site Preparation)**

**Dr. Fuad Khan** (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Is the Prime Minister aware that the construction site preparation and start of the foundation for the Arima Hospital began in late 2014?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley)**: Madam Speaker, I am not aware of that. What I am aware of is that the people of Arima are very nervous that there is somebody trying to thief their hospital. Madam Speaker, the people of Arima have just received a spanking new hospital built by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And this matter about who owns it and who built it, the record will show, Madam Speaker, if you look at the question, it speaks specifically to construction site preparation, meaning, cut some grass, move some old wood and get ready for a construction.

Madam Speaker, the facts are as follows, that—not 2014, June 2015, June 2015 and I may assist my colleague, under the last Government, that was the commencement date of this project, June 2015. What happened was that functionaries of the last Government went to the site with a large picture, held both sides of the picture, took a picture of the architectural drawings and spoke about a hospital. The designs of that hospital were substantially completed in January 2016. The Government changed in September 2015. The construction started in March 2016. The topping off ceremony for that project for that hospital took place September 2017.

Madam Speaker, the construction continued apace and when the COVID hit us the hospital was substantially complete allowing the Ministry of Health to use



the third and fourth floors of the building as part of our COVID-19 preparation. The construction then was completed by the contractor and handed over to UDeCOTT on June 04, 2020. And UDeCOTT handed over to the Ministry and the formal opening of that hospital took place on June 09, 2020. Madam Speaker, the hospital, the last Government—

**Madam Speaker:** Your time is up. Supplemental, Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Dr. Khan:** Prime Minister, can you indicate to this House if you can, how long does it take to start a project in this country?

**Madam Speaker:** I will not allow that as a supplemental question.

**SEA Examination  
(Government's Consideration of TTUTA's Proposal)**

**Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Given the public response by the President of Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) that the Association would have preferred to have the SEA examinations held in October to allow students to reacclimatize and guarantee their readiness, could the Prime Minister state if the Government would consider TUTTA's proposal in the best interest of students and fiscal sustainability?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, this matter is one that concerns a lot of stakeholders of which TTUTA is but one. We have parents, we have the denominational bodies, we have the students and we have the wider national community. Specific to TTUTA and consultations, what the Ministry has done is to canvas the opinion of all those who are involved and having a say of which TTUTA is the main one. The position arrived at is that there were two competing positions: one, which is to have the exams as early as possible, and the parents and

students preferred that option. The other was TTUTA's option which is to have the exam in October.

Madam Speaker, if the elections—I keep saying “elections”.

**Madam Speaker:** Yeah.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** If the examinations are held in October as TTUTA is suggesting, it would mean that the first term of the year 2021 would be lost because if the exam is in October it means that the two-month period going forward would ensure that no placement of students could take place in what should be the first term. Those persons, like mainly parents and all those advocating on the students' part, are saying that if we hold the exams in August, and the date, August 20, 2020, is looked at, then it is possible to get the exams done and to, with minimal loss of time and disruption, get the students placed and save a substantial portion of the first term. To not do that is to lose the first term when there is an option to try and save it. And that is where the difference is, Madam Speaker.

So the Government is prepared to listen and we have been listening and consulting, but at the end of the day a decision has to be made. What should be confronting us now is whether TTUTA would cooperate with the rest of country to ensure that our students' interest comes first. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, to the hon. Prime Minister, based on what you just said would the first term if the exam is held in August as you just stated, what time would the first term restart given between—normally the first term starts in September.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, my understanding is that if the exams are held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August the vast majority of the school age population would not be affected and would return to school with some semblance of normalcy. [*Desk*

*thumping*] Those students who are affected by the exam and to be influenced by the outcome of the exam, a matter of a number of weeks—six to eight weeks? Six weeks, they would be disadvantaged for only six weeks and then the placement would be done and they will start their first term a little late. But the rest of the school year would have been saved for the other students. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, do you feel it is prudent to spend \$20million to assist in the one month of assisting the students preparing for that August exam as you just stated?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, if that is what it takes to get the students into school, yes, it is prudent. People have stolen much more money than that [*Desk thumping*] and were not interested in this country. The money that is being spent, Madam Speaker, for people to be paid to work during their vacation is their money. The money that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago spends is the money of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And if they have to spend it on the teachers to get the students into school that is prudently spent and this Government makes no apology for that. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Lee:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, given that we agreed to spend the 20million and the nurses are out there crying for some sort of payment during this COVID period, are you giving some consideration to reward these nurses?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** And the answer is—

**Madam Speaker:** Prime Minister, I would not allow that as a supplemental question. Member for Couva South.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much. Prime Minister, are you aware that the offer of the financial stipend in relation to the SEA exam has been rejected by the general council of TUTTA.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Well, Madam Speaker, I hope that is not so, because if that is so then what are our teachers telling us, that they are not prepared to work in their vacation even if they are going to be paid to work in their vacation, even if that is the only way that we can save the first term of the year. That is what they will be saying, Madam Speaker. And if that is what prevails then the parents and children should know that.

I am hoping, Madam Speaker, as I said earlier on, that in this matter of this COVID, we are all in this together and we are all having to make sacrifices and if that is what they have to make and they refuse to make it, Madam Speaker, then I would be very disappointed.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you. Prime Minister, could you inform this House if the health and safety guidelines as it relates to the concerns of TTUTA has been addressed and in terms of providing guidelines in writing to the recognized majority union, which will govern the conduct of the exam.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, an exam that is supposed to take place on August 20<sup>th</sup>, it is now mid-June. Those are issues that can be addressed and addressed properly and which will be and must be addressed, but it cannot be a basis for not making the decision as to having the exam.

**Interception of Communications (Amdt.) Bill, 2020  
(Refusal to Release Legal Opinions)**

**Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh** (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister: In light of the refusal of the Attorney General on Wednesday June 03, 2020, to release all legal opinions in relation to the Interception of Communications (Amdt.) Bill, 2020, is the Prime Minister willing to direct the Attorney General to do so in the public interest and transparency?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, I do not know what is the significance of the

date June 03, 2020. But what I do know is that, unlike what happened before, in this Government the Attorney General gives legal advice to the Government, to the Cabinet and not the other way around.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Could the Prime Minister inform this House how many legal opinions were received by the Attorney General in relation to this particular legislation?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, I would like to repeat this answer. In the Government of Trinidad and Tobago the Attorney General advises the Cabinet on matters of the law. The Cabinet does not advise the Attorney General on matters of law, whether it is one or 25 opinions that is the position of policy in this Government. And if you file by notice how many pieces of advice he got, the Attorney General would be able to answer you in the appropriate way at the appropriate time. Just file it by notice.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Prime Minister, could you inform this House as to the cost of the legal opinion that was received from Senior Counsel Fyard Hosein on this particular issue?

**Madam Speaker:** I would not allow that as a supplemental question. [*Crosstalk*]  
Member for Couva North.

**Tobago Self Government Bill, 2018**  
**(Status of)**

**Ms. Romona Ramdial** (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Given statements reported in the media on the Tobago Self Government Bill, 2018, attributed to the Prime Minister, could the Prime Minister inform the House if this Bill will be placed on the Government's legislative agenda prior to the dissolution of the Parliament in September?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, this is the most amazing question, and I too like

my colleague, the Member for Couva North, I am a little taken aback by the article written by my schoolmate Winford James. But I am also even more amazed that a Member of Parliament could be asking me in this House about a Bill that is on the agenda, whether it is part of the Government's legislative agenda. If it was not part of the Government's legislative agenda, how did it get to the Parliament and get to a joint select committee of Parliament which is functioning? The Joint Select Committee of Parliament on this matter is functioning. I have seen it said in that article by my colleague Winford James that I have said that the matter will be withdrawn by me. I have said no such thing.

And therefore, Madam Speaker, for a Member of Parliament to come here and ask me about the Government's agenda until September it is because it is on the Government's agenda why it is in this Parliament; and I will go further. It is because the party I lead is the only party at convention that has committed itself to further internal self-government for Tobago. We are the only party at convention that put the issue by resolution and said and did what we have done to bring it to a joint select committee of Parliament which is now under process. So I do not know where that question is coming from, from kindergarten in the Parliament.  
[Desk thumping]

**Ms. Ramdial:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister is very sensitive over this. [Crosstalk] Prime Minister, you said—[Crosstalk] Prime Minister—

**Madam Speaker:** Members! Can we have some order, please?

**Ms. Ramdial:** Prime Minister, referring to your statement in that article, you said you did not have the requirement to pass that Bill. Are you in a position to say that when this Bill is brought to the Parliament for the second reading that you are prepared to remove the special majority requirement to give Tobago self-government?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, this is getting more ridiculous by the minute. It is a statement of fact; 23 votes in this Parliament cannot change the Constitution in that way. [*Desk thumping*] And as a Member of the Committee, the Member has a responsibility to stop confusing the public. She is a member—that Member for Couva North, Madam Speaker, is on the Committee. Everybody knows how many seats the Government has in the Parliament. It would require a majority larger than what this Government has in the Parliament. So to ask me today whether I will do this or I will do that, Madam Speaker, I plead your assistance. Is there anticipation here?

**Trade with Venezuela  
(Sanctions Imposed by Rio Treaty)**

**Mr. Rodney Charles** (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister: In the light of warnings by a senior US envoy at Wednesday's AMCHAM AGM that Trinidad and Tobago businesses should not trade with Venezuela, is this country still standing by its position that it is not bound by sanctions imposed by the Rio Treaty?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Madam Speaker, notwithstanding the best efforts of my colleagues on the other side to create disturbance between Trinidad and Tobago and the United States, I would go as far as to say I do not know that it took a meeting at AMCHAM for Trinidad and Tobago's businesses to know that they do not trade with Venezuela and that has not been happening, notwithstanding the efforts of the Opposition to tell the world the vast untruth that we had traded fuel to Venezuela.

But furthermore, let me clarify finally, Trinidad and Tobago does not recognize Juan Guaidó as the President of Venezuela nor his appointees as representing the Government of Venezuela. Trinidad and Tobago acknowledges

under the UN Charter that the sitting Government of Venezuela is the Maduro Government. And whenever any agency like the OAS or anybody else allows Guaidó representatives to participate in decisions, those decisions are queried by Trinidad and Tobago and we reserve our position on that. And that is *punto final*.  
[*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Charles:** The United States has said, “You could withdraw,” and if we do not we must abide by the sanctions. Do you intend to withdraw from the Rio Treaty?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, these parliamentarians are coming here and telling me, “the United States say”. Madam Speaker, is that how they make policy for Trinidad and Tobago?—“The United States say”. I would have thought he would get up here and say Trinidad and Tobago had said what I have just said. We took a position which is our right not to acknowledge Guaidó as the President of Venezuela and you coming here and telling me the United States say? Madam Speaker, I wish my colleagues on the other side would stop undermining the foreign policy of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] There was a time in an earlier era when the people in Parliament would have been put to the sword for that.

**Madam Speaker:** Supplemental, Member for—

**Mr. Charles:** Okay, I give way. I give way to—[*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche East.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much. Prime Minister, in light of your statement and response, could you confirm that this country, without a Cabinet decision, wrote the OAS for a reservation on the decisions taken in January to what is called “Register your Reservation” which became a footnote and you are still binding by those decisions of the international body in relation to the Rio Treaty.

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago is



comprised of Ministers acting on the authority of the Cabinet and the foreign Minister and his team. They are part of the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago insofar as decisions are made. This attempt to separate the foreign Ministry from the Cabinet is puerile and dangerous.

**Mr. Charles:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister, is it in Trinidad and Tobago's best interest for there to be policy dissonance between our official position on sanctions, that of our largest trading partner on the second hand, and that of the advice given to local businesses by a senior US envoy?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker, are you hearing my colleague from Naparima? Madam Speaker, a position taken by Trinidad and Tobago in the well-considered and civilly put forward position of our foreign policy is here being attacked by Members of the House of Parliament on the grounds that another country has an issue with it. Trinidad and Tobago is a responsible country acting responsibly, and notwithstanding the best effort of the Opposition, we maintain our best relations with the United States of America. [*Crosstalk*] "These people for real?"

**Dr. Moonilal:** Thank you very much. Prime Minister, are you aware that the position you are articulating is in contradiction with the Venezuelan Constitution itself and you are undermining the national interest of Trinidad and Tobago? [*Crosstalk and desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Prime Minister— [*Crosstalk*] I am not allowing that as a supplemental question. It is out of order. Member for Naparima.

**Mr. Charles:** Prime Minister, have you as Prime Minister taken steps to advise Government Ministries and state agencies that they should not do business with Venezuela and if they do they should seek your prior approval?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, I have done no such thing because it is not

necessary. Up until the attempt by the United National Congress to tell the Americans that we had sold fuel to Venezuela, there was absolutely no issue and there still is no issue because that lie has not succeeded. [*Desk thumping*]

**Seasonal Agricultural Programme in Canada  
(Arrangement Made by the Government)**

**Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh** (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister: In light of COVID-19, could the Prime Minister inform this House what decision has the Government arrived at in regard to the seasonal agricultural programme in Canada under a long standing arrangement existing for several decades?

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley)**: Madam Speaker, this is called the Rip Van Winkle question. The Minister of National Security at a public press conference to the world, two or three days ago, Wednesday, answered this question in its totality. And the answer was that, yes, we have come to a position after long consideration. We have been in consultation with our Caricom partners, we have harmonized our position with Jamaica and we received a pre-action protocol from one of their imps saying that they are going to sue the Government for not doing it. But what the Government has done, the Government has come to a position that we are aware that at the farming locations in Canada there are outbreaks of “COVID-14” where deaths are even reported. We have indicated to those who are interested to go to those locations that these are the conditions. We have also indicated that we are going to facilitate their exit but that there are certain concerns and the Attorney General's Office is doing a release and discharge and indemnity agreement which will be applicable to their exit and therefore everything, Madam Speaker, would be ready for them to go and take their chances as they are demanding to do and get employment in Canada, but being told that the Canadian Government's position is

that if they do get infected in Canada they will have to make their way back home to Trinidad and Tobago because they will not be allowed to get health care treatment in Canada. Madam Speaker, we have made that public last Wednesday in a fulsome discourse by the Minister of National Security and I do not know how this question “end up” here coming from my colleague from Couva South.

**2.10 p.m.**

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Prime Minister, based on your response could you inform this House if the Cabinet has taken a decision that if our nationals return to Trinidad and Tobago they will have to pay for their quarantine?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, the Cabinet has taken no such decision.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Thank you very much.

### URGENT QUESTIONS

#### COVID-19 Testing at Major Hospitals (Status of)

**Mr. Rodney Charles** (*Naparima*): To the Minister of Health: Could the Minister provide the status of the decentralisation of COVID-19 testing at major hospitals throughout the country, including Scarborough General Hospital, Port of Spain General Hospital, San Fernando General Hospital, Sangre Grande Hospital and the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex?

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issue of testing is one that causes a lot of angst globally because of lack of information and understanding. Trinidad and Tobago, like other Member states, use CARPHA's gold standard PCR which is 99.6 per cent accurate. We did not follow the UNC in doing rapid tests or antibody testing. We did not follow the CDC where initially those tests were incorrect. To date, we are testing at two sites, CARPHA and the virology lab on the compound of Eric Williams. So you have two sites up now. Tobago received their machine.

They are now in the process of clearing through customs their test kits. That would be a third site. Because of the embargo placed by the United States on equipment and supplies leaving the United States, the PCR machine at San Fernando, which is an Abbott machine, the test kits only came in today because of the embargo.

So in very short order, we would have moved from one testing site to now two to four. So that would be more than sufficient to cover Trinidad and Tobago. One of the reasons we are not looking to expand—and I had this discussion with the Chief Medical Officer—is to manage the quality assurance and the quality control issues. So we will be having four sites up and running in the shortest space of the time. Currently, we have two. Thank you very much.

**Dr. Khan:** Minister, would you be considering doing randomized testing during that process and increasing the amount of areas?

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** Yes. Thank you. So we have in fact have been doing randomized testing through the communities testing programme, and to date we have done 1,558 through the counties in Trinidad and Tobago. So your answer is yes, and we have started that since the 11<sup>th</sup> of May. But, Madam Speaker, one of the reasons why we just cannot test and I will give you some interesting statistics. Acute viral illness in January of 2020, the cases rank as follows between 1,005—1,009. Since we instituted the public health measures do you know what is the incidence of viral illness in Trinidad and Tobago today? —230. We are now at 15 per cent of our January figures, and that impacts on the number of COVID suspect cases because suspect cases form a subset of acute viral illnesses. So acute viral illness have dropped by 85 per cent since January of this year to now from a high of 1,505 to 230.

So, Madam Speaker, yes, we are doing community testing, but all the

measures this Government has put in place, from closing schools on 13<sup>th</sup> of March, closing the borders of 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, have had a positive impact and a significant reduction of all viral illnesses, respiratory including gastrointestinal. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Charles:** Could the Minister explain why, given this decentralization and the statistic that he has articulated, why is it that a country like St. Kitts/Nevis has, on a per capita basis, done 20 times the testing Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, as I have said from the beginning, you cannot compare apples with oranges. I have just said the data shows a precipitous decline in acute viral illnesses, which will be a function of, and lead to a function of the number of tests that you do. So if nobody has respiratory symptoms, if nobody is coughing, if nobody has a runny nose, if acute viral illnesses drop from 1,505 to 230 your need for testing is significantly less, and then you have to look. When did St. Kitts close their borders? When did St. Kitts schools? When did St. Kitts ask people to wear masks? When did St. Kitts close off non-essential work? So, as I have said, you cannot compare apples to oranges. Trinidad and Tobago have been ranked number one in the world because this Government followed its own path. Thank you very much.

### **Electronic Bracelets Programme (Implementation of)**

**Ms. Ramona Ramdial** (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: In light of the recent murder of a woman by a repeat offender due to domestic violence, could the Minister state how soon will the electronic bracelets programme be implemented simultaneously with the issuance of protection orders?

**The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam

Speaker, first of all it pained the Government to see this recent incident, and our sympathy goes out with the family. Madam Speaker, the Government is about to proclaim the legislation, the electronic monitoring legislation, as we debated it recently. The team and set up to do the electronic monitoring is all in place and ready to begin straight away, but there is a process before protection orders can be issued by the court. So once it is proclaimed, which will happen within the next week, we at National Security are ready to implement and will do so once the courts begin making the relevant protection orders.

### **STATEMENT BY MINISTER**

#### **FISHERIES MANAGEMENT BILL, 2020**

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am authorized by the Cabinet to make the following statement.

On January 13, 1992, I assumed office as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for what at the end was a term of three years and 10 months. My first job in the public sector was as a fisheries officer in Tobago, so by the time I was appointed Minister with responsibility for fisheries I was in fisheries management, and more specifically that fact that for 76 years the country's fisheries resources were managed via a piece of legislation with a mere nine sections. One of my early tasks, Madam Speaker, was to move to review that short piece of legislation in the context of all that had been happening globally, in particular the need to preserve fish breeding grounds, the need to improve craft and fisherfolk safety, and the need to ensure that we are fishing sustainably.

- In 1992, Madam Speaker, under my leadership as Minister, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO, initiated a

- process for updating the fisheries legislative framework. This was in recognition of: the severe constraints in the range of management options that could be applied under the 1916 Fisheries Act;
- the limited legislative support for implementing international obligations as a consequence of Trinidad and Tobago ratifying, acceding, and becoming signatory to a number of fisheries and fisheries-related regional and international agreements and conventions; and
- the need to implement international best practices in fisheries management.

Madam Speaker, when I took the Ministry along this route 28 years ago, I could not imagine that the final product would arrive 28 years later.

Madam Speaker, upon my appointment as Prime Minister on September 08, 2015, this work came back to me and it fell to me as Prime Minister to appoint a Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to bring this work to fruition. I am here today because the work, 28 years later, is sufficiently advanced to lay today a Fisheries Management Bill in this House. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, this process spanned almost three decades, with legislative exercises being undertaken in five major periods: 1992—1997, 2004—2007, 2010—2012, 2013—2015 and 2017 to present, with five draft Bills being developed in 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015, and this 2020 Bill that is being laid in this House today.

Of these five drafts Bills, Madam Speaker, the 2011 and 2014 drafts were presented to previous Cabinets but did not go much further. The 2018 draft Bill presented by the current Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was approved by our Cabinet as a draft, and this has advanced to this stage as a 2020 Bill ready for the consideration of the Parliament. Madam Speaker, let me briefly retrace our steps in this 28 years.

Madam Speaker, 1992—1997. In June 1992, Cabinet approved the first comprehensive review of the legislative framework for fisheries management in Trinidad and Tobago. Then, in 1993, consultations with stakeholders commenced, supported by a legal counsel of the FAO. Recommendations included the creation of new and comprehensive legislation to consolidate existing legislation, and extend the substantive and geographical coverage to address issues of concern to the fishing industry and the needs of fisheries administration and development.

Subsequently, in 1995 the FAO legal office in Rome produced the document entitled a Bill: “An Act to repeal the Fisheries Act, Chapter 67:51 to provide for the management of the fisheries resources in the waters over which Trinidad and Tobago has jurisdiction and for matters incidental thereto”. This 1995 Bill was drafted in collaboration with the Fisheries Division and the Chief Parliamentary Counsel, with inputs from several stakeholders including the Institute of Marine Affairs, the IMA; Maritime Services Division of the Ministry of Works and Transport; Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard; and the Tobago House of Assembly. The 1995 Bill underwent extensive review between 1996 and 1997.

Madam Speaker, nothing further happened until 2004. In 2004, efforts to advance the Bill resumed, and in accordance with a 2004 Cabinet decision a consultant was hired via the FAO to expedite the revision and finalization of the 1995 Bill. Stakeholders were again consulted, and then by 2007, the Draft Fisheries Management Bill and 2007 Draft Fisheries Management Regulations were produced.

We fast forward, Madam Speaker, to 2010. There were further delays between 2007 and 2010, and based on these delays in 2010 Cabinet agreed to the establishment of a Cabinet Appointed Committee, chaired by the Director of



Fisheries, to review, update, and finalize the 2007 version of the Bill and Regulations. This Committee produced the 2011 Draft Fisheries Management Bill and 2011 Draft Fisheries Management Regulations which emanated from extensive review and amendment of the 2007 Bill and Regulations by the Cabinet Appointed Committee, with inputs and guidance from both technical and legal experts from Ministries and Government agencies. In 2012, the 2011 Bill and Regulations were submitted to Cabinet and were subsequently referred to the Legislative Review Committee of the Cabinet for further consideration and advice to Cabinet.

Madam Speaker, in 2013 and 2014, the 2011 Bill was subjected to further review by stakeholders. The comments from this review were considered in a process of amendment with the assistance of a legal consultant with expertise in criminal law, and these amendments led to the development of a 2014 Bill which was submitted to Cabinet and again referred to the Legislation Review Committee of the Cabinet for further consideration and advice to Cabinet. Although the 2014 Bill was submitted to Cabinet, the desire to make further amendments persisted and after several further consultations with stakeholders, a 2015 Bill was produced.

Madam Speaker, if we examine the period of 2015—2020, in September to October 2015 the Government commissioned a review of the existing draft legislation and a review of the Ministry's policies and activities in fisheries and aquaculture. In November 2015, the European Commission Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (EC DG MARE) conducted a mission to this country to review and evaluate national fisheries management arrangements to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The review was conducted in the context of the country's compliance with binding obligations under existing International Conventions and Laws to which we have acceded.

The evaluation report stressed that that the current national fisheries legal framework does not specifically address the IUU fishing and identified a number of deficiencies in the administrative and legal framework for fisheries management; inter-agency collaboration for integrated fisheries monitoring; control and surveillance; and co-operation with other States' vessels who utilize our ports. The EC DG MARE reviewed the 2015 Bill and concluded that a number of improvements were needed in order to ensure fulfilment of basic principles of international law.

Madam Speaker, let me say that again, notwithstanding the establishment of a Cabinet Appointed Committee in 2010, the 2011 Draft Fisheries Management Bill and 2011 Draft Fisheries Management Regulations produced in 2011, the inputs and guidance from various experts, further review by stakeholders in 2013 and 2014, the development of a 2014 Bill, further consultations with stakeholders, and the development of a 2015 Bill, the European Commission Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries found that 2015 Fisheries Management Bill to be woefully inadequate. In particular, the Commission found that there was a severe inadequacy in the national fisheries management arrangement to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Madam Speaker, on that basis this country was pre-identified as a non-cooperating State in the global fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and was assigned a yellow card as a warning. If Trinidad and Tobago did not make progress on the areas of deficiencies in national arrangements to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, the country faced listing as a non-cooperating third country and would be assigned a red card in accordance with Article 33 of the EU Regulation 1005/2008 concerning the fight against illegal,

unreported and unregulated fishing. The implications of a red card, Madam Speaker, are catastrophic not only to our local fisheries sector, but also to our regional neighbours and to our relationship on this and other matters with the European Union.

At the same time, Madam Speaker, there was an ambitious project in the 2010—2015 period on the abuses of the law and regulations dealing with trawling, particularly by large industrial trawlers. Upon review in 2016, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries concluded that the work attempted in the 2010—2015 period was inadequate, largely impractical, and in large measure was likely to expose the State to significant liabilities. It was the view of the Government that the legislative work on the management of fisheries should take precedence. Madam Speaker, on the recommendation of the Commission, this country instituted a plan of action to address the deficiencies highlighted in the Evaluation Report.

In 2016, Cabinet agreed to the establishment of a Cabinet-appointed committee for a term of six months to finalize and initiate the implementation of an action plan to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the ports and waters under the jurisdiction of Trinidad and Tobago; to accept the offer of technical assistance from the EC DG MARE to review the 1916 Fisheries Act; and to develop a new Fisheries Management Bill which would meet all this country's local, regional, and international commitments. Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the Government, via the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, embarked on a project with FAO titled "TCPF: Strengthening Fisheries Legislation in Trinidad and Tobago - Focus on Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing", with a timeline of July 2017 to December 2018. Madam Speaker, after much stakeholder

consultation, in April 2018 a first draft of this 2020 Bill was finalized for the consideration of Cabinet before being referred to the LRC of the Cabinet.

Madam Speaker, in June 2018, two years ago, the Cabinet approved the first draft of this 2020 Bill and requested that it be reviewed by the Legislative Review Committee of the Cabinet supported by the Chief Parliamentary Counsel and other officers of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. Since that time, this Bill was subjected to extensive work by the Legislative Review Committee; the Chief Parliamentary Counsel; the Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; the FAO, and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA); and several other stakeholders including the Tobago House of Assembly, fisherfolk and fisherfolk groups.

Madam Speaker, let me be very specific on these consultations which took place even after the Cabinet approved the first draft of this 2020 Bill and requested that it be reviewed by the LRC of the Cabinet supported by the CPC. Madam Speaker, there were 153 organizations represented at these consultations. This consultation generated a 200-page report. There were 539 recommendations for amendment to the Bill, and these recommendations were received from more than 50 organizations attending the consultations. Madam Speaker, of these 539 recommendations, 204 were accepted for inclusion in the Bill. Thereafter, the Bill was previously approved as a first draft by the Cabinet in June 2018 when it underwent significant review by LRC, and CPC, and FAO in order to accommodate the views expressed at the consultation and approved for further consideration.

Madam Speaker, before this House today, laid by me as Prime Minister, is the end result of a work I initiated 28 years ago. [*Desk thumping*] Madam

Statement by Minister  
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Speaker, the FAO has supported Trinidad and Tobago all the way. The European Commission and its various organs including our country representatives have been extremely supportive, particularly on the issue of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) has provided technical support. Many regional and local organizations including the UWI, the THA and various Ministries have provided technical input. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries through about 15 Ministers, numerous Permanent Secretaries, and more than a dozen Directors of Fisheries, has been the lead Ministry on the creation of this final piece of legislation. For every version of a Bill, Madam Speaker, the Chief Parliamentary Counsel and other officers of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs have guided us through this very lengthy process.

Madam Speaker, the gratitude I express spans 28 years and more. The Bill before you now strengthens and incorporates fisheries management and international obligations in relation to its antecedent drafts as it allows for broader responsibilities, jurisdictions and powers in relation to fisheries management by the State and its representatives. It creates a legal basis for compliance by stakeholders. Madam Speaker, it establishes a legal framework for the State to fulfil its obligations as a flag, port, coastal and market State in accordance with the existing international framework for fisheries management and related sectors. It establishes the legal basis for the State to collect revenue through application fees for authorizations, licences and permits, as well as penalties that are significant for deterring in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and Madam Speaker, it provides a way into the future in which the law can be relevant for at least 20 years

as it provides for validity of measures to give effect to other agreements and treaties which Trinidad and Tobago may adopt in the future.

Madam Speaker, I save my final praise and thanks to the stakeholders whose lives and livelihoods this Bill seeks to protect:

- vessel monitoring and other safety and security measures would make seafaring less dangerous;
- families should expect loved ones to leave home, go to sea, and return home safely;
- the strict management of breeding grounds and the sustainable fishing of our waters are critical.

We must ensure that in the context of all that is happening around us, we can secure livelihoods particularly in the many fishing communities around Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, for the first time in 104 years a Bill is being laid to replace this old Fisheries Act. After several attempts, this Bill represents our best efforts to date. It has been endorsed by our international and regional partners. It takes into consideration the bulk of views expressed by local stakeholders. And, Madam Speaker, even then a Bill of this size, over 200 clauses, requiring a special majority, is best handled through a joint select committee of this Parliament. I so recommend that this House adopt this course. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche West.

**Mr. Charles:** I rise on—Madam Speaker—[*Interruption*]

**Madam Speaker:** I recognized the Member for Oropouche West.

**Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, having taken 28 years to bring this Bill, would this Bill include protection for all

Statement by Minister  
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fisherfolk—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche West, you will have to say something before—[*Interruption*]

**Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Pursuant to section 24(4) please.

**Hon. Member:** Protection?

**Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Standing Order. Having taken hon. Prime Minister 28 years to bring this Bill, would this Bill include any clause for coastal protection for all fisherfolk including the Carli Bay fishermen?

**Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:** Madam Speaker, the last time I looked at the map of Trinidad and Tobago, Carli Bay was part of Trinidad and Tobago, and therefore, what I have said here applying to fisherfolk of Trinidad and Tobago applies equally to the fisherfolk of Carli Bay.

**2.40 p.m.**

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2020) BILL, 2020**

Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019 (Act No. 21 of 2019) [*Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken later in the proceedings. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**FISHERIES MANAGEMENT BILL, 2020**

Bill to provide for long term sustainable fisheries in Trinidad and Tobago and to regulate fishing and fishing related activities in the fishery waters and in areas beyond national jurisdiction, to repeal the Fisheries Act, Chap. 67:51 and the

Control of Importation of Live Fish Act, Chap. 67:52, to amend the Tobago House of Assembly Act, Chap. 25:03, the Environmental Management Act, Chap. 35:05, the Marine Areas (Preservation and Enhancement) Act, Chap. 37:02, the Shipping Act, Chap. 50:10, the Archipelagic Waters and Exclusive Economic Zone Act, Chap. 51:06, the Conservation of Wildlife Act, Chap. 67:01, the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, the Fish and Fishery Products Regulations, Chap. 30:01 and the Imports and Exports Control Regulations, 1941, and for related matters [*Hon. C. Rambharat*]; read the first time.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE  
(APPOINTMENT OF)**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. I beg to move that in accordance with Standing Order 64(1)(c), the Fisheries Management Bill, 2020, be referred to the Joint Select Committee to be established for its consideration and report to the House by August 31, 2020. The names will be given in a subsequent Motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS**

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Notwithstanding the resolution of the House on Monday April 27, 2020, related to the speaking time during the period of the current global pandemic and following discussions with the Chief Whip, I beg to move that for today's debate on Motion No. 4 only, the speaking time be as follows:

- Minister of Finance and the first Opposition speaker be permitted to speak for one hour; and
- All other Members be permitted to speak for 30 minutes with no



- extensions.

**Madam Speaker:** [*Interruption*] This is put without any debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## **STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT**

### **(Adoption)**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Be it resolved* that this House adopt the Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Fifth Session 2019/2020, Eleventh Parliament, on the consideration for proposals for the supplementation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2020.

Madam Speaker, I rise to present the 2020 Supplementary Appropriation and Mid-Year Budget Review. I am presenting this review in the context of the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic and the sensitive framework for the reopening of economy. We have been witnessing the devastating human and economic toll which the coronavirus is leaving in its wake as it spreads around the world. With over seven million infections, and tragically, a high mortality rate now over 400,000, this virus is very different to previous pandemics. This is a worldwide health crisis. The world has changed beyond recognition.

To protect citizens, the global economy has been put on hold. Businesses have been shuttered and freedom of movement has been severely curtailed. The health crisis is now intertwined with an economic crisis. The outlook for the global economy has turned negative now at negative 3 per cent. The International Monetary Fund is projecting a global recession in 2020, worse than what occurred during the 2009 global financial crisis, but economic recovery is expected in 2021.

To get there, the IMF is pointing to the critical need for countries to prioritize containment and strengthened health systems supporting the extraordinary fiscal actions already undertaken by many countries.

In a base line scenario which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can gradually be unwound, the global economy is expected to grow by 5.8 per cent in 2021 as economic activity normalizes helped by policy support. However, there is extreme uncertainty about the global growth forecast. The economic fallout is affected by factors which interact in ways which are hard to predict such as the spread of the virus, the intensity and efficacy of containment efforts, the extent of supply disruptions, the repercussions of the dramatic tightening of global financial market conditions, shift in spending patterns, behavioural changes such as people avoiding shopping malls and public transportation, social distancing and confidence effects.

Trinidad and Tobago has not escaped the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. We were already experiencing a decline in natural gas prices and since September 2019, there has been a 40 per cent decline in natural gas prices. This decline has resulted from weak demand, the restarting of nuclear power plants in Japan, and the increasing availability of LNG from non-traditional exporters. In parallel and in the context of depressed demand conditions resulting from the global economic shutdown, oil prices collapsed and at one point in March 2020, WTI entered negative territory. Since then, Brent has rallied to over US \$40 per barrel and clearly the compliance by oil producers with their committed production cuts is paying dividends but projected price increases will depend increasingly on the cost of the virus and the associated demand conditions.

Madam Speaker, consequent on the declaration by the World Health Organization of the virus being a pandemic, this PNM administration, under the

astute leadership of Dr. the Hon. Keith Rowley, recognized early that the high transmissibility of the virus could lead to the possibility of our citizens being infected and loss of life. The health and safety of our citizens thus became the centrepiece of our public policy. We also understood that the economy would be affected by the pernicious effects of the virus. All available resources and expertise were therefore mobilized to design and implement a comprehensive response to overcome the potential health and economic crisis.

Accordingly, since the arrival to our shores of the virus in March 2020, we have been able to contain community spread through effective and carefully thought-out Public Health Regulations, border controls, stay-at-home orders, self-distancing procedures and good hygiene practices. Since March, we have recorded only 117 cases, most of which were imported and our testing and treatment programme to identify, isolate and treat where necessary, infected citizens is ongoing. More importantly, our testing capability is now more than adequate to meet our needs. Our approach has been to ensure a systematic resumption of economic activity which is now taking place in a measured and safe manner and in so doing, this Government will protect the lives of our citizens at all costs and will not be reckless with human life. We are thus reopening the economy based on the best available scientific and medical advice.

Madam Speaker, during this pandemic, whatever the health sector needs the health sector will receive. Substantial budgetary resources have been directed to the health sector and this has been aided by external financial support. Additional medical personnel have been hired, medical equipment and personal protective equipment have been sourced, hospitals and medical facilities have been and are being upgraded and commissioned where necessary and specific sites are dedicated to treating infected people. Stepdown convalescent facilities are also now in place.

We have created a health system parallel to the traditional health facilities to respond specifically to the pandemic which has been and continues to be an extremely effective approach.

Allow me now to share with Members of this House, the principal elements in our comprehensive package of policies which have been put in place to address the unprecedented humanitarian public health and economic challenges posed by the pandemic. While the full effects and duration of the virus are still uncertain, our strategic initiatives have been swift and decisive as we stop the spread of the disease and minimize its economic consequences, and we did this all in the context of erosion of our oil and gas tax revenue base. Our fiscal and monetary response has provided a bridge to support businesses and individuals to help to ensure that the recovery will be as robust as possible.

At this time, I would like to express our sympathy to all the families and communities which have been affected by this pandemic. I would also like to commend our devoted and hard-working health care personnel, medical practitioners and essential workers for their collective responsibility for ensuring the containment of the pandemic. They are all doing a tremendous job and they deserve our eternal gratitude. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, early on as we sought to mitigate the health impact of the pandemic on our citizens, we recognized that economic activity would be curtailed and that particular economic sectors would be seriously affected, including tourism, hospitality, manufacturing, trade, distribution, construction, personal and professional services and the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors. We thus responded quickly and decisively with a broad set of policy measures aimed at assisting the poor and vulnerable, protecting businesses, jobs and incomes, maintaining financial resilience and sustaining economic activity. Accordingly, a

targeted and sizeable financial support programme is providing a safety net for the most vulnerable households and businesses as follows:

- 25,000 existing beneficiaries under the Food Support Programme have received additional funding.
- 50,000 individuals who have lost their jobs or who have had their incomes reduced have become additional beneficiaries under the Food Support Programme.
- 20,000 households have become beneficiaries under the Food Support Programme being households which receive meals from the School Feeding Programme.
- 42,000 current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant programmes have had their income support increased.
- 47,000 individuals who lost their jobs or had their income reduced have received salary relief or income support grants.
- Almost 3,000 citizens who have not yet received their senior citizens pension are receiving \$1,500 in food support.
- Almost 500 individuals who have not yet received their disability assistance are receiving \$1,000 in food support.
- 1,400 families in direct need have been provided with hampers during the stay-at-home period.
- 30,000 families in direct need are receiving food vouchers and up to 10,000 families are receiving or will receive rental assistance.

Madam Speaker, in this creative social agenda, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is currently processing applications for income support grants of up to \$1,500 per month per household for persons who are outside of the National Insurance Scheme and the Board of Inland Revenue

systems, who have lost their jobs or incomes as a result of the COVID-19 measures. That is persons in the informal economy. I am told that 25,000 such grants have been paid so far by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Rent relief grants of up \$2,400 per month are also available. These and other social support measures will cost up to \$400 million for the period up to July 2020.

The Government has expanded the reach of the Food Support Programmes by enlisting the assistance of our churches and religious bodies. Grants totalling \$10 million per month for three months, May, June and July, have been made available to religious bodies in proportion to the size of their congregations to allow them to distribute food to the poor and to the needy in accordance with their existing procedures and programmes.

The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is distributing \$30 million for food support within the 14 municipal regions in Trinidad. This programme began in May 2020 and will end in July 2020. Emphasis on these food support programmes will be placed on the supply of fresh produce as well as traditional processed foods.

The Ministry of Works and Transport is providing a one-time fuel relief grant in the amount of \$2,000 to 5,000 active maxi-taxi owners in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as one-time fuel relief grant in the sum of \$750 to be made available to approximately 15,000 registered owners of active taxis at a total cost of over \$21 million.

The Ministry of Finance is now at an advanced stage of processing payments of salary relief grants designed for persons registered for national insurance and whose employment has been terminated or suspended without pay as a result of the Public Health Regulations. These grants are up to \$1,500 per month for up to three

months and so far over 22,000 persons have received these salary relief grants and this is in addition to the 25,000 persons who have received the income support grants from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. These 22,000 persons who have received the salary relief grants represent 70 per cent of eligible applicants at a cost of over \$32 million.

Madam Speaker, I wish to point out that financial assistance is generally channelled to the working population in many countries utilizing tax and social security data. This is particularly true of the United States and Canada where all citizens have social security numbers or internal revenue service registrations. In Canada, registration with the Canada revenue authority is an essential requirement and banking accounts are critical requirements. However, Madam Speaker, as I have said before, it is a matter of concern that only 420,000 workers or 68 per cent of our labour force in Trinidad and Tobago of 620,000 are registered for national insurance, with 200,000 individuals or 32 per cent of the labour force outside of the formal economic system. This must be corrected. But in the interim, unlike other countries, we are helping one and all, registered or not, whether in NIS or outside NIS. We are helping everyone. [*Desk thumping*]

In addition to individual financial assistance, we are improving the cash flow for our business sector to maintain employment. Payment of outstanding arrears of VAT refunds to businesses is being accelerated, thereby easing the financial and economic burden on businesses during this strenuous time and facilitating in the process some measure of business continuity. Importantly, by this measure, we envision the preservation of jobs at a time when most people need them.

In March 2020, we issued over 3,800 VAT refund payments in cash to businesses with outstanding arrears of \$250,000 per VAT period or less at a cost of \$260 million. A few weeks later, we made the decision to pay out a further \$200

million in cash in VAT refunds to businesses owed between \$250,000 and \$500,000 per VAT period, bringing the total of VAT refunds paid out in cash within a period of four weeks to \$460 million. The remaining VAT arrears are being settled through the issuance of interest-bearing bonds. These fully tradeable bonds bear interest at the rate of 3.3 per cent over three years and are already being purchased by financial institutions from bondholders at par, that is, 100 cents on the dollar. At last count, we had issued almost \$900 million in VAT bonds in just two weeks, a tremendous achievement by our Inland Revenue Division.

We are also taking the opportunity to expedite income tax refunds to individuals. To date, \$240 million in income tax refunds has been paid out to 25,000 individuals, thus clearing off all outstanding individual income tax refunds. In just over two months therefore, we have made accelerated tax refund payments in cash or bonds totalling \$1.6 billion, [*Desk thumping*] all designed to inject money into the economy to keep people in jobs during this difficult period. Accelerated payment of corporation tax refunds, via bonds or otherwise, is also being seriously looked at.

Madam Speaker, we have provided the credit union sector with \$100 million for soft loans to their members. With these funds, credit unions will now be able to provide affordable loans of up to \$5,000 per month for three months or 15,000 in total to their members to carry them through this period. These loans will be priced at half the usual interest rate and will have very favourable repayment terms with a suitable moratorium. Another \$100 million will be made available in due course to the credit union movement specifically for small and medium enterprises.

We have also finalized a Government-guaranteed soft loan programme for small and medium enterprises in an amount of \$300 million to be administered by First Citizens Bank Limited. These businesses represent an integral part of our



economy and make a valuable contribution to employment creation. The programme targets small and medium enterprises with annual gross revenues of between one million and 20 million and the funds being advanced are intended for salary payments, working capital and purchase of raw material. These loans will be interest free with a moratorium of two years. For businesses with less than \$1 million in annual revenue, the National Entrepreneurship Development Company would be given the mandate to manage a grant facility which will be resourced with an allocation of \$30 million.

We have also made available to the Eximbank a US \$25 million per month facility for a minimum of three months to fund established importers to bring in food, pharmaceuticals, sanitary products, PPE and other essential supplies during the period of COVID-19. This special forex window ensures that there are no shortages of these essential items. We have also assisted our UWI students at Mona, Jamaica and Cave Hill, Barbados with grants for the purchase of food and other students at regional institutions would be assisted in due course.

The Central Bank is also working very closely with us to help the economy navigate through these difficult circumstances and so far reserve requirements for the commercial banks have been reduced by the Central Bank from 17 per cent to 14 per cent and the repo rate reduced from 5 per cent to 3.5 per cent. As a result, commercial banks have reduced their prime lending rates from an average of 9.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent, narrowing the spread between lending rates and deposit rates which will surely bring about improved efficiency within the banking system. It should be noted that whereas the reduction in the prime lending rate has an automatic beneficial effect on loans that have a variable interest rate, the commercial banks have advised that loan agreements with fixed rates require one-on-one consultation with the banks to discuss possible reductions.

Central Bank has also provided additional liquidity through the freeing up of \$2.6 billion previously held in reserve. Liquidity in the banking system is now at a record level of \$10 billion. The banks are also providing a moratorium on mortgages and instalment loan payments. Penalties are being waived on overdraft facilities on a month-by-month basis. Credit cards now have reduced rates and increased limits. Banks are being encouraged to reduce mortgage interest rates and discussions continue between the banks and the Ministry of Finance on this issue and interest rates generally.

Moneylenders have reduced interest rates and deferred payments. Credit unions are being encouraged to exercise forbearance. The Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Limited and Home Mortgage Bank are deferring mortgage payments up to three months in the first instance. The Housing Development Corporation is deferring mortgage payments for up to two months and more which will be extended in the context of the evolving situation. Import duty on VAT is being waived or remitted on certain medical and emergency supplies to mitigate the pandemic.

Let me now turn to Tobago, Madam Speaker. We are providing the Tobago House of Assembly with \$50 million or have provided them with \$50 million to fund the Tobago Regional Health Authority with its COVID-19 related expenses. We are providing \$5 million for channelling to the Enterprise Development Programme in Tobago to assist small businesses. We are making available a special fund of \$50 million to provide grants to Tobago hoteliers for hotel upgrade and financial support based on a plan developed and implemented by the Tobago House of Assembly.

To finance all of this, Madam Speaker, we will, among other initiatives, tap the domestic capital market for such resources that are necessary and this is being

facilitated by the recent amendment to the Development Loans Act which created substantial headroom for funding mechanisms. To that end, we have to date utilized just over 1 billion of the 10 billion available under the Development Loans Act and most importantly, Madam Speaker, not the 20 billion touted by the Opposition. We have just utilized 1 billion of the 10 billion available under the Development Loans Act. Moreover, we have approached multilateral institutions and development banks to ensure that appropriate external financing is also available to meet the requirements of the expanded fiscal deficit in 2020 and 2021.

In the interim, we have taken steps to allow for emergency drawdowns from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund not exceeding US \$1.5 billion or TT \$10 billion in any given year for budgetary support in exceptional circumstances such as the current pandemic. As a country, we have long recognized the importance of building up a foreign exchange buffer through our Heritage Fund which has a net asset value now of close to US 6 billion as at June the 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In fact, I checked today and it is currently also US \$6 billion, which is US \$400 million more than what was in the fund when we assumed office in September 2015 despite withdrawals over the period over the last four and a half years totalling US \$1.1 billion since 2015 and despite the recent volatility of the US stock market. At this juncture, I wish to announce that on May the 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Government withdrew US \$400 million from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for budgetary support and not the \$10 billion touted by the Opposition.

Madam Speaker, there is no question that fiscal 2020 will be exceptionally difficult although the pandemic is expected to fade in the second half of the year allowing for the gradual lifting of the containment measures and a reopening of the economy. In 2020 therefore, our objective has been to keep the economy moving, stimulate economic activity, provide financial assistance to individuals and

businesses and keep as many people employed as is possible including all workers in the public sector. We consider policy and delivery execution to be an essential requirement to ensure that our citizens are able to steer through the crisis and come out of it more resilient.

On April the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the hon. Prime Minister established a 23-person committee chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising Ministers and esteemed representatives from the business community, senior public servants, academia and non-governmental organizations to develop and design a roadmap for Trinidad and Tobago post-COVID.

### **3.10p.m.**

Madam Speaker, the Government has received a first draft of that plan, the aim of which is to guide action in the immediate short-term, as the country navigates a challenging period ahead in which a new normal and a high degree of uncertainty will prevail. I will say more about the plan later.

I now turn to the mid-year fiscal outturn. This mid-year review is taking place at a time without modern precedent. The pandemic has severely impacted economic activity which we are addressing with a robust fiscal stimulus and financial support programme. When all the priority areas are included and adjustments made in other areas, total expenditure for fiscal 2020 has been revised to 53.107 billion, almost the same as the original budgeted expenditure of 53.036 billion. Total revenue was originally projected at 47.749 billion, predicated on an average oil price of US 60 per barrel and a natural gas price for US \$3 per MMBtu. The original deficit was estimated at 5.208 billion or 3.1 per cent of GDP.

As stated on previous occasions, Madam Speaker, the adjustments included in the Supplementary Appropriation Bill, together with curtailment of expenditure within most Heads of Expenditure, as well as an anticipated decrease in total

revenue of approximately 9.2 billion, will result in a revised overall deficit of 14.533 billion or 8.8 per cent of GDP. When last I spoke on this matter in this House, Madam Speaker, I had estimated 15 billion. We are now estimating 14.533 billion.

The Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives met on Wednesday 10 June, 2020, and agreed to a supplementary appropriation of \$2,686,000,800 for the financial year 2020, in order to fund urgent and critical recurrent and capital needs to September 30, 2020. The supplementary appropriation is being sought by way of the Finance (Supplementary Appropriation) (Financial Year 2020), Bill 2020. Details of the proposed changes were circulated to all Members of the Standing Finance Committee and discussed at the meeting held on Wednesday.

At this juncture, let me advise this House that the supplementary appropriation of \$2,686,000,800 affects 15 Heads of Expenditure and comprises recurrent expenditure of \$2,518,374,800 and Development Programme expenditure of \$167,626,000. Funds for the supplementary appropriation will be sourced from overall savings in expenditure across all Ministries and Departments and from borrowings.

Apart from the information in the report of the Standing Finance Committee, which has been circulated to all Members, details of the proposals contained in the Bill will be addressed by various Members of Government, and so I will simply summarize at this stage.

Supplementary appropriation affects the following Heads of Expenditure. Firstly, the Judiciary requires an additional sum of \$99,648,000 to facilitate the payment of monthly rental for accommodation, to pay salaries to contract officers, and to fill vacant contract positions within the various courts. Funding is also

needed by the Judiciary to meet outstanding payments for miscellaneous expenses and to pay MTS for janitorial and security services. With respect to the Service Commissions Department, a sum of 2,142,000 is required to meet the payment of rental costs for several properties.

Elections and Boundaries Commission requires the sum of \$43 million to pay overtime to staff who are expected to work beyond normal working hours in preparation for general elections at some time in 2020, and also to pay officers employed on a short-term basis to carry out field work in the communities prior to election. Funding is also required by the EBC to meet the cost incurred as a result of recently filed petitions in relation to the 2015 parliamentary elections and other expenditure associated with the impending general elections due by December 2020, such as the payment of travelling and subsistence to field officers, the purchase of materials and supplies, cost for postage, printing and advertising, training and rental accommodation, and so on.

The Office of the Prime Minister requires the sum of \$47,220,000, in order to enable the National Security Council to meet operation expenditure and to facilitate most importantly the disbursement of \$30 million in funds to the major religious organizations to provide food support to citizens and residents who have been adversely affected by COVID-19. The OPM is also being given additional funding to meet debt service payments.

The sum of 105 million is required by the Tobago House of Assembly. The sum of \$50million is required to enable the Tobago Regional Health Authority to meet expenditure associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including training of health care workers, educating the public, establishment of primary health care facilities to meet the needs of persons in quarantine or self-isolation and manage patients who test positive for the virus, as well as maintenance of a distinct

pandemic response service to prevent disruptions in the primary and secondary care service in Tobago and for the acquisition of personal protective equipment and other equipment, as well as the hiring of additional staff.

Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum of \$50million is also required to enable the Tobago House of Assembly to administer the Tobago Tourism Accommodation Relief Programme, to give financial support to hotels and guest houses in Tobago and another 5million to provide relief to entrepreneurs whose businesses have been impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Finance requires the sum of \$880 million. The sum of \$180 million is required to make payments to banks for various COVID-19 social support services, such as food cards provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The sum of \$400million is required to enable the administration of a Salary Relief Grant to persons within the NIS system, to mitigate the financial challenges experienced by persons suffering loss of earnings as a result of the pandemic. Madam Speaker, how much more time do I have?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, you end at 3.44.31.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much. Further, the sum of \$200 million is required to enable the credit union facility programme as a strategic response to the pandemic. Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum of \$100 million is required to facilitate the award of contracts and the payment of project management fees to the National Infrastructure Development Company (NIDCO) for the construction of the new terminal and associated works at the ANR Robinson International Airport in Tobago. The sum of \$177,824,135 is required by the Ministry of National Security to effect payments of increments, overtime and allowances to officers of the prison service for the upgrade and maintenance of

the costal radar system to meet expenditure for the counter-trafficking unit and the Witness Protection Programme, as well as the rental of vehicles for covert operations.

Additional funding is also required to enable the Strategic Services Agency to make payments associated primarily with its CCTV project and other works and projects. Within the overall sum, the sum of \$5million is required to enable the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM), to meet the cost of preparation for the 2020 hurricane season, including expenditure on personal protective equipment, stores, vehicles and the National Alert State system.

Madam Speaker, the sum of \$76,550,000 is required by the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs to meet the payment of salaries for additional contract staff to pay outstanding fees to local and foreign attorneys for the provision of services, to enable the Legal Aid and Advisory Council to pay external council fees, to meet expenditure for the newly established public defenders department, and to effect the payment of arrears to permanent staff, contract officers, on the approval of terms and conditions of employment.

With respect to the Ministry of Health, the sum of \$224,582,640 is required to supplement the 2020 funding to facilitate payment to 11 new intensive care nurses from Cuba, 20 doctors attached to the Ministry of Health COVID-19 hotline and other staff in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the overall sum, \$184,669,990 is required to supplement the allocation to the four regional health authorities to enable the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The funds are to meet the cost for consumables, infrastructure and equipment, and the procurement of additional human resource services.

The sum of \$36,878,335 is required to facilitate the payment of interest on a number of loan facilities in the health sector for pharmaceuticals and other medical



supplies and for the redevelopment of the Central Block at the Port-of-Spain General Hospital and for the completion of the Arima Hospital, which was built by the People's National Movement, and nobody else.

Madam Speaker, the sum of \$21,405,000 is required to supplement the funding for the On-the-Job Training programme as a result of the 10 per cent increase in stipends in 2020. With regard to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, the sum of \$116,700,000 is required to cater for the 15 per cent increase in wages to workers and fees to contractors within the Community Environment and Enhancement Programme or CEPEP, announced in the 2020 budget.

The sum of \$20 million is required to supplement funding for emergency food support to needy households in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sum of \$40 million is required to enable the Rural Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago, to continue the National Reforestation and Watershed Rehabilitation Programme recently transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Madam Speaker, the sum of \$244,484,504 is required by the Ministry of Works and Transport for a fuel relief grant to 5,000 registered or active maxi-taxi owners, 15,000 registered or active taxi owners in the context of the adverse effect of the pandemic for payments on a bond which was secured for the implementation of the Programme for Upgrading Roads Efficiency or PURE, and to enable the National Helicopter Service to meet its debt obligations and for various expenses associated with the provision of the inter-island ferry service and the costal water taxi service in 2020.

The sum of \$35,374,200 is required by the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs for arrears of payments and current payments associated with the United

Nations peacekeeping operations and the United Nations regular budget and working capital fund.

The sum of \$30,276,000 is required by the Ministry of Communications to pay increments and allowances to monthly-paid officers, to meet additional expenditure associated with the televising and information-sharing sessions, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, provision of other services, works and supplies, as well as to pay outstanding bills and expenses for goods and services provided to the Printery, the National Archives and library services. Under the Public Sector Investment Programme, the sum of \$12,626,000 is required to pay outstanding amounts for the upgrade of equipment at Trinidad and Tobago Television.

With respect to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the sum of \$581,794,321 is required to enable the recruitment of additional staff to fill vacant positions within the Ministry, to provide additional financial support to NGOs, to enable meals, lunch and dinner to be provided to the homeless during the pandemic, to supplement the Senior Citizens Grant allocation, to cater for existing beneficiaries and meet new expenditure associated with the increase of the number of senior citizens accessing that grant and to supplement the 2020 social assistance programme allocation, to provide additional support to existing beneficiaries and income support to families who experience loss of income as a result of the pandemic.

Additional funding is also required for that Ministry for rental assistance to families where an income earner's employment was terminated or curtailed, to supplement the 2020 Disability Grant allocation through a top-up, and to cater for new beneficiaries, among several other things. And that is the summary, Madam Speaker.

The 2020 budget projected an overall fiscal deficit of 5,000,287.5, or 3.15

per cent of GDP for the whole year. For the purposes of the administration of the budget, which is frontloaded, Madam Speaker, an overall deficit of 5,000,885.6 was projected for the period October 01, 2019, to March 31, 2020, which would have been reduced later on as revenue came in. However, based on actual revenue received and expenditure incurred, the Government actually realized a deficit of \$5,387,000,000 for the first six months of the fiscal year, approximately \$498 million less than the projected outcome. This was as a result of lower than expected revenue collection and lower than expected expenditure.

Members are asked to note that the Ministry of Finance in its mid-year review of the 2020 budget was cognizant that certain areas require priority funding, especially with respect to the financial measures implemented with respect to the pandemic, in spite of the need to curtail overall spending. When all of these priority areas are included and adjustments made in other areas, as I indicated earlier, total expenditure has been revised to \$53 billion, 107.5 million; a small increase of approximately \$70.6 million over the original budgeted expenditure.

Further, with the adjustments included in the supplementary appropriation, together with curtailment of expenditure within most Heads of Expenditure, we are reallocating expenditure to priority areas, as well as the estimated decreases in total revenue in 2020 of \$9.2 billion, as I indicated previously, the fiscal deficit is now estimated at 14.533 billion.

Members are asked to be cognizant of the fact that the majority of the supplementary appropriation is in respect of current transfers and subsidies, helping people. This is due largely to the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unavoidable related expenditure which has ensued as a consequence. But I wish to assure you, Madam Speaker, and the wider population, that this administration will continue in 2020 to manage the country's financial resources in

a prudent manner.

Allow me now to summarize our policy response to the economic challenges created by the pandemic. As with all other countries, Trinidad and Tobago has been hit by the COVID-induced sharp fall in activity and the oil and gas price shock. But we have been proactive and have taken immediate measures to protect the population and prevent irreversible damage to the economy. After the initial shock of 2020, we therefore project a moderate rebound over the next 12 months, aided by the full use of short-term stimulative policies, which have been activated in support of the economy. This balance sheet flexibility is a differentiating factor, as compared to many countries of the region and once the necessary stimulus has helped stabilize the economy, we plan to bring our debt levels back on their earlier trajectory by the year 2023. We will do this at a pace that balances the goal of avoiding a contractionary consolidation while minimizing financial risk. It is noteworthy that our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund provides us with ample liquidity buffers.

Trinidad and Tobago's response, this Government's response to the pandemic was swift and proactive. Very early in the game, on January 30, 2020, we imposed restrictions on travellers from China and other at-risk countries, the first country in the western hemisphere to take this decision.

Following this was the creation of an Inter-Ministerial Committee reporting to the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Health and National Security, and the set-up of a parallel health care system, with necessary equipment, infrastructure and personnel. A series of public health restrictions then followed from March 19, 2020, which effectively contained the spread of the virus and prevented our health care system from being overwhelmed, as occurred in so many other countries. As a result, Trinidad and Tobago has been ranked by the prestigious Oxford

University as No. 1 in the world, in terms of its management of COVID-19 and its ability to exit the lockdown without undue risk to the population and economy. Thanks to this PNM administration. [*Desk thumping*]

We are now engaged in a purposeful, systematic and carefully-planned reopening of the economy, starting with the food, beverage and hospitality sector, then the industrial, construction, manufacturing, retail and distribution and services sectors. Churches are being allowed to resume activity and restrictions on outdoor activities and public transportation are being gradually eased, and so on. Partial reopening of our borders is occurring, with the carefully supervised return of nationals from overseas, while maintaining strict quarantine and isolation arrangements to mitigate against the spread of imported cases.

However, the combined shocks of the collapse in oil and gas prices and the disruption in economic activity both here and overseas have provoked major changes in our economic forecasts. Accordingly, we have revised our baseline scenario for macroeconomic projections, based on new energy price assumptions of US \$45 for oil and US \$2.90 per MMBtu for gas in 2021, we are looking ahead, in order to assess the actual impact on our economy, public finance and external situation. Based on our comprehensive fiscal stimulus programme, we now project a decline in GDP in 2020 of just 2.4 per cent, rebounding to a growth of 4.7 per cent in 2021, with a continuing inflation rate of 1 per cent or less, consistent with our policy of easing the burden of price adjustments on the population.

It is noteworthy that there are abundant resources to face gross funding needs over the next several years under the stressful conditions created by the pandemic, and there is ample financing available to cover the primary deficit and debt service.

Indeed, at this time, Trinidad and Tobago is unique among countries of the

region, in that there is no liquidity crunch, given the variety of funding sources available, in spite of the dislocation of the global market, including over \$20 billion in potential funding from multilateral agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Andean Development Bank or CAF, the World Bank, international and local banks, bilateral partners such as China and the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. And on top of all of this, we also have access to almost \$4 billion in low-cost funding, rapid financing instruments from the IMF, if at all necessary.

In order to maintain the economic momentum, we expect a temporary increase in our debt to GDP ratio to just over 70 per cent. But when this Government, Madam Speaker, when this Government returns to government within the next few months, having weathered the economic storm created by the pandemic, decisive and prudent action will allow us to bring back net public sector debt to GDP to its pre-crisis level of 63 per cent by 2023, owing to our medium-term fiscal responsibility approach and the recovery of the economy under the next PNM Government.

With respect to our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, despite withdrawals in 2016 and 2017, and most recently in May 2020, HSF assets have been on an upward trend in the recent years, reaching a high of US 6.5 billion in December 2020. The value of the Fund's assets decreased to US 5.7 billion in May 2020, following the COVID-19 outbreak and the collapse of world stock markets. But the Fund continues to recover most of its losses and as of today stands at US \$6 billion, US \$400 million more than when we assumed office in September 2015. It is noteworthy that under this Government, over the last five years, the HSF assets increased from just over 24 per cent of GDP to almost 28 per cent of GDP.

Following an influx of foreign exchange from the Heritage and Stabilisation

Fund and international loans, our foreign reserves are now also quite healthy at almost US \$7 billion, or eight months of import cover. Simply put, under this Government and my team at the Ministry of Finance, we are in a good place. This is why, after a grueling round of evaluations over the last months, in the midst of the pandemic, by four international credit rating agencies, namely Standard & Poor's, Moody's, Fitch and CariCRIS, we have maintained good credit ratings. This has reflected itself in the good performance of trades on the New York Stock Exchange of our 2016 US \$1 billion international bond, which continues to strengthen and improve in value, trading at very strong yields; testimony to the confidence of the international community in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

It is because of this excellent economic performance that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be rated by the prestigious *Economist* magazine as 15<sup>th</sup> in the world among 66 emerging economies, in terms of our ability to withstand the adverse economic effects of COVID-19, scoring well in all four categories such as public debt, foreign debt, cost of borrowing and reserve cover. Indeed, in terms of reserve cover, we have been deemed to be among the strongest emerging economies in the world. And, to be clear, this is not PNM saying so. It is *The Economist* and Oxford University determining how well we have done.

Madam Speaker, our overall policy response has provided a measure of relief and stability to the national community. In a confidence-inducing framework, the national economy is being kept alive and we are doing so in a transparent manner. We are keeping the phased approach to the re-opening of the economy under constant evaluation and we will continue to adjust phases as we learn more from the medical experts.

The pandemic has posed the most serious threat ever to our social and

economic well-being. However, this administration has acted and will continue to act forcefully, aggressively and proactively, utilizing all tools at its disposal to provide critical support to the economy during this challenging time, to create the conditions for its recovery and diversification and to ensure that the recovery as it commences becomes sustainable and job-creating and be put on a trajectory of a new normal.

And, Madam Speaker, consistent with our policy to seek the broadest possible consensus and advice from among some of the best minds in Trinidad and Tobago, the economic road map prepared by the committee of 23 is now providing ample guidance for us to take advantage of this window of opportunity. We are particularly pleased with the emphasis on both short-term and medium- and long-term objectives of the road map.

The implementation of a targeted and sizeable support programme to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable households and businesses is well advised and we will seek to expand the scope and focus of the social safety net, wherever feasible. We will reach out to the vulnerable individuals and communities to meet their basic needs, and very importantly, we will correct existing inefficiencies in the delivery system and harness technology to improve delivery and targeting of beneficiaries.

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

Civil society organizations will be accorded key roles in this exercise. Madam Speaker, the preliminary Roadmap Committee report focuses on eight sectors which would be the foundation for a revitalized economy: agriculture, construction, energy, manufacturing services, wholesale, retail and distribution, banking and insurance, small business and credit unions.

Tobago is accorded a special status. An enabling environment is critical to



the transformation process. The road map stresses that the agricultural sector should be geared to making the country a more food secured nation. Productive capacity is recommended to be increased with a reduced dependence on specific imported foods and accessibility to domestic produce, creating in the process strong linkages among the food, value and distribution chain. A significant agriculture stimulus package of \$500 million is proposed to launch this programme. The road map points to the need to revitalize the construction sector, create jobs, and economic activity in the quickest possible time, the commencement of a number of new projects injecting considerable funds into the economy. In parallel, new private sector shovel ready projects have been identified for immediate implementation.

The road map also emphasizes the urgent need for revitalizing the energy sector and an assessment of the sustainability of the gas value chain. Madam Speaker, with the support we are providing the manufacturing sector, the committee is of the view that we should quickly emerge from the shock brought about by associated closures. The tourism sector requires particular attention, the committee recommends a task force should develop a tourism recovery plan. Incentives should also be expanded as well as emergency support grants for micro-businesses and a liquidity support programme for small and medium-sized tourism related businesses.

The wholesale, retail and distribution sector is expected to undergo a transformation. Tobago has also undergone a severe shock on account of the closure of the borders to visitors, closure of restaurants and bars, and a sharp decline in inter-island traffic, and Tobago will receive all of the support it requires in terms of construction projects, expansion of its enterprise development programme, support for the hotel and tourism sector, and so on.

Madam Speaker, this very brief summary of the suite of policies is supported by a cogent, practical and compelling actions in the areas of the ease of doing business, building institutional capacity, critical support in infrastructure, and nation value systems.

I end by saying, Madam Speaker, that I am firm in my view that no other Government could have managed the crisis created by COVID-19 in the way that this Government has, this Dr. Keith Rowley Government. Our robust, sensible, proactive, efficient and comprehensive response to the virus has received worldwide acclaim and endorsement. I am proud to be part of this Government that has been ranked as number one in the world in terms of dealing with the multifarious demands and health and social and economic challenges caused by COVID-19, way and above and beyond all of the countries of Europe, United States and the Far East.

I thank you, Madam Speaker, and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Caroni Central.

**Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I noticed that the Minister of Finance congratulated himself and his Government for managing the economy well, and the assumption behind those congratulations is that they managed the economy well pre-COVID, and continued to do so during the COVID period

Madam Speaker, I do not think that the facts would bear that out. I think the story is very different indeed. The Government, Madam Speaker, called us out, all Members of Parliament, in March, to do two things, one, to get parliamentary approval for US \$1.5 billion or about just over 10—close to TT \$11 billion from the HSF, and to raise the ceiling for the Development Loans Act by \$10 billion.

And the earlier ceiling had basically been maxed out by the time they came to raise the ceiling. And the Opposition, we in the Opposition supported them, both to raise the ceiling for the Development Loans Act, and secondly, to draw down from the HSF to a limit of US \$1.5 billion or about TT \$11 billion. And we did that because we acknowledged the severity of the COVID demands and the crisis that it induced and we supported the Government's request in Parliament. All we asked repeatedly for was transparency, [*Desk thumping*] accountability, a restraint on unbridled spending, and that the Government focus on survival and rehabilitation for the country, because we knew that we were in a dire situation.

The Government had brought the Development Loans Bill long before COVID and they had been looking at the HSF for some time, long before COVID. But when COVID came it presented for the Government at the time a cover. They could ask Parliament to respond with a certain amount of legitimacy, and we, understanding the human crisis set in motion by a national shut down, because the economy was shut down, and the socio-economic dislocation that would ensue, we went along for the sake of citizens, for the sake of businesses and for the sake of the country.

The Government did not say what they would use the potential \$21 billion of funding for. The COVID pandemic was so all encompassing and there were so many problems to attend to, you had to have money to attend to the various needs and there was the catch all of deficit financing. So basically that was the approach, but we said okay, we went along. That was on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. Today, the Government has come following the committee meeting on Wednesday, for approval for \$2,686,800,000 to supplement the 2020 Budget of 53,036,000,000 approved in October 2020.

Now, I want to simply raise an issue of the sources of revenue of financial

support. The Minister himself talked previously, and I think today about US 300 million or about TT 2 billion from five multilateral agencies, US 30 million from the World Bank, \$130 million from the IDB, US \$150 million from CAF. There is domestic borrowing, local banks and financial institution of TT 500 million and from external sources for budgetary support we are told the Government is also negotiating—I do not know in that has been finalized—a US \$500 million from external sources the equivalent of \$3.4 billion.

So, Madam Speaker, when you take the \$21 billion, you add US \$20 million or TT \$140 million, another US 130 million or TT 910 million, another \$150 million or TT 1,050,000,000, you add 500 million domestic borrowing, and you add the external sources funding, which they are either negotiating or have completed, which is the equivalent of \$3.4 billion, you have a total of \$21 billion that is from the HSF and the developmental loan fund potentially. I am not saying that they have drawn down on that, and the Minister gave us some numbers today, and I will acknowledge the numbers so that he does not say that I am trying to mislead, but the end result of all of this is that the Government has at its disposal \$27 billion. So this is the potential they have in terms of the HSF drawdown, in terms of the development loans financing, and in terms of the loans from the multilaterals.

Now, we do not have any clarity on the grants. The Government got some grants as well. They got US 2 million from Republic Bank as a donation. They got US 400, 000 from the Developmental Bank of Latin America, CAF, or TT 2.7 million as a donation, as a grant, and from Shell they got TT \$3.6 million approximately or \$537,000 and so on, but we do not have any information about what that money was used for.

Now originally, the Government had a price assumption projected for oil of

60 and for gas for \$3, and those prices has been revised 25, 1.80 and for 2021 the Minister tells us today that he is going to revise it upwards again. So those were the assumptions at the time, and the end result is that we have those sources of funding that I mentioned, a combination of grants, and loans, and the HSF, and potential loans from the Development Bank, and we have of course the various expenditures that the Minister has mentioned and that we are debating here today, based on the committee report that has come to Parliament today.

The request to Parliament today is for \$2,000,686,800. Now, yesterday when we did that I thought that this was additional funding and it would be added to the budget, and I asked certain questions for that clarity. Those questions were either not facilitated or not answered and I left with the impression that in fact the money allocated prior to today, prior to the discussion on Wednesday was in fact all used up. Today we find that there are savings. So you have a \$53,036,000,000 expenditure, we had a revenue projection which was originally \$47,749,000,000. It is now 9.2 billion less. The original deficit was 5.3 billion and prior to that it was projected at 3.94. The projection given to us up till today was 15.5 and now the Minister tells us that it is likely to be 14.5 based on a combination of savings that they are able to accrue based on the oil prices that we mentioned, based on the revenue projected and assumed to be constant, and based on this additional expenditure.

Now, had there not been any savings, the budget would have been revised to \$55,000,722,800. So with the savings we have the reduced figure. I do not know if I took the exact number here, but it is just over 53 billion. Now out of the 2.7 billion or so that are being supplemented here, you only have \$167,626,000 that is being allocated for the Development Programme under the PSIP. Now, all the PSIP allocations are for the Tobago House of Assembly and for TTT. So the

\$2,518,374,800 are being used for recurrent expenditure under the 15 Heads. Now, I have to ask the Minister, because he went into the future, I have to ask the Minister, are these recurrent expenditure items seen as one-off and related to COVID-19 only? And which, if any, are likely to be repeated?

Now, he said that these additional funds will be sourced from the Consolidated Fund, but today he explained of course that they will come from a combination of savings as well as loans. So the question I have for him is: Would you clarify exactly what elements of the loan funding will be put into the Consolidated Fund to make sure that you have the expenditure number that you require to proceed with the Government's business? I think it would be useful also if the Minister could tell us how much of the original "53,036" allocated in the 2020 Budget remains to be spent. He talked about savings and in 2019 there was an unspent balance of 3.4 billion. So that is why I am asking the questions about savings.

No variations came to us in the committee meeting two days ago, and I do not know if there are any variations that the Minister might want to bring to our attention. I assumed on Wednesday that every Ministry kept their budget. I assumed that all the recurrent Heads have been used up, or will be used up, because at the Finance Committee I asked a question of the AG and it was not answered, it was not allowed, if all the recurrent Heads for which supplementation is being requested are exhausted? And the answer today based on the Minister's presentation would be no. There are savings. That is what I get out of his presentation. And that savings have now worked to reduce the deficit earlier projected of 15.5.

Now, this is a very significant thing, Madam Speaker, because we are adding \$2.7 billion in expenditure and we had a projected deficit of 15.5, and under

normal circumstances if that expenditure remained and this expenditure were added to it, we would then have a movement of the deficit of 15.5 to \$2.7 billion more, which will make it over \$18 billion. But the Minister is telling us today that the deficit will in fact be \$14.5 billion, and therefore it is important for him to clarify that and explain that to us so that we understand what is the combination of savings, and what is the combination of savings because we know the expenditure that will in fact allow the deficit to remain at the reduced rate now based on projections of 14.5?

So, when we look at the expenditure, Madam Speaker, by the voice and statement of the Minister of Finance at an earlier time, he had indicated to us that a safety net of about TT \$4.5 billion would be created. Up to July he had mentioned that TT 200 million addressed towards 75,000 households and 200 nationals were involved, and these involved additional support measures implemented by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Now, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April he mentioned a \$65 million had already been spent or committed on COVID-19 relief measures. He mentioned figures today on food cards. He talked about some of the grants. He talked about rent relief, he talked about the 30 million to religious bodies. He talked about the 20 million to Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, and he mentioned the 400 million salary relief grant linked to NIS, which originally had targeted 100,000 persons, and the Minister explained during the Standing Finance Committee meeting here that there had been some, I would not say mix up, but some uncertainty about the numbers and now they are really looking at about 80,000 people.

Now the problem with these grants, Madam Speaker, notwithstanding the numbers that the Minister gave us on Wednesday, and notwithstanding the numbers that he gave us today, based on my and our experiential knowledge of

people who have applied for these grants and have not received anything, I find a big discrepancy between the numbers mentioned by the Minister of Finance and the number of people who are complaining about not receiving those grants. Now, I do not know what the problem is, I will be quite frank with you. It has to be some kind of implementation problem. It has to be some kind of problem between the processing because I know a public servant will come to the Minister, the Minister asked how many people have applied for these things? They say, “Well, 56,000, and out of that we found such up to 48,000 who are okay, and out of that we have approved so and so.” And they tell you that, and of course they go about their business. The question is, how many of those 27,000 people now actually get the grants in their hand and are able to use it?

And I think, hon. Minister, I am not in any way casting aspersions either on your numbers nor am I casting aspersions on your good intentions to make these grants available. But I am saying based on experiential knowledge on the field and people complaining about these things, that there has to be a problem of delivery of these services to the people, because they could not be that—people send me WhatsApp in which they—when I tell them well what happen to the grant—sorry?

**Mr. Young:** Devon gave out your number “awot”?

**Dr. B. Tewarie:** No, my number is available to my constituents. I deal with WhatsApp every morning, and sometimes when you ask them they are so frustrated, that they would say something that they would not ordinarily say because they are so angry, and the equivalent of “forget that, I doh think I am going to get dat”. In some instances five weeks have passed, in some instances six weeks have passed, and they are just so frustrated. So I want to raise that as a real issue, Madam Speaker. It is real in terms of people hurting.

Now, the Minister mentioned the relief for the commercial banks, the



reserve requirement reduced from 17 per cent to 14 per cent, leading to a freeing up of \$2.6 billion making liquidity in the banking system—I thought it was about \$6 billion, but I think the Minister said today it was \$10 billion in fact, which is a healthy situation of liquidity. But that also raises the question. There was also the reduction of the repo rate from 5 per cent to 3.5. But that raises the question of whether the loans are in fact being used? Are people coming for the loans? Are the banks passing it on to their customers? Are loans being processed? Because the whole point of that was to give people the opportunity to go to the banks to get money in their hands so that the liquidity of the banks could be passed on to these particular businesses who were in severe conditions for cash flow and liquidity themselves. And then the VAT refunds, Madam Speaker, and the tax rebates. I want to say that this is not a gift from the Government. I have to say it again. These things were owed to the people, you gave them very well, leave it so you gave it to them. It was due to them.

Then the credit union—I would ask the same question, Madam Speaker. , Is the money that has been given to the credit union being passed on to people who are coming for those loans, to the credit unions? We need to have the numbers to see if it is making any difference in the economy. It is only if people receive their \$1,500 or whatever sum their grant is that it would make a difference in circulation in the economy on the demand side.

#### **4.10 p.m.**

It is only if credit union people who receive some part of this \$200 million actually get the grant, get the loans, that they will be able to conduct their business. So, I do not know what is the situation with the 50 million in Tobago, or the 5 million enterprise development, but I must say that the 300 million Government guarantee for small business, the Minister said when he was here on Wednesday,

that by today this matter should be settled. And what that means is that people should be getting their loans. But I have some questions about that which is first of all, this arrangement is made with FCB, not with all the banks.

So I want to ask the question, if I have a loan with Republic Bank or Scotiabank or one of them, or if I do business with them, and I want to benefit from this particular facility, can I do it with my own bank first of all? Secondly, I would like to know how the money works. Is it that FCB is providing that money? Because if FCB is providing that money, I do not see how I could get the loan from Republic Bank. I do not see how I can get the facility from Republic Bank.

So then, it must be Government managing this money. I need the clarity on that. And if it is the Ministry of Finance is managing this money, and then on the basis of loans— loan requests from the bank, it is then being passed on. I do not know if they are going to take that circuitous route of sending the money to FCB and then FCB sends to another bank. But I mean, for God's sake, if we are going to do something, let us try and find the most efficient, effective, customer-friendly way of doing this thing.

And there is another issue and I want to flag this. I hope, Madam Speaker, that this is not an instance in which if I am applying for a loan that is guaranteed by Government and administered by FCB, that I am going to have to send my documents for approval in the Ministry of Finance first before it gets to the bank. So I want the Minister to clarify that because to put that layer of public service bureaucracy in this process, you might as well simply lift a flag and celebrate the debt of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, and to celebrate the debt of small business in Trinidad and Tobago. Because I want to ask those questions and I shall be grateful, very grateful if the Minister would clarify in a straightforward way what—how these loans are going to be administered and whether they are in fact

going to be available in the various banks and without Government interference and control in the process, so the bank makes a judgment.

In any case, the Minister said yesterday, and I saw it in the Roadmap report—and not yesterday, sorry, Wednesday. I cannot hear you, sorry. The Minister said on Wednesday that they are going to raise the guarantee from 50 to 75, that is a good thing and it is very good for the—and I saw it also in the Roadmap report. So those are good things. Now, so if I can get some clarity on the business loans guaranteed by Government, I shall be most grateful. The—out of the \$5 billion—sorry.

When I add up the amount of money that has been mentioned in the documents on Wednesday and then brought here today for approval, I see that of the \$2 billion from—of the \$2.7 billion—I better not get to that yet. I want to ask this question: What is COVID-related in this supplementation request? It could not be the Judiciary, Madam Speaker, because what we have in the Judiciary for rent, for contract employment, janitorial services, security services, I do not think you could consider that COVID expenses. And I might ask—the AG might respond—I might ask: What will be the material improvement to the justice system with the \$99 million additional expenditure?

When I look at the National Security Council, all right, which could have probably—it is only 6 million, it could have probably be vired from saving somewhere. I do not think that you can call that COVID-related expense, Madam Speaker. When you look at the loan payments for UDeCOTT, you could not call that a COVID-related expense. When you look at the hundred million dollars for upgrade of the ANR Robinson Airport, you cannot call that a COVID-related expense, Madam Speaker. The National Security allocation of \$177 million plus—177 million that could not be a COVID-relation, a COVID-related expense. The

Attorney General, 76 million plus, that is not COVID-related. The Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development for the OJTs, not really COVID-related. We had an OJT programme, we were proceeding in a certain way. The CEPEP and watershed management programme in the Rural Development Ministry, not COVID-related, Madam Speaker. That existed before.

In the Ministry of Works and Transport, nothing there is COVID-related except the fuel grant, nothing else. Everything else is basically projects that are being funded. In Foreign Affairs nothing is COVID-related. In Communications absolutely nothing. So, let us add up the COVID-related supplementation, Madam Speaker. Even if we take contract employment as COVID-related, when you add it up you have about \$719 million for COVID-related activity that are directly related to COVID. In the Ministry of Health, 187.7 million; in Rural Development, 20 million; in Ministry of Works and Transport, 25 million, and that is what you end up with in terms of COVID-related—out of 2.7, Madam Speaker, only 719 million is COVID-related. And I am reluctant to add the \$55 million for—the 50 million for hotels in Tobago as a COVID-related supplementation. Because if you take two things into account, the state of tourism prior to COVID in Tobago, and you take what is likely to happen in the tourism industry worldwide, which is, you probably have a 30-month cycle before this thing begins to pick up because there are so many things to attend to, for instance, the whole business of simply flying in a plane. You cannot fly under the same terms and conditions anymore. You are going to have to make more space, people are going to have to wear a mask, people are going to have to make calculated risk decisions about whether they are willing to take that risk, notwithstanding all the things that you see happening in the country today.

I think this is a misapplication of funds [*Desk thumping*] and this has nothing— as the Minister accused me some time ago—to do with the people of Tobago. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with the fact of the relationship with the House of Assembly, first of all and secondly, the issue of priorities if you are in a situation where your economy is on the brink and you have got to take some measures to get the economy going again in both islands.

Now, the \$43 million to the EBC is a justifiable expense in an election year and the reality of COVID may make the election exercise more complex, I want to concede that. COVID did not choose an election year. An election year found COVID as an unwelcomed visitor. Many governments all over the world are now thrust, however, into a larger and more central role because of COVID, and they are using incumbency and COVID, to embrace the tragedy of human socio-economic distress and business dislocation, disruption and disorientation for partisan political purposes. That is a fact of life and there are hundreds of articles written about it in the last, I would say, eight, nine weeks, appearing all over the world that people are concerned about what this has done for central government control, and the extent to which they are able to drive the economy and everything in it.

Now, it is my hope that the EBC will strive to assert its independence, to guarantee a free and fair and transparent voter list, first of all; a flawlessly free and fair election process; non-partisan hiring for the \$20.5 million to be spent on two issues, voting lists verification personnel and 13,000 polling day personnel required for the task; and that they will use some of the \$43,000,000 for clarity and consistency and precision of processes across the system in a managed, coordinated and customer/citizen friendly way.

This is very important for the integrity of our democracy, Madam Speaker, and I expect that this \$43 million will allow the EBC to play their role properly and to do what is required in order to address the challenge of elections in a COVID year in which, possibly, all kinds of new protocols are going to have to be observed. Can I ask how much more time I have, Madam Speaker?

**Madam Speaker:** Well, you end at 4:44:18.

**Dr. B. Tewarie:** 4:44 I end?

**Madam Speaker:** Yes, 4:44:18.

**Dr. N. Tewarie:** Thank you. Now, Madam Speaker, the—when you look at the budgets of this Government over time, including this budget here, you will end up with five budgets totalling just about \$273 billion, and that is the amount of expenditure over the five-year duration of this Government if you assume that the money that the Minister of Finance mentioned today— just over 53 billion for this budget— is going to be spent. But when you look at the—I mentioned before, the sources of funding, the loans, the HSF, the available funding from the developmental loans, and I do want to acknowledge that the Minister said that he only drew down 400 million from the HSF, and I want to acknowledge as well that, that he used the 10 million limit of the loan to take only \$1 billion—10 billion— to take only 1 billion worth of loans. Is that correct, Minister? I think— yeah, I thought he said that. So I want to acknowledge that that is what he said. I am not trying to make any mischief and I am not trying to say anything that is untrue, but I do want to make my case here.

If you look at the Auditor General's account— and I have it here, I would not look at the page, it is on page 4, the Auditor General talks about the Exchequer Account which is now at 41.38 billion. Okay? Now, the reason I mentioned that is because during the last budget, I had asked for the amount and the Minister would

not tell me and I told him that I would probably have to wait for the Auditor General to report. So, finally we got the amount, and the Auditor General simply mentions it but this is the highest that that has ever been since 2003. And the actual Central Bank overdraft, I want to say for the benefit of the Minister, is about 10.5 billion, and that is more than the 9 billion that he accused us of taking the Central Bank overdraft into fumes in 2016 when we were in this Parliament and continuing thereafter.

So it is now 10.5 billion, the actual overdraft itself which is about 86 per cent of the total. And one of the things about that total is that they are using the 2014 numbers in order to calculate the percentage, when the GDP of this country continues to fall because of the economic circumstances, so I mentioned that.

If you look at the Auditor General's report also, you will see that the Comptroller of Accounts raises issues about the debt. Now, this is just a public servant responding and putting in her accounts but what she says is that:

The issue of public debt and debt sustainability has long been a concern for policy makers of both fiscal and monetary authority. The central government debt and contingent liability must be examined and analyzed in its entirety to ensure present and future debt sustainability.

And I would not read all. She closes by saying:

Close coordination is needed to choose an appropriate mix of financing and policy adjustment, to facilitate economic recovery while preventing the buildup of an unsustainable debt burden.

So, I simply mentioned that the Central Bank tells us that the debt is at 101.565.5 billion and that is based on their January report. This document also tells us that when the COVID came, one of the big issues that arose was business continuity management in the public service. So the entire ICT system of the

public service found itself out of sync with the demands of a crisis for business continuity.

**4.30 p.m.**

This report—the Auditor General also tells us about the fact that the biometric system on pages 92, 93, which was introduced by the Ministry of Social Development in our time was abandoned and, generally, there is an entire chapter here on ICT on readiness of the public service. It talks about the number of silos that exist, the lack of connectivity, and really the difficulty of getting anything done in the ICT system in the public service, and what we find now, Madam Speaker, is that this is one of the biggest issues facing countries in this COVID time. And even the roadmap report acknowledges that as something that is an absolute necessity. And simply, what it says is that we were unready for any kind of crisis in which IT would have had to play a central role.

Now, not only are these things there. The reason I am saying these things, Madam Speaker, is because the Auditor General's Report takes us up to September 2019 and COVID would not have arrived in the world until, at least, known to us—some people are claiming now that it happened earlier in China, but it would not have been known to the world until December/January. So that the report that I spoke to that I read from or that I mentioned, really are things that existed pre-COVID and that is my point here. So we had issues with IT, we had issues with the Central Bank overdraft, we had issues with the Exchequer Account, we had issues with the debt as reported by the Central Bank. We had all of those issues that were pre-COVID.

And I want to say, Madam Speaker, that the Central Bank reported in January 2020 and that would have taken us to the point where we would have had consecutively 18 continuous quarters of economic decline in Trinidad and Tobago.



For 18 consecutive quarters, every quarter was a quarter of decline, and what it meant is that before COVID arrived—before the first case arrived in Trinidad and Tobago, because I remember when it I arrived I wrote an article the next day, because I was hoping—hoping against hope that it would not happen—and when it arrived we had already had four and a half years and 18 consecutive quarters of economic decline.

Now the HEU, the Health Economics Unit, which was the base document that informed the road map recovery group and the report mentions that the decline for this particular year, based on what is likely to happen in the fourth quarter, is going to be 10.8 per cent, that is to say, minus 10.8 per cent. It would be the lowest decline in the five years. It would be the worst decline in the five years, and I am not saying that that is the responsibility of the Government.

We had COVID come, it was very real. It made a difference to every country. Okay? So it has exacerbated what was the situation before. COVID came and it brought a crisis, and it took us to the economic precipice—that is true—but we were already headed there for four and a half years, and that is the point I want citizens to understand, because between 2015 and 2020, there was a 13 per cent contraction. And despite what the Minister says about Moody's, and he knows that it does not dovetail with the facts. We were downgraded by Moody's, Madam Speaker, and we were downgraded before that by Standard & Poor's. I do not know why they do not accept it. It is easy to explain. The Minister does not—it has nothing to do with anything except the fact that the oil price was down, the production was down, the energy sector was in a mess, our revenue had gone. We had debt servicing that was at 18 per cent. I mean, really. But we need to acknowledge it before we find a solution. If we do not acknowledge it, and you tell everybody the economy is going great as the Minister

is seeking to do here. The economy is not doing great, Minister. It was doing bad before and it is doing worse now; and we understanding why it is doing worse now, because we are in a COVID situation.

You know, look at the situation in energy sector, for instance, where you have about six companies that are down now. You have a situation in which Point Lisas itself is threatened. The Minister talks about the foreign exchange situation. We have about seven months of foreign exchange. We have in the HSF, if we draw down the 1.5, we are going to be close to the \$4 billion limit under which we cannot go to borrow any money—to take anyone money. I mean, these are serious matters. So all of these things, I am saying, existed before COVID. We were not doing well. The assessments by Moody's and Standard & Poor's reflect those things, and we should accept that and if we accept that, we could then say well, okay, how do we build back this economy from the ground? Because that is where we are, we really are. We are down to zero with the energy and we have got to find other ways. Because what are the two fundamental issues that we have to deal with, Madam Speaker? If we do not deal with the foreign exchange situation, we are going to be in a mess and that means you have to reduce imports and you have to find some way of exporting something else, and if we do not address the issue of resilience, we are never going to get out of this hole, and if we do not address the issue of sustainability, we are not going to be making any progress, no matter how much progress we have made before.

Now, the Minister started his presentation by talking about the IMF projecting 5 per cent. I think they projected 5.8 per cent growth for the world economy and so on in 2021. Madam Speaker that is not happening. The same head of the IMF—not the lady who wrote that report which I read, I have it with me—but the head of the IMF, three or four days ago, made a statement in which

she said that 90 per cent of the world's population will be living under reduced circumstances and diminished conditions because of what has happened with COVID. That is what we are facing here. So we are in a world situation in which we have a crisis and our economy was badly managed before and we ended up with four and a half years of decline. [*Desk thumping*] So when the crisis came, it is like a double, triple and quadruple whammy on us. And what she says, which is very important, Madam Speaker, she said it is going to increase inequality in the world, in countries and across countries.

There are other sources which tell you that this is likely to be the worst recession in the history of the world system, and there are other people who tell you that digitization will leave large numbers of people behind. So, these are challenges that the world is facing and we are facing it too. There is a big difference between the 2008/2009 crisis and this crisis. I do not want to get into that now. I think that is something I will leave alone with the present time. I would do it at some other place. But the question is: What is the task required at this time and what in fact will gain us success?

Now, let me read what the Roadmap committee says. They say it is “addressing and mitigating hardship”. I concede that. That is not a problem. But I want to say here and emphasize strongly, that this mitigating hardship is not reaching the people in Trinidad and Tobago. You have too many people that are not connected to the relief. It says it is restarting the economy. Yes, we are opening up, but the stress is real. If the small businesses do not get the bank loans, if they do not get the support, if the people in the credit unions do not get the support, if ordinary people are not reached, if people are not getting back their jobs, it is not going to survive. They are not going to survive. And then it says, “laying the foundation for sustained economic recovery”. But nothing is

happening in that front. There is nothing that the Minister told us today, except his wishes for the future I would have to call them that tells you anything about anything happening that will cause a recovery in Trinidad and Tobago. The Roadmap committee talks a little bit about agriculture, but the question is not to talk anything about it. The Minister knows because we had a personal engagement over something. For instance, in the last budget, all the inputs into agriculture were given tax-free status, but it is almost like the public service did not know. And I have to thank the Minister because through his intervention he was able to do something by taking the matter to Cabinet and getting Cabinet to agree, and he got the confirmation of the Note and because of that the process is still not finished yet, because another department of the Government will not honour the process and it has to go through another bureaucracy. And he was helpful and I want to acknowledge that. But notwithstanding that, the question with agriculture is how? How do you do this thing, you know?

What we need to do, Madam Speaker, in this period now where the world is in a state of virtual collapse, we have to address the issue of self-sufficiency as far as possible, that is, what we could do without foreign exchange. We could deal with that self-sufficiency starting with agriculture. We must reconfigure the structure of the economy to diversify the production base and to earn foreign exchange because foreign exchange, if we do not have it, it is finished. We have to digitize the public service, e-business and commerce, education, entrepreneurship and education and we have to build an entirely new economy, Madam Speaker.

We are at a point where we are only managing the survival phase and we are restoring closed businesses who are having a real difficult time recouping and retrieving their businesses as they open. We are not yet at a recovery strategy. The Government has no recovery strategy that I can see, and there is nothing that

was said today that represents a recovery strategy. We need immediate action on economic restructuring and we need to build a fresh and new post-COVID economy. Because I want to say, there are upheavals all over the world, and I want to say it is reflective of these kinds of choices that are being forced by populations everywhere who see what this COVID has done to people and how many people are vulnerable in the world. And we are facing some hard choices between oligarchy or greater equality.

Whether we are going to have consumer capitalism or sustainable development, whether we are going to respond to climate change or forget about the environment, whether we are going to continue as usual or rethink our value system and way of proceeding, whether we are going to have meaningful democracy or stronger authoritarian control, those are the choices we face in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, and we are a miniscule example relatively to what the whole world is facing. It is happening everywhere, even in the big countries, but we can manage it. We only have 1.4 million people, and if we do this in a reasonable way and bring our people together, I believe we can build this country from the ground up, because we are back to zero with this COVID crisis. Thank you very much for listening to me. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, as I make an intervention on this Bill to vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Bill. Madam Speaker, there is a saying now circulating in Trinidad and Tobago that goes like this: “For the UNC to succeed Trinidad and Tobago must fail.” I had to hear a former principal of the University of the West Indies, who a decade or so ago said that Trinidad and Tobago had the characteristics of a failed state. Today, the hon. Member comes here and says that Moody’s has downgraded

Trinidad and Tobago. Could you imagine? With the permission of the Minister of Finance, I want to put on the record for the right-thinking persons of Trinidad and Tobago who know what honesty and facts look like, the following.

“International ratings agency, Moody’s, has confirmed Trinidad and Tobago’s credit rating at Ba1...

In a release, the Ministry observes that this rating is ‘one of the highest in the Caribbean...’ [*Desk thumping*]

‘Moody’s decision to keep the rating of Trinidad and Tobago unchanged...’—that is fact, that is the truth—‘is a testimony to the resilience of the country, in the face of unprecedented shocks...The COVID-19 crisis combined with the collapse of oil prices have led rating agencies’—like Moody’s—“to change the rating of a very large number of countries.”

But to hear my hon. friend, he would pick out Trinidad and Tobago and make it sound that we are a basket case, because in their eyes for the UNC to succeed, Trinidad and Tobago must fail. You know, it just amazes me how facts elude my friends opposite. So that puts paid to that untruth told about Moody’s and Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the issue of COVID is one that has rattled the world, and the Minister of Finance needs to be heartily congratulated for—not only [*Desk thumping*] for his fiscal packages for the COVID response, but for his whole tenure as Minister of Finance, steering this country through the most turbulent financial waters that this country has seen. [*Desk thumping*] And Mr. Imbert, take a bow, take a bow.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in the midst of a global pandemic, and I think the country forgets that, and you know why?—because we have done so

spectacularly well to be number one in the world to reopen the economy. We are not talking about a line-up of cases. We are not talking about people dying by the hundreds. We are not talking about our health system being overwhelmed. The news is so good that now everybody wants to open the economy at the same time because we have handled this crisis in a world-class manner; [*Desk thumping*] totally world class. Everybody, Minister of Finance, led by the Prime Minister, the Minister of National Security who worked with me, the Attorney General who had to draft all these regulations, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, Minister of Education, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, everyone put their shoulders to the wheel and worked for Trinidad and Tobago.

This global pandemic was declared on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. From November/December 2019 when the first case was announced, a mere six months later, as we speak, Mr. Deputy Speaker, six months from the first case, we are now “celebrating” 7,673,976 cases. The cases are going up at a rate of 140,000 per day globally. This is not finished. But because of the world-class job we have done, Trinidad and Tobago thinks that we are finished. We are not. And the world has changed more in six months than it has changed in 600 years. With the ongoing rate of infection of 140,000 a day, that is a staggering amount. We have to continue to plan for the future.

And I want to thank the Minister of Finance for allowing us the opportunity in health—access to another \$224 million. And I also want to thank all health care workers from the Chief Medical Officer come right down to the doctor, the nurses, the wards maids. Because, you see, what we did, and we will never have this conversation because we did well, we did not see our health care system collapse as in other countries. In Continental Europe, Italy, one of the best health care systems in the world was brought to its knees. In South Africa, in South America,

they are being brought to their knees, but thank God we were not even close to that because of astute leadership started and managed by the hon. Prime Minister.

*[Desk thumping]*

Our COVID response had a total of 65 measures that started from January 21<sup>st</sup> to May the 16<sup>th</sup>; 65 measures. With that money which the hon. Minister of Finance gave us with, we set up the parallel health care system, four levels of care, four levels: quarantine, primary health care, secondary, tertiary and step-down facilities, and by the end of this week and next week, 1,600 persons would have passed through that parallel health care system; 1,600 people. Where else in the world with a country this size we could have accommodated that? Only in sweet T&T; only here. But more remarkably, our normal health care system was untouched. That is how we flattened the curve. People were still able to get their treatment—parallel health care system. But the Member for Siparia was on a rampage, “There is no parallel health care system”. What an insult to everyone who worked on that project. What an insult.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our parallel health care system has been recognized—as the Prime Minister has said, his Caricom colleagues asked him: How did he do it? Because we planned. We had a strategic plan. We implemented it. And if you take off 52 cases that came from one source, the cruise ship and minus it from 117, our case load would have been one of the lowest in the world on a per capita basis. That is how well those 65 measures worked.

So what were the funds that were allocated used for? Infrastructure, HR, equipment and consumables. And on the issue of consumables, I want to debunk the theory again put forward by the UNC, from Caroni East, who in his contribution on a Motion said there was no PPE for medical workers. Again, the narrative is for them to succeed, the country must fail. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in



First World countries, you know what they were doing? Washing and reusing N95 masks. They had no surgical gowns, so you know what they were doing? Using garbage bags. Some of them did not have gloves; they were using plastic bags.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) estimated that 90,000 health care workers globally were infected and 260 nurses have died. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we took our moral and legal and ethical responsibility to health care workers seriously. We never underestimated our responsibility to them to provide them with PPE. I want to quote from an article, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the *New England Journal of Medicine* an article called: “Perspective” of March 11, 2020, talking about a critical supply shortage, need for ventilators and PPE and it said:

“Equally worrisome is the lack of adequate PPE for frontline health care workers, including respirators, gloves, face shields, gowns, and hand sanitizer. In Italy, health care workers experienced high rates of infection and death...because of inadequate access to PPE.”

So what did we do with the 224 million, because we took health care workers safety seriously? From February to May we bought 12,496 safety goggles at a cost of \$86,320; N95 masks, which we never ran out of, we bought 195,040 at a cost of \$2.7 million; isolation gowns, we bought 508,440 for our frontline health care workers at \$1.1 million; sterile surgeons gowns—we did not have to use garbage bags—113,040 at \$1.1 million; caps, we bought one million caps at \$193,000; shoe covers, 300,000 at \$71,400; and mentholated spirits, 41,600 litres. Think about that, 41,600 litres at \$557,000 and that does not include donations. This is just a sample of what we used the money for to provide for our health care workers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what about cost for patient care? Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a data collection agency, non-profit, in the United States called FAIR

Health. You know what they estimate was the cost with insurance to treat a COVID positive patient in an ICU setting in a hospital setting? These numbers are going to shock the population to see what this free health care system provides. They estimated it costs between US \$38,000 to \$73,000 to treat one COVID person in a hospital. Which average Trinidadian could afford that? None. None. That is why when the Member for Princes Town, in one of his flights of fancy, stood up in the old Parliament and said, “Trinidad is not a real place”. “Trinidad is not a real place”, if Trinidad and Tobago is not a real place, why is everyone wanting to come back here now? Why is that? Why all of a sudden Trinidad and Tobago is a real place, is the place to come for cancer treatment, is the place to come for COVID treatment and is the place to come for health care? Yes. Mr. Deputy Speaker, they feel for them to succeed we must fail. But we have not failed.

**5.00p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I honestly think they were hoping that COVID would have brought this country to its knees. It would have given them a platform perspective to talk about. It would have.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the UNC, especially Caroni East, was on a narrative, and I want to quote his *Hansard* here. His *Hansard* of 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2020, on a Motion. He said:

“People are dying... Instead hundreds of patients lining up on the corridors in the emergency department on trolleys...”

He always makes these statements:

“Hundreds of patients”—with no statistical proof—“and some dying while waiting for treatment. The death of scores of patients in this country is on the hands of this Government.”

That is what the Member said. So let me give you some statistics. The same

way we proved that Moody's did not downgrade, with facts, and I think the right-thinking citizens will know facts when they see it, let me give you the facts about mortality data in Trinidad and Tobago which will debunk again what the UNC, through its main spokesperson on health, Caroni East, speaks about. He said, "Hundreds of people are dying". Well, if hundreds of people were dying they would show up in the data. Let me give you the data.

All-cause mortality: January to March 2018, 3,002; January to March 2019—which is last year, 3,107, statistically insignificant. Look at this: January to March 2020 this year—this year—when the Member said people are dying by the hundreds, it went down from last year, 3,107, to 3,052, again statistically insignificant. But to hear the UNC take Trinidad and Tobago and tarnish its name, because what is said here goes international. It goes international.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just by analogy, when the Member for Oropouche West said once about the per capita rates of people going to ISIS, that was taken globally, and the hon. Attorney General had to debunk that. They do not care. They have absolutely no concern about the international reputation for Trinidad and Tobago, because for them to succeed, Trinidad and Tobago must fail.

So the data I have presented here shows clearly that what my friend—and I use the 'friend' loosely—Caroni East, when he said people were dying by the hundreds and lining up by the hundreds, is absolutely false. Just like the statement made about Moody's today, absolutely false, no basis whatsoever. Absolutely none.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, to further demonstrate what has happened I quoted some numbers because I forgot the information on my desk. If someone can just run it for me, please. You would see some stacks of paper on my desk; if somebody could bring it for me please? Hint, hint, hint, Attorney General.

The data on viral illness and influenza will show conclusively that for this year there has been a precipitous decline in the incidents of viral illness, influenza, in Trinidad and Tobago. That totally debunks—totally debunks—what Caroni East and what the UNC has been saying about data. And the data is coming to me now so I will call it, because you see, figures do not lie.

Influenza figures: Number of reported suspected influenza cases, the week of 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2020, 33. It goes on like that, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, right up until March, and that is when we started to put the public health measures in place. Do you know what is the figure for May now?—four. So from 33, 70, we are down to four, which tells you, to answer the question on testing for COVID, that you do not go out and test asymptomatic people. But to hear the Member for Siparia, who took the words of Dr. Tedros, when Dr. Tedros said, “Test, test, test for COVID”. Yes he said that, but nobody read and listened to the second paragraph. He said, “Test, test, test all suspected cases and isolate them.” That is what Dr. Tedros said.

But I had to hear the UNC, advised by their three doctors, have the Member for Siparia say, “Test, test, test.” You do not test asymptomatic people. But I had to hear Caroni East saying, “Why are we not doing anti-body testing? Why are we not doing rapid testing?” Because they have failed in every country they have tried to do it because of the high rates of false negatives.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other statistic to show that COVID is not the big thing it is in Trinidad and Tobago right now is acute viral illness data. For January right down to March it averaged around 1,500 cases, the number of reported or suspected AVI— acute viral illnesses. Once schools were closed, once borders were closed, you know what it is down to now?—230. We are at 15 per cent of our January, February, March numbers as far as acute viral illness is concerned. That is why, that is why, our community testing so far where we have done over

1,007 is picking up negatives, because of the public health measures we have put in place.

I want to thank the population, because most of the population bought into the public health measures: the hygiene, the sanitization of hands, the washing of hands, the wearing of masks, the physical distancing, staying home while you are ill, how to cough and sneeze into the crook of your elbow. So the population has to be heartily congratulated on this score.

As we open up more and more of the economy to stimulate economic growth, the economy will rebound. After 9/11 it was predicted by the doom and gloom people that the world would collapse. Economies have a way of self-righting and rebounding. So much like the doom and gloom of Caroni Central to the end of his contribution where he is predicting the end of the world, we have had instances, the 1918 pandemic where 50 million people died, the world recovered. World War II, the world recovered. The financial crisis of 2008, the world recovered; 9/11, the world recovered. Do you know what? After COVID, because of the resilience of human nature, the world will recover. But to hear Caroni Central in the last five minutes, it is doom, it is gloom, the world is going to come to an end. The world will survive. We will survive. We will regain lost ground.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the last issues I want to deal with, because some of this money was used for these purposes, has to do with the issue of Central Block in Port of Spain, because one of the loans under this Bill is to help pay for Central Block in Port of Spain.

Prior to the earthquake in 2018, I believe it was, September, this Government took the responsible decision to rebuild Central Block in Port of Spain. It was not on the radar of my colleagues opposite, and the Member for

Fyzabad who is going to speak next could confirm that. It was never on the radar of the UNC to rebuild Central Block.

After the earthquake, when the TTRNA, the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association, and the TTMA, Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association came to me in a meeting, I told them, “I have no intention of putting you back there, absolutely none”. Because the same way I made sure PPE was available for frontline health care workers, I had no intention and I told them, “I am not prepared to work there, so therefore I do not expect you to work there, because your safety is my paramount concern.” So we decanted Central Block, but the plans were already in place.

Central Block is being built at a cost of \$1.1 billion, 540 beds. So health care workers are now working in a safer environment as we decant, as we rebuild facilities in Port of Spain at the old COSTAATT building, as we rebuild facilities in St. James, as we built the Arima Hospital, because we arranged the loan financing. Construction started in March 2016. , Designs were finished in January 2016. So as we start to populate Arima Hospital it means some of the pressure on Port of Spain, Eric Williams, will be relieved. That is what we did.

All the money we spent for PPE for health care workers was in their best interest, because we did not want one health care worker, one nurse, one doctor, one wards maid, anyone who had to have contact, one ambulance driver, ambulance attendant, nobody should have gone without PPE in this country and we ensured that and that is where some of this money went.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, some of this money also went into the purchasing of pharmaceuticals, human globulin immune, \$4.6 million. It shocked me to learn that one patient could absorb \$100,000 to \$200,000 of this one drug. So Trinidad and Tobago is a real place. It is the place to be for health care, because it is free.

Meropenem injectables—we spent \$792,960; paracetamol injections, we bought 4,500 vials at \$202,000; salbutamol to relieve bronchial spasms, we brought 40,000 of those at a cost of \$396,000. We spent tens of millions of dollars on this COVID response and let me say, it is not finished. Because now, we have 1,000 people between the cruise ships, UWI students and others coming in, and money has to be kept in reserve to quarantine 1,000 persons over the next two to three weeks. Then we are going to have more coming in July, more in August, more in September and so it goes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have two more minutes.

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** Thank you very much. So when we hear about the global pandemic, it is still raging out there. Yes, we have done extremely well, but the population ought to be cautioned that as we allow people to come back in, in a structured manner—and I want to congratulate the Minister of National Security who has a very difficult job these days, very, very difficult—as he does it in a structured manner we have to keep funds in reserve for the next four to six months as we accept our nationals back into this real place called Trinidad and Tobago so they could get real first class health care.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity for the past 30 minutes.

*[Desk thumping]*

**Dr. Lackram Bodoie (Fyzabad):** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute on this Bill before us here today, that is to approve the supplementation, therefore the mid-year review.

Before I go into the meat of my contribution, I just wish to take the opportunity to address some of the issues raised by the hon. Minister of Health. I noticed that the Minister of Health seemed to have lacked a bit of energy today, perhaps he is tired, but there are a few issues that I need to address.

I just want to state first of all, very clearly, the statement “for the UNC to succeed that Trinidad and Tobago must fail”, I want to say on this side that is furthest from the truth. We on this side are here to support whatever measures are required to provide for the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Indeed, I want to say further that the parallel health care system of which the Minister boasts, and which would have assisted in the battle against COVID was built on a UNC foundation. I will go further to explain that in a bit.

I also want to address the issue of, why does everyone want to come back to Trinidad and Tobago? On a light note the answer is simple: because they want to remove the PNM and save Trinidad and Tobago. So that is straightforward.

I also want to raise the issue of using statistics. The Minister mentioned about the decrease in influenza cases and so on, and as we speak to the national population I think it is important that we understand that sometimes statistics are not always reliable. When you talk about reported cases it may very well be that because of the current situation, those patients who would normally would present to a hospital setting are not presenting. So one has to be careful in terms of how you interpret those statements.

The issue of the requests for testing by the Opposition Leader, the Member of Parliament for Siparia, is based on good and valid scientific practice and, that is, you have to have the evidence. You must have a sufficient number of tests to ascertain the incidents of the crisis that you are facing. Therefore you must have the numbers before you can address the crisis.

The Minister raised a very important point which I intend to address as well, and that is the issue of the extraordinary expenditure on a product, a drug, called “human immunoglobulin”. I remember in the committee stage the Minister was concerned about the cost of that drug, and I myself became very concerned. You



know what, let me just go into that straightaway.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, following that committee meeting on Wednesday I did some research. To quote the Minister, and he is correct in this in terms of the figures, he indicated that \$100,000 to \$200,000 was spent on this particular drug, and I speak of the human immunoglobulin per patient. This drug actually comes in two doses. There is a one milligram and there is a .1 milligram. So it is a big dose and a small dose. It is normally given five doses per patient. But a big dose would cost about US \$9,000, and a small dose about US \$2,000. When you translate that by our current exchange rate, you will come to figures of about, in one case if you use 16,000 or maybe about 60,000 to 70,000.

There are two issues here. One is that—and I say this with the greatest of respect because, you know, in the practice of medicine when I wear my hat as a medical practitioner and change it for the Parliament, medical practitioners have something called and we treasure and we value something called “clinical freedom”. It means that we do not want to be interfered with in terms of getting the best drug to treat a patient, and I support that, and that is important. On the other hand as parliamentarians we have to look for value for money. But the point I was making is that the research has indicated that this drug is still experimental and may not be of tremendous—of confirmed value.

So I spoke to my colleagues who are treating the patients at the Couva Hospital. I am very alarmed to learn that none of the patients at the Couva Hospital who would have required this drug, or where that drug would have been used, have actually received the drug. So I want to ask the Minister here today in this Parliament to look carefully at where this drug was given, and whether the expenditure was justifiable in terms of the cost that the Government would have paid for this drug.

If it is that the drug was required, certainly to my information, the information I have, this drug would not have been used on COVID-19 patients. If it was used elsewhere then so be it. I am fine with that, I have no grouse with that, but I am just saying here that as we ask for the approval of \$224 million for the COVID response for the Ministry of Health that that is something that the Minister of Health needs to look at, and to get a bit more information and detail on that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So as mentioned in the Bill, and we are looking at the committee as well, the report of the committee, the Minister did mention on Wednesday that the \$224.5 million extra was required for supplementation in three major categories, that is the COVID-19 response to set up the parallel health care system, the loan for NIPDEC with regard to the purchase of pharmaceuticals and non-pharmaceuticals, and the construction loans for the Central Block and Arima Hospital.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me look at the COVID-19 response. We were told that this money would have benefited 589 persons who were treated or accommodated; 117 persons tested positive and eight deaths unfortunately. At this point I would really want to thank the doctors, the nurses, I want to take this opportunity, and the health care staff, who were led ably by the Chief Medical Officer. I also would want to take the opportunity to thank those who performed the essential services, protective services, those who were industrial workers and so on. Most importantly of course, to thank the people of Trinidad and Tobago, who I believe did a wonderful job in doing what they were supposed to do, and this of course would have resulted to a large extent, to a great extent in us being in the position where we are. Of course I want to thank those as well, the students who have been anxiously awaiting the writing of their CAPE and CXC and the SEA exams, and so on.

But you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the management of this crisis by the Government that happened to be in power illustrates a very important example of how responses in a time of crisis and emergency depend on foundations that are laid by previous administrations. I want to say that the parallel health system that the Government speaks of, and I have no problem with that, that is a system that has worked uniquely in our setting, but this was possible for several reasons and I want to go back to a meeting of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee in the early stages of planning for the COVID crisis.

I want to compliment the PAAC for taking the initiative in terms of convening those meetings. But to say at one of those meetings the Chief Medical Officer, when asked about the planning for COVID-19, indicated that there was a plan prepared by the Government in 2014, which would have been the People's Partnership Government, to address the Ebola issue, and his job therefore was very easy, in that, all he had to do was remove Ebola and insert COVID-19. So I am saying that the process, a plan was already there. Nothing is wrong with that. The plan was built upon. It would have had to be modified and so on, but I am saying that that was a bit of a foundation.

Very importantly I want to say that one of the most important features of the response of this Government to COVID-19 was a brand new facility, 230 beds, that was there and able to take the challenge and to deal with the challenge of COVID-19. Of course, I speak of the Couva Hospital which came on at the appropriate time, and was appropriately and adequately utilized by the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. So therefore that would have been one of the foundations that was built by the People's Partnership, and turned out to be a great asset to the Government of the day in terms of addressing this issue.

Of course there are other foundations which would have been built. The

foundation would have been laid for the Arima Hospital, which the Government is taking credit for. Nothing is wrong, it takes years to build a hospital. The fact of the matter is that the Partnership started the process, and therefore we are happy to see that it is completed and that the residents of Arima and Trinidad and Tobago will benefit.

I trust and hope that the Point Fortin Hospital which was started by the People's Partnership will be delivered to the people of Point Fortin. That is an area that is close to my heart. I remember as Chairman of South-West Regional Health Authority, when high-risk patients would have had to be flown by ambulance from Point Fortin to San Fernando and I look forward to the completion of that project started under the Partnership Government.

I just want to refer to the issue of contract employment, where an allocation of \$3,034,000 was allocated with regard to the 11 ICU nurses from Cuba. We are very happy that specialist nurses are being added to our health sector, but one of the concerns raised by the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association is with regard to whether the qualifications of these nurses have been examined and I say that because what is happening is that the local nurses have found that sometimes those who are brought as specialists have to be supervised and overseen by the local nurses. I ask that the Minister ensure that these nurses are adequately qualified and trained as they treat with our citizens.

Of course with regard to the nursing council, I would just want to digress for one moment with your permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to ask about the legal status of the nursing council, because after all they are responsible for certifying any additional staff, especially foreign staff that you may want to engage and employ in the health sector. There is that issue of nine out of 16 positions still not being filled, and I ask for the Minister to address that as a matter of urgency,

because the question is being asked as to whether the Nursing Council of Trinidad and Tobago might be operating illegally.

So to move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I notice of course as well that the COVID hotline was implemented and 20 doctors were employed. That is commendable. But I also pondered as to why the opportunity was not taken to perhaps engage more of the 500 or 600 unemployed doctors who are still currently available. So a commendable initiative, the COVID hotline, but I also think that there may have been a missed opportunity. I want to throw this out, because I hope I am wrong, but COVID may still be with us when we reopen the borders, but I hope I am wrong about that, and I therefore just throw it out as a suggestion that when you have a captive audience as we did for the last two or three months during the lockdown, that perhaps the opportunity could have been taken to also have what I call a non-communicable disease hotline in the sense that we could have taken the opportunity, Minister of Finance, to engage a few more doctors, and you take the opportunity as you have this captive audience where you could educate them, but also you could have done a bit more primary health care via the Internet and the WhatsApp and so on. But it is just a suggestion I throw out, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So I want to move on, and I just want to look at the RHA allocations of \$4.2 billion, which has been increased by \$185million. Of course when it comes to health, comes to COVID, we are looking at expenditure, but we are also looking at value for money. I just wanted to raise the issue—one issue which has been brought to my attention, and this is with regard to the engagement of 30 UNDP nurses who were placed in Couva and were under the oversight of the North Central Regional Health Authority. The issue here is that these nurses apparently were supposed to have been paid \$13,000 by the UNDP. The information is that

they were paid \$7,507 for the first two months. Of course, that is a big difference. The question really has to be asked as to whether this was just administrative error or whether in fact the nurses were being, you know, treated unfairly in terms of what they were entitled to.

**5.30 p.m.**

I also want to raise an issue here as well in terms of the NCRHA, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the—with regard—and, you know, we speak about the nurses and so on, and if we look at the allocation of nurses at the NCRHA, and I raise this point because the NCRHA has been given the highest allocation in terms of the additional expenditure of 185 million, in fact, they have been allocated \$129,000,950 and therefore, I think it is important that we look at the issue of—because they have the largest numbers of facilities to look after. And the numbers here, the issue here that is being raised is that—and, again, this is just a comparison from the data that I have received, is that the SWRHA you have 1,250 nurses, at the NWRHA, 1,112 nurses, but at the NCRHA you only have 600 nurses. And the question is that, why is this so when in fact you will need more nurses at the NCRHA to manage the facilities that are there, and I think that this is something that the Minister of Health needs to look at in terms of the quality of governance at the NCRHA.

And there are many issues, and I focus on the NCRHA, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because this authority, you know, has been asked to do a whole lot. They have been given the biggest allocation, and there are questions being asked in terms of governance. And, you know, I want to ask, you know, again the Minister may or may not be aware of this, but I want to ask, you know, was a hospital, a senior hospital administrator sent on leave because he refused to sign off on an invoice that required—and apparently this invoice was required to—the administrator was

being asked to approve an invoice which he felt, you know, was not appropriate in terms of tents being rented at the NCRHA. So the question is, was this hospital administrator—is he currently on leave because of that?

And also, there is also the issue of a hospital medical director who was appointed to Couva Hospital at the height of the crisis and, you know, who left the position after two weeks allegedly because of pressure, you know, from senior administrators at the NCRHA. So I speak of these matters because it is a matter, you know, of governance, it is an issue, you know, that speaks to governance, it is an issue that speaks to whether this allocation that we are being asked to approve of here in this Parliament today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether the country, whether our citizens are going to get value for money, whether there is going to be accountability, whether there is going to be transparency in the expenditure of these funds.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to also refer, as the Minister mentioned, one was the issue of the COVID-19 response, but the other big item that we are being asked to approve here has to deal with a NIPDEC loan of \$671 million, and this is 04/011/05, a NIPDEC loan. And I go back to this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because in the October 2020 budget there was something that troubled me tremendously, because in the budget presentation under the Item for drugs and supplies, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a special Item that speaks to drugs and supplies.

And in 2019, the expenditure on that Item was \$575,162,000, and I am familiar with the expenditure under the Item, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I monitor it, I have looked at it over the last five years and it is normally around \$600 million, but the allocation in the 2020 budget was \$144,200,000, so there was a shortfall of \$430million in that allocation. And I remember raising it at the Standing Finance Committee phase and we got an answer that the shortfall will be

made up; and it has been made up, and this is where this NIPDEC loan speaks to.

The problem I have, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that that loan was only approved on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, and 262.5million the Minister advised is being dispersed and therefore, and I am seeing that there would have been a gap in the distribution of drugs and supplies because I am looking at the period from January to March of 2020, because the October allocation would have probably just lasted the first quarter. So I am very concerned with whether how that gap was dealt with, and whether patients would have been affected at the hospitals because of a shortage of drugs and supplies during that period whilst this loan was being negotiated.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am asking that the Minister addresses this issue, what would have been the impact of the shortfall on drugs and supplies especially in the second and perhaps the early third quarter of financial 2020.

The other issue that is of concern would be the—I just want to refer to the ERHA loan which was increased from 500 million to \$1 billion. And we are told that although it is linked to the ERHA, it was really meant to treat with expenditure across the RHAs, and the Minister indicated that these were mainly for trade payables. And that is fine, it is important but, again, if these are outstanding trade payables, the question really would be: What was the impact on suppliers and supplies in the health sector? And perhaps this is something that needs to be addressed.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are two more issues I just want to look at with regard to the matters raised, and this would be the issue of COVID testing; I come back to that. The Minister indicated that close to 3,000 patients—patient tests have been done, in fact, he stated 2,952. Fortunately, just a small number of those were positive, 117, and we knew that CARPHA was involved in the testing,



but with regard to the actual testing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there would have also been significant involvement of the Trinidad Public Health Laboratory in the matter of testing, and there are some issues which I want to raise with regard the TPHL. Now, they would have been part of the process for getting the samples to CARPHA, but we are also seeing a situation here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of many issues with regard to the Trinidad Public Health Laboratory, and I am hoping that these can be addressed especially in light of the fact that we are asking for additional funding, we are asking for additional allocations here.

And some of the issues that have come to my attention and I want to raise this with the Minister and, you know, perhaps to look at whether this can be corrected is the issue first of all of, when I speak of the Trinidad Public Health Laboratory, the issue of not getting testing kits, for example, for hepatitis B, for hepatitis C, for HIV reagents, for what you call TORCH titers and for herpes. In fact, my information here, and this is current, is that there have been no HIV kits available for the last two and a half months.

Also very worrisome is the fact that no preventative maintenance or very little maintenance has been done at this lab and, you know, the staff there feel that, you know, whilst CARPHA has been praised, they are being side-lined, and they have some genuine issues, you know, they have a very important role in terms of the procurement and distribution of swabs, to recording, liaising with CARPHA and so on and sending out their reports.

And initially my information is that they had seven fridges and seven freezers in 2018, and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my information is that they are now down to one lab fridge. So this is very worrisome and perhaps, you know, the Government may want to look at this and address this, if this is in fact correct and, you know, it is worrisome that apparently Standard furniture store had to donate

two fridges to the facility and two ice makers to the UWI lab.

And one of the important things to note is that regular refrigerators are not adequate and appropriate for storing and dealing with laboratory materials because the temperature and so on is very important, but the significance of this is that, if you do not store these reagents and testing kits at the appropriate temperature, it means that they have a shorter shelf life and they can go bad, but most importantly, the integrity of your test could be compromised. And you would remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that there was some issue as regarding the integrity of some tests in the public domain during the early stages of the COVID crisis, you know, and I would hate to think that this would have been an issue that would have caused this. So I just wanted to bring this to the attention of the Government in regard to what is happening at the Trinidad Public Health Laboratory.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close I just wanted to mention that there is one more issue and that is the issue of the expenditure that has been allocated to the TRHA. And I have nothing against, it has always been a difficult situation, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I remember as chairman of the south west we would have meetings convened, and the Chairman of the TRHA would be, you know, invited as well to join those meetings although the administrative arrangements were different, but I just want to make an appeal and to ensure that the expenditure of that \$50million is spent properly, some of it is for infrastructure, and I know the Minister of Finance had promised to give some details. Perhaps in his winding up he might be able to give some specifics as to how that allocation will be done, but I also want to ensure that the money that was allocated for infrastructure is in fact done properly and completed on time. I think it is important, I have no grouse with it, but I also want to ensure that it is spent properly and in line with the battle against COVID-19.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity. As we look to COVID in the future, this morning I—you know, it is good news in the sense that I saw a report of a patient being saved by a double lung transplant, that is very encouraging. This is a patient who would have survived, but at the same time we see today that the numbers have gone past seven million, and, of course, we look forward to a vaccine because with the development of a vaccine and the implementation of a vaccine we know that is where it will change the dynamics.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with those few words, I thank you for the opportunity. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the hon. Prime Minister and Member for Diego Martin West. [*Desk thumping*] Hon. Prime Minister, you have 30 minutes.

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Public Administration (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley):** If I may have followed the lead, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of my colleagues on the other side, I would be tempted to ask you if that is 30 US. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just entered the debate to make a few observations and to state a few facts. Firstly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that everything that we are doing now is influenced by a development which is something we had not planned for, it is something far-reaching and it is something that is game-changing. I understand the position of my colleagues on the other side because they are called Opposition, but it does not mean that they have to be unreasonable even in the face of a pandemic.

And I also want to indicate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that whatever is said about how the Government has gone about this, the one thing that cannot be truthfully said, is that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago ignored the threat of a coming pandemic. It might be too difficult for our colleagues who are politically opposed to us, but I would say to them, “Try it, it does not taste bad, and not all medicine

has to be gagging you”. It would be reasonable to assume that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago could put the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago first, and to make tough decisions, difficult decisions, even unpopular decisions, if those were the decisions that would give the people of Trinidad and Tobago the best option in any circumstance, and that is what we have done.

I have heard it said that it is all about elections. Mr. Deputy Speaker, COVID-19 would have influence on elections around the world and in our country, but you must remember that it was not introduced to us as an election item. It was introduced to us as a matter of life and death—and if I will give you way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I will collect it back in my injury time. Thank you.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, I was saying COVID-19 was not about elections or political campaigning and propaganda, it was about saving lives. And I want to recommend to my colleagues, there is a programme on YouTube, the WHO has a very interesting presentation on YouTube and it is called the “WHO facts dashboard”, it gives you a running commentary of what the world is facing. And when we in Trinidad and Tobago want to behave as though our current circumstance is something that this Government did or did not do, or is or is not doing, let me just take you back, Madam Speaker, to what we are dealing with and how we got here.

By January 22, 2020, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had responded to a coming pandemic. At that time, Madam Speaker, we had to close our border, and when we closed our border, shutting out people coming from China, immediately the economic development programme that we were engaged in would have been affected.

By March, Madam Speaker, virtually the whole world was reporting

infestation, infections with serious calamities in a large number of countries and, of course, once that began to happen, Madam Speaker, the economic effect which was the substance of a lot of today's argument by my colleague from Caroni Central, the economic effects were a given. And that is why we said very early, that there will be painful outcomes to the decisions that we have to make in the quest to save lives in this country.

Madam Speaker, with respect to the effects of COVID-19, you heard a lot today about what is going to happen to our economy and how it should be or should not be. It is not because there are bad Governments in Europe why the projection from Europe, the EU in particular, is that they are facing a 15 per cent decline in their GDP, 15 per cent of the value of their gross domestic product is to disappear as a result of their response to COVID.

The United States, they are expecting an 8½ per cent decline in GDP. Here in Caricom, that decline is expected to be between 18 and 30 per cent, and across the world it is expected to be a 4 per cent decline straight across the performance of the world. The World Bank has done a documentary, just came out very recently and is predicting a 5.2 per cent decline in the world's GDP.

Madam Speaker, these might be small percentage declines, but what do they really represent at the human level at the extent of the economy where people are at. Listen to this, Madam Speaker. In the EU in April alone they have lost 397,000 jobs, in April alone. Unemployment in the EU is at a 12-year low, 6.6 per cent decline in April alone. In April alone the unemployment in the EU rose by 6.6 per cent, and they are experiencing a loss of jobs which they have not experienced.

As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, in the United States they are in a worse position now job-wise than they were in the great depression of 1929. So if

somebody had said to us in December on Christmas day that we are going to experience the conditions of the depression of 1929, somebody would take a drink and ask them if they are crazy, but that is what the reality is.

And here in Trinidad and Tobago we received the news what while BP was intending to reorganize itself because with new leadership, it would be taking the company in a new direction and there might have been a small amount of jobs losses that would have gone with the new arrangements, we are now being told that given what is happening, BP—well, you have BPTT, Trinidad and Tobago which is part of BP, is expecting to cut 10,000 jobs including in Trinidad and Tobago because we are not immune when BP cuts 10,000 jobs.

It is anticipated that those jobs are going to be largely off field jobs mainly office-type jobs, managerial-type jobs and manager's support, but the actual production in the fields is going to be maintained at a relatively high level, so we have to brace ourselves for job losses there. The terms and conditions would be not impossible, some people are going to be let off with certain assistance and with certain benefits to go, but 10,000 jobs in BP should be of interest to people in Trinidad and Tobago.

British Airways is expecting to lose 12,000 jobs. Virgin, 3,000; Ryanair, 3,000; Renault motor car, 15,000; Airbus, 10,000; Lufthansa, 22,000. Madam Speaker, these are the effects of the virus that people in Trinidad and Tobago, some of our colleagues in this building in this Chamber would tell us, “ignore that”, it is just—that is not part of the equation and the current situation, that is something that other people have to deal with. I say, no, Madam Speaker, we too had to deal with it, and thank God we have dealt with it well enough. [*Desk thumping*]

We have been able to deal with it well enough, that we did not end up in a

collapse that this could have brought upon us, because the fact that the virus is not here now and we are declaring ourselves, because I am hearing it now, that Trinidad and Tobago is COVID-free. The Government has not made that statement nor has the Ministry of Health, but because we have not been reporting new confirmations, people are taking it upon themselves to declare us COVID-free. To be in that situation, Madam Speaker, we had to literally reconstruct our economic outlook. We had to abandon the budget of 2020 and create with no time available, create a new space to allow our people, one, to survive, and two, to have a future after we survive.

The Minister of Finance early up front, at the same time we were closing our border, shutting ourselves off from the world knowing what effect that will have upon us, knew that in so doing those who would have been losing their jobs, losing their income, those who live from pay cheque to pay cheque, the State had to intervene. And, Madam Speaker, you heard the Minister of Finance today talk about the tens of thousands of people who have been supported by the Government getting involved, intervening [*Desk thumping*] and ensuring that they had enough, not enough to splurge, not enough to be indemnified, but enough to survive, because we said, if we do that, this too shall pass.

And where we are at now, Madam Speaker, and where we should be is not trying to get at each other's throats in this country trying to take credit, but trying to plan a future after COVID, that is where we are at, and that is what this Government is doing. And that is why in the coming days, as a matter of fact, I have just taken possession of our first document arising out of the team that was put in place to look at how we will act immediately and how we will go forward and into the road ahead, and that first document will allow us to adjust or to confirm where we are at because we would have survived that first phase, but the

second phase is upon us, where do we go from here? And that is what should attract this country's attention, Madam Speaker. And how do we do that?

We do that by ensuring that no one group carries the burden; this was said before. We do that by sharing the burden. So when you hear people from the business community saying that they want this and they want that and they did not get this and they did not that, that might be true, but it might very well be as it is more than likely, Madam Speaker, that that which they are complaining about is the aspect of the burden that they are required to share. I have no doubt that there are persons who believe that it does not concern them, but when Members of Parliament speak, they speak as leaders or they should, because they are in the best position to know what the Government and the country are dealing with.

Madam Speaker, I heard my colleague from Caroni Central today tell us in this debate, when the Minister of Finance is reporting how much resources we had to scrape from here, there and everywhere to make sure we had enough to go forward to survive, to not implode, to not be like the others—and his comment was, our economy experienced four and half years of decline. Madam Speaker, a certain level of honesty is required in dealing with these kinds of crises, otherwise the crisis will deal with you.

Madam Speaker, the last time there was economic growth in this country was 2008. Madam Speaker, we had a very good year in 2008, and there was the Wall Street collapse towards the end of 2008 into 2009, and since then Trinidad and Tobago has been spending a lot of money, but we have not been seeing economic growth commensurate with that. The Government changed in 2010, and we had conversations about economic growth and green shoots and clear skies, but the bottom line is, Madam Speaker, we had not turned the economy around. 2010, at the end of 2010, when the review was done it was shown that, I think it is 1.6



per cent of growth was anticipated, and when corrected, that growth was virtually insignificant.

**6.00 p.m.**

The five-year period of my colleague from Caroni Central and others that saw five years of record spending; every year was a record expenditure until our expenditure got to over \$60 billion a year. That did not produce economic growth. So when you speak about four and a half years of economic growth, implying that—of economic stagnation, that it happened under this Government, we have been striving. But, let us put that aside. Whatever we were doing, good, bad, or indifferent, the arrival of a pandemic called for this country to get up and take notice and react, and we did that. [*Desk thumping*] We did that, Madam Speaker. We are being compared with others. We did not ask anybody to compare us with others. What we did was to make firm decisions about this country's prospect based on what was available to the country, and then after that, there are those who say we have done well. We accept their accolades with humility, but we still have a long way to go, a long, long way.

Madam Speaker, I hear my colleague today in this debate, I think it was the same spokesperson for the Opposition, talking about the energy sector being down to zero. To quote him, down to zero on energy. Madam Speaker, nothing is further from the truth. We are in a much better position today in energy than when we came into Government in September 2015. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, in September 2015, we were facing a situation at Point Lisas where companies that require 20 year comfort in gas supply could not see that gas supply and there were no contracts. They were on month to month contract, because there was no gas contract to allow them to invest or to change their minds, those who were thinking of leaving. Madam Speaker, we also found that Trinidad and Tobago was not

getting the best out of the arrangements we had in place for marketing our gas. So what did we do? We took key positive steps, and as a result of that we have stopped the revenue leakage with regard to LNG training. That was a commitment we made publicly at the Hyatt Hotel when we told the companies we are all in this together and you have shareholders and we have shareholders too, and we want a better arrangement.

Madam Speaker, we have, as a result of that, renegotiated an enhanced revenue package with Shell, an enhanced revenue package which is expected to give Trinidad and Tobago, going forward in this post-COVID future, going forward, TT 6.4 billion from 2018 to 2025. We negotiated that in a business that is the backbone of this country. No other Government has taken that on. This Government took that on and came out of it successfully, but I guess that does not make news in Trinidad and Tobago. We have new LNG marketing arrangements which will result in an incremental increase of TT 482 million per year going forward, every year going forward, as a result of that change. Madam Speaker, incremental revenues of TT 802 million per annum—not 482, 802. That is as a result of negotiations done by this Government on our existing business. We settled outstanding claims with BP. And, Madam Speaker, we have stabilized our gas production which was declining; stabilized. It was at 3.3 in 2016, billion cubic feet per day. It is now at 3.8, in a situation where we were running short of gas in terms of the gas that is required for the infrastructure we had in Point Lisas.

Madam Speaker, this country is now engaged in a successful deep-water programme. We are increasing the number of exploration wells. We found approximately 5 trillion cubic feet of gas, and we are currently evaluating that commercial feasibility. As a result of our intervention at the top in BHP Billiton in Australia they have confirmed their investment in the Ruby Field and we are

expecting a production of 10,000 barrels of oil per day in 2021, and an investment being made of US 500 million by BHP Billiton. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago in this environment is one of the few areas where companies are increasing their investment. It is the opposite elsewhere in the world. This is the place where our methanol plants, they have enough gas to produce, they are not producing— One or two plants have shut down because the methanol market is so soft that there is no point in producing the product because there is no taker, there is no buyer for it outside. But of course our colleagues on the other side will ignore that and tell you it is because of the Government. Madam Speaker, it is because the methanol market outside is not there. It has disappeared as a result of COVID.

There are thousands of planes on the ground which otherwise would have been in the air using fuel. There are millions of cars in the United States that are not going to be running this summer because of COVID, and as a result of that the energy market has contracted considerably. And our producers here in the business, the world-class business in which we are engaged, our market has shrunk and disappeared to the point where methanol producers have said to us, they are going to close one of our plants because if we produce the methanol we cannot sell it, there is no taker for it. You would never hear that from our colleagues on the other side, because all they intend to do in this period of hardship, rather than bolster the resilience of our people to fight this virus so we can all be strong and win in the end, they believe that the country has to fail so that they can win an election. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, you saw them here today, once again trying, invoking all kinds of things, trying to get the United States to apply sanctions to Trinidad and Tobago, for God alone knows what. Madam Speaker, this country has to be very,

very careful, because the people who in another country is called the loyal Opposition, would have stood with the people in a case like this. But instead what are we getting? Put sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago. What for? Because we have said we did not do what the Opposition said. We have not sold any fuel to Venezuela. And, Madam Speaker, because we have said we are, as an independent sovereign nation, we are not going to accept as president of another country somebody who was, in our view, and in the UN view, not properly installed in that country. And for those two reasons, Madam Speaker, the Opposition is asking the Americans to put sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago, as if we do not have enough trouble. Our market has shrunk, our people are losing their jobs. There are people communicating every day as to how they get their next meal, and the Government has gone beyond any expectation. The billions of dollars that we have committed that we have spent already in keeping this country's families at the table, and preserving jobs, as if that was not enough for a challenge for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, you have an Opposition calling for sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago, trying to frighten people that the Americans "vex", and we go lose we visa. Well, in fact what they are doing, Madam Speaker, is undermining us, and it is not new, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] It is not new.

During World War II England was fighting for its life against the German war machine, the Nazis, but there were people calling strikes in England in the factories. We too have our ragamuffins. Madam Speaker, if this country had to rely on anything it had to rely on the fact that we in this sea had to paddle and must paddle our own canoe, and this Government is going to ensure that the resilience of the people of Trinidad and Tobago is what is going to take us beyond COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I heard my colleague talking about agriculture, and nothing

is being done for agriculture. Madam Speaker, I would like to ask them, my colleagues, what exactly did you do for agriculture in the five years when you had money? Since you are this expert on agriculture, how come the only thing they did, they created something called Caroni Green, and that like everything else they did was a waste of taxpayers' money, a handful of people got rich, they spent millions trying to produce products for sale at a humungous loss, and Caroni Green is not an example. You know what our example is? Our example is before COVID, long before COVID, we advertised the 1,100 acres at Aripo that was in the public service, where public servants were minding 260 cows and producing nothing. We advertised it to the private sector. We got two proposals. We evaluated it and took the better one, and today the private sector is engaged in a \$30 million agricultural production enterprise at Aripo [*Desk thumping*] where that acreage would be properly managed and properly producing. It was the COVID intervention that prevented us from bringing into that private sector operation frozen embryos, because we can begin to produce dairy cattle and other kinds of cattle up there to restart agriculture on lands that were idle.

Madam Speaker, we have put thousands of acres of lands in people's hands before COVID, and many of them got the lands for agriculture. But what is being done with it? Trading it for business, using it for housing, and encouraged by the Opposition, who tells them all the time that the Government does not care about agriculture. Talk! Talk! Talk! I also heard about "the future of the country is the digital age". Madam Speaker, who is it? Who is it that has entered the digital age? It was under this Government during the last year that the Cabinet has gone from boxes of pounds of paper to being on a computer, where today as COVID came we are conducting Cabinet with no problem on the digital, on a platform where you stay wherever you are and join into the Cabinet. We have done that! The AG's

office, the entire AG's is now digital. And, Madam Speaker, I had two meetings, two meetings with the president of Estonia, because we are using the Estonia model to create in Trinidad and Tobago an e-identity, and the intention is to put every citizen as a unique number and a unique identified object in a nation of 1.4million people so every aspect of national life and governmental service can be identified where the person is, who the person is, and you do not have this thing about you want to give help to people but you spend half of the time trying to figure out who belongs and who does not belong, who qualifies and who does not qualify, because the way it is now, by non-digital arrangements they could go to every single line and try to get the same assistance in every single line. If we had e-identity that would have been the easiest thing to do, because nobody could have gone from point A to point B without being observed and known.

Madam Speaker, it is not those who talk that is going to make this country step into the digital age, it is those who do it. We are aiming, Madam Speaker, in the not too distant future, the post-COVID future, to move, to have our children use e-books, and to have more of that kind of training. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, my grandson is at home doing his work at home, five years old. Without COVID that may never have happened, because we would have stuck with what we were doing before and say, "If it ent broke doh interfere with it". And, Madam, because of the circumstances forced upon us by COVID-19, many, if not all our children, have been put in a position to begin to appreciate how they can learn without the school space that they are being accustomed to. Learn at home. Learn on the applications on their phone.

So, Madam Speaker, these things are things that the Government is aware of, that we are doing, and it is part of our plan. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** Prime Minister, your time is now spent. I now call on the

Member for Oropouche East. [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. Roodal Moonilal** (*Oropouche East*): Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to make an intervention on this critical measure before us today, mid-year review almost, and a request from the Government through the parliamentary process and relevant procedure to obtain \$2.6 billion more than the \$53 billion budgeted for, for fiscal 2020.

Madam Speaker, the Government is convinced of their good work as most Governments are, and the last speaker of course and other Ministers earlier spent significant time, as is expected, on the COVID-19 challenge. Some pronounced “COVI” I hear today, so I do not know if that is another way of saying it. But, Madam Speaker, the challenges that this country face today did not begin with COVID-19 and they will not end post COVID-19. They will end by a change of Government, a change of administration. They will not end after COVID if the Government remains in place. But the problems did not begin on January 22<sup>nd</sup> or thereabout with the declaration of a pandemic. It just did not begin then. And I would just like to respond briefly to some of the issues raised by the last speaker, the Prime Minister, who had some amazing statements in the context of this debate, at least, spoke about digital technology, the children, the Venezuelan issue, sanctions, accused the Opposition yet again of calling for sanctions upon Trinidad and Tobago, accused the Opposition of opposing for the sake of opposing, and then made a fascinating comment, which I had to write, because I needed to reflect on it, that the COVID challenge has nothing to do with elections or political campaigns. I heard it, Madam Speaker, and I was shocked, so I really did want to write it down.

Madam Speaker, we heard of the Government’s challenge, and let me just begin by telling the Prime Minister, he said and spent some time making the point,

to him, that the last time this country had economic growth, the Prime Minister told us today, was in 2008. Now, this is fascinating, because I have in my hand the *Review of the Economy* 2019, and at page 136, Appendix II, they have here T&T economy, 2014 to 2020, and would you believe in 2015 real GDP growth 1.8 per cent. [*Desk thumping*] Now, Madam Speaker, if we heard that from the Member from St. Joseph we would forgive him, because it is not his forte and that has nothing to do with the quarantine measures. If we heard that from any other Member of the Government we would accept, we would forgive them. We would understand that. But the Prime Minister of this country, who ought to have at his or her fingertips at least basic data; no one is accusing the Prime Minister of not being an economist, a financial expert or anything like that. He is not, and we know that. But certainly when a Prime Minister speaks they ought not to completely and utterly disregard the facts as the Prime Minister did today. And this, Madam Speaker, is the *Review of the Economy*, and we have it here, 1.8 GDP at purchasers' prices, and it is in another column as well here.

So, if the Prime Minister cannot be trusted to tell us the last time it had economic growth in this country, what can we trust him to tell us? And what could you believe, Madam Speaker? And today, Madam Speaker, the Government, several speakers, including the Prime Minister, they have adopted this sombre and deep voice type of delivery, talking about how they managed the COVID and so on. Madam Speaker, in the early days of this COVID, I must tell you, as a concerned citizen I tuned in to TV for one, among the first of the press conferences. When the Prime Minister began with a volcano in Montserrat I turned the channel and went on to look at BBC that was giving some information on coping and dealing with COVID-19, because the Prime Minister of this country spent almost every day, every other day, giving lectures at that time. And today, I



am not saying the Government did nothing or the Government did absolutely nothing. I am not saying the Member for St. Joseph collapsed and did nothing. He did as much as he could, and I understand he is now sharing out hand sanitizer in St. Joseph, for which he is entitled to do that, with the PNM logo, but never shared out hand sanitizers in the height of the pandemic and lock down, cannot remember getting a drop of hand sanitizer, but they are entitled to do that. No problem with that.

But, Madam Speaker, today I compliment, and my colleagues join me, in complimenting the people of Trinidad and Tobago on their diligence, on their courage. Trinidad and Tobago citizens have several defining characteristics, but one is resilience. They are resilient people. They are also fun loving but they are resilient. And when our folks, Trinidad and Tobago citizens look on at the world news, every single day, Madam Speaker, would you believe before I close my eyes in the night to sleep I go on to COVID-19 global trends and I type “the world”, and every night I used to be checking between the time when I go to sleep to wake up how many more persons were infected and how many more fatalities we had. And we monitored, we looked at news, we listened. We watched all the news reports, social media, and our citizens took a responsible position.

When this thing started the Leader of the Opposition—among the first things the Leader of the Opposition said and did was to call upon citizens to practise the health protocols. Never to attack the Government. The record is there. The Leader of the Opposition, very early during this pandemic, did not go and come out and attack the Government on anything. She took the position, a mature, responsible position that we have to contribute in this challenge. And the Opposition Leader led a team that spoke about health protocols, that spoke about the importance of sharing, delivering hampers, long before hamper programme

start. The United National Congress was the first organization in this country, first to give masks, to make masks and deliver to people. We were the first. We made 50,000 masks and delivered. We were not attacking the Government then. Today you say we are attacking the Government. Our citizens need to be complimented on their maturity, and their responsibility, and their commitment to life. This was a time, Madam Speaker, it continues, I say, but in the height, I mean, you do not even want your brother and sister come in your house. Madam Speaker, there is a bucket in front and when you come home you put your clothes there. You spray down the groceries. This is what we lived through.

And today, Madam Speaker, I am here to unmask the Government, figuratively, on how they managed that crisis that they are boasting about today. You see, Madam Speaker, when they entered office they were talking about ghost workers from the former administration. Today we are hearing about ghost hotels getting grants. The Prime Minister looked to blame the economic catastrophe we face today on COVID and what COVID was doing, and all the companies in the world firing people. But it is not that at all. That started before. Petrotrin refinery closed, 10,000 persons direct and indirect lose their jobs, fence-line workers. YARA closed in December 2019, ArcelorMittal plant, the ammonia plant, Centrin, Methanol Holdings, and on and on we go. Thousands. We estimate over 50,000 persons lost their jobs before the COVID-19 pandemic. So this Government cannot hide behind COVID. COVID is not a veil you hide behind and say the virus came, that is why we are in this position today. The Member for Caroni Central, I listened to him carefully. He was at pains to point out that several measures being introduced today had nothing to do with COVID. Nothing. But the one that really gets me, Madam Speaker, was when the Prime Minister stood here boldly and said, “We are not about politics and campaigning”. We are not

about that at all. “We are about serving and acting in a way that is not political”. And of course, accused our party, our Opposition, of behaving in a manner that suggests to the Prime Minister that we took politics—we wanted to politicize this matter.

Madam Speaker, I have in my hand here, I have in my hand distribution sheets for hampers, and today we are asking the Parliament to approve millions of dollars for social development programmes, including food cards, including hampers, including other relief grants and so on, salary relief grants, what you call the rent grants and so on. That is the purpose of being here today. The Government has to explain why it is during this period hampers are being distributed all over this country, and you like this one. When they are distributing hampers they have the list here, and I have the list in my hand. The distribution list, it is in my hand here. Friday 15 May, 2020, hamper distribution list. This is what the person gets at the warehouse and they get at the Ministry, NAMDEVCO, wherever it comes from, and they distribute according to a list sent by the Government: And Siparia, 50, Penal junction office, the lady name is there and the number. Well that clearly, Penal junction opposite Penal market is the Member of Parliament for Siparia. But hear this, another 15 Siparia, to the Siparia community centre, Kelvin Fletcher. Who is he? Madam Speaker, look at this. Pointe-a-Pierre, Plaisance Park Community Centre, 50; but Pointe-a-Pierre, 270 Hermitage Road, Union Village, Claxton Bay, 50. That is the office of the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre. Madam Speaker, Princes Town, two sets, one to the incumbent MP and one to the PNM candidates and PNM offices.

Madam Speaker, it is here in the list, Cumuto/Manzanilla, and the contact person. I am not going to call contact person and so on. San Fernando West, Attorney General, 100, 50 Independence Avenue, San Fernando, the person.

Nothing wrong with that. But you know none going to any UNC office down there. Why you did not give 100 to Sean Sobers? “He doh deserve none?” [*Desk thumping*] “Why you doh give to him, he doh deserve any?” Madam Speaker, Friday 05 June, Oropouche East, 100 hampers to go, 50 for Debe junction, which is my office, 50 for Esperanza Regional Complex, collected by the PNM office, the PNM officers. Siparia, the same thing. It happens again. Look, Naparima, Barrackpore Regional Complex, 50, Naparima, 29 Manahambre Road, Cedar Hill, Princes Town, 50, that is the office of the elected MP. Chaguanas West, the same thing; Tabaquite, the same thing. But you know when it comes to areas like Diego Martin, Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, Laventille/Morvant, only one set going. “How that working? How that working, really?”

Madam Speaker, the list goes on, I do not want to call the 41 constituencies here. Oropouche East, again, Madam Speaker, Oropouche West, and, Madam Speaker, you know they do this with a brass face that is unbelievable. The PNM candidates actually go on social media and thank the Ministry for the hampers—the candidates. Now let me make the point because I know they would come after, I have no problem with poor people and deserving people getting hampers. That is not the issue at all. You can do it through elected MPs, through councillors, through NGOs and so on, but I did not think that a political party in that sense was an NGO. It is not a church, but I did not think it was an NGO. Then you give all political parties. If you were building a programme on the basis of equality then you call all political parties and say, look, we have hampers, we have for UNC, for PNM, for COP, for NJAC, for whoever. But, Madam Speaker, they went, they took taxpayers’ money which we are approving today, and in every single constituency held by a UNC MP they delivered to the PNM office, PNM operative, and we have the list here. But in the constituencies held by the PNM no other

political party would get one single hamper, and that, Madam Speaker, is how they operate their business.

And I have to hear the Prime Minister today—and, Madam Speaker, they so bold faced, look we have pictures of the Ministry truck backing up into an office of the People's National Movement with full, what you call?—the state logo and thing. I do not want to get driver and thing in trouble and so on, so I am not going to call no number of the vehicle, but the Coat of Arms there, the relevant Ministry and so on. So, this is what they come today for, to ask for money for electioneering, to ask for money for electioneering, and it will continue. We read in the social media they rent two tents for the price of a HDC house. When they got caught they said, no, no, no, was just an invoice, we did not pay it yet. Madam Speaker, they boast today. I had to hear the Member for St. Joseph boasting about COVID and how well we did.

### **6.30p.m.**

Madam Speaker, I have the note here, the CMO, Chief Medical Officer. He said in a newspaper article in an interview, incidentally, in March— sometime in March. I will get it for us now. The CMO said, 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, the Chief Medical Officer said—here is it. He said we were fortunate to have the Couva children's hospital available. They were fortunate. It took a pandemic for this Government to open the Couva children's hospital to deal with COVID-19.

In this report as well, the Minister of Works and Transport came and talked about the interchange and how well they did with the interchange, and that is another fallacy. Madam Speaker, for the record, I want to correct— because it was said in the committee and in the report, the verbatim notes I have. The United National Congress, the People's Partnership never issued a contract for the interchange in Curepe. There was no contract awarded, there was a bidder

selected, we were in negotiations with the bidder, it was about \$293 million. We were in negotiations with the bidder that—Madam Speaker, they will get the records for it, but no contract was awarded for the interchange.

So you cannot boast that you built an interchange for \$200 million less because none was awarded. The same thing, Madam Speaker, and I want to tell them, an incoming UNC government will keep an eye on them, will keep an eye on them, because I am informed that the RFP for that interchange was suspect. They gave it to a Chinese company and left out paving works. And the paving works were left out of the RFR and in that circumstance, the entire arrangement should have been cancelled.

So you see, the trick— I know the little trick, I know the trick. The trick they used is that they cut down the scope of works, took paving outside of the RFP and said, “Look, we build it cheaper than the UNC was going to build it.” And then they got a next contractor— who the Prime Minister said is his good friend— they got another contractor to do what is called the “paving works”. So, Madam Speaker, that is what they are doing, they are butchering contracts. It is not the same scope of works.

In Point Fortin Hospital, you know what they did? They so want to show that they can build the hospital at a cheaper rate than the Partnership Government, they removed UDeCOTT management fee, they removed contingency funds, so the project naturally came in smaller in the sum than what we had budgeted. You know what they told UDeCOTT? You all would get the management fee from the Treasury, Do not put it in the budget, do not budget it that way because then that will be 20 million— \$23 million more. So UDeCOTT has to get a loan to pay staff and to pay operating cost at the side because they wanted the figure to come in lower. Contingency gone, management fees gone and they have been doing this.

But the Curepe Interchange deserves an enquiry, an investigation as to how that contract could have been awarded and tell me I am wrong. Tell me you did not have to go into the bond posted by the Chinese company to use the money from that for paving. That, Madam Speaker, is a serious matter.

And these are the matters, Madam Speaker— and today to hear the Prime Minister talk as if, you know, everything going so good. The Prime Minister admits they went to Houston, They have a habit of doing something which no government could have done before, none, not Dr. Eric Williams “come down de road”. They go with politicians alone, without technical people, without lawyers, without Permanent Secretaries, without nobody from a Ministry and they negotiating big time. The Prime Minister spoke about Venezuela in his speech a few minutes ago, accusing us of what? Hating this country and so on. They secretly, they secretly without Cabinet approval wrote the Latin American institution responsible for the Rio Treaty, the OAS, Madam Speaker, and they wrote and requested what is called a notification of reservation, saying that Trinidad and Tobago does not support the September and December decisions on sanctions on Venezuela. There is no Cabinet Note. When you ask people in the know, they say, “That is Minister do that.” Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs and Prime Minister decided to write an international body, decided to write an international body to escape their legal responsibilities in a treaty and the Cabinet knows nothing.

I ask my colleagues opposite, find the Cabinet Note that supported a reservation, a notification of reservation because it is in the footnote of that agreement. And today foreign affairs is embarrassed because of the conduct of this Government on that matter. And a story is now coming out, I think today, you had something in the international press, *Reuters* news, I believe, in which, Madam

Speaker, they are dealing with that matter, fuel to the Venezuela. And, Madam Speaker, let me say, categorically, at the top of my voice, the Opposition has never represented to the Americans or any authority, anyone, to impose sanctions on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

What we have said is if you are guilty of breaching international law, they should sanction Diego Martin West in his personal capacity, sanction any other Minister, sanction the leaders of the state enterprise that is responsible in their personal capacity, but not the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Because the other day— two days ago, an American high official, in a virtual meeting with AMCHAM, made a fascinating—Ms. Judy Chong, I believe her name is. She said that the support for Venezuelan, Guaidó, had nothing to do with being ad hoc and whimsical. It was pursuant to the Venezuelan constitution. That is what she said. This Government and this Prime Minister, as was said today, does not recognize the Constitution of Venezuela, has no respect for their own Constitution and has gone and put himself on record and again, hiding behind the United Nations' flag.

The United Nations recognize states, the United Nations do not recognize government that way, they recognize the State. And today we are now at risk but I want to tell you, God is great too, The people of Trinidad and Tobago are not at risk. It is the leaders of this Government and the state enterprise in question, they are at risk with any investigation that is going on there, it is not the people. I do not think the people of Trinidad and Tobago are at any risk because they understand clearly that the people do not support the Government on this, they do not support. And the United States is getting fed up and tired of this Government, not of this country. They are not getting tired of the country, you know, they are getting tired of this Government because this Government has breached international law with impunity.



A daily newspaper had it to say, in reference to the Minister of National Security of all people, that this Government is misleading the public with impunity on that matter. And there was not a quack from the Government, nothing. And today the Prime Minister comes holdfast to that position and behaving like a bad-john in his own right, accused the former Government of records spending—spend on what? Today, if you go in this country, every single thing you can see built in the last 10 years was built by the People’s Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] They had to quarantine people in Couva Hospital, we built that. [*Desk thumping*] In the National Tennis Centre, they call it. for obvious reasons, they call it “racquet centre”. They had to quarantine, Madam Speaker, at the Debe campus in my constituency, built by the Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] Why did they not quarantine people at the Central Block in Port of Spain, which he is building for 10 years now? Five years now they are quarreling about the Central Block. Every time the Minister of Health got up, he said, “The Partnership never dealt with the Central Block.” Why did he not put one patient there? Because in five years, they have done nothing.

Arima Hospital, we made the arrangement with the Chinese contractor, turn the sod, on the move, that should have finished by 2017. Point Fortin Hospital, Point Fortin highway even, Madam Speaker, these projects could have been long done. They delayed and delayed. When the pandemic came and they had nowhere to run, they then looked at the Partnership projects and said, “Look, we really have to open these buildings and use it, eh, because is water more than flour.”

The Prime Minister spoke of his work for the last five years. He will be remembered for the Sandals scandal, for Dragon Field, for the ferry. The Prime Minister himself declared in a Parliament meeting that there was corruption in relation to the purchase of a ferry. A report on that was done, Madam Speaker. In

the recent COVID-19, a report was done on the Sangre Grande facility, Brooklyn centre I believe. To this day, we have not seen— we have not had sight of that report.

What about that report? We heard it went to the Attorney General. I imagine Senior Counsel Fyard Hosein is advising there as well, but we have not seen it. Why do you want to hide a report that dealt with such a critical matter as substandard treatment of patients and undermining health protocols during a pandemic? They do not have it, they do not have it. To this day, with all the money they are passing and all the money they are spending to their operators, policemen complained that when they go for money, the police force— the police service in this country has not received one dollar more during this pandemic to assist them with their work. Policemen cannot get outstanding back pay, outstanding moneys for optical and dental surgery, and so on. They cannot get it.

Madam Speaker, today, I think nurses were protesting today when we were sitting here, asking for their moneys. The nurses asked from day one— when I raised the matter of the nurses asking for some type of assistance and compensation during this period, the Member for Laventille West got vex. He said nurses all over the world have the same challenge; that is their job. When you take the job, you have that job. Today the nurses are on the march, Madam Speaker. And there was a fascinating article which I will not have time to read in detail, but there is an article published, Madam Speaker, in *The Economist* which speaks about how COVID and the pandemic can be used by dictatorial regimes to smother and suppress democracy during a time of COVID, using the pandemic. And that is a very important article that we can get and circulate for colleagues to read, because it says that during this time governments used the guise of lockdown and all the associated protocols to smother free speech—watch at it— ability to

mobilize, ability to protest, to raise your voice against public policy. The governments are doing that, regrettably, in different parts of the world. And this Government, one gets the feeling as well, that this Government is not unknown to that strategy that in this pandemic they can continue—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

**Madam Speaker:** May I overrule. He said, one gets that feeling. He has not accused. Go ahead.

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** Thank you, Ma'am. Yes, Madam Speaker, and it is an interesting article that deals with the use of a pandemic to suppress rights, human rights and democratic rights. And this country has to wake up, smell the coffee and understand that if we allow this period to run, with the Government having this control over what we think, what we believe, our ability to move, our ability to mobilize, to speak, it is a very sad day. Because I am sure Members opposite would like this to continue till next year, because they believe that they can conduct what is called a "COVID campaign", a covert COVID campaign, give out sanitizer with the PNM sign on it, Madam Speaker, give out hampers to their candidates and that will help them win. In some way, that is the campaigning that they are undertaking. But, Madam Speaker, that will not help them because the problems and the burdens that the citizens feel did not begin on January 22<sup>nd</sup> with the COVID.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance spoke earlier today and gave an outlook and said that things were looking good and that their projection was a positive projection, and so on. Madam Speaker, I have in my hand, Monetary Policy Report, Volume 22 it would be, May 2020. I think this is as recent as one can get, Monetary Policy Report. And on page 18, "Outlook", that is the name of Section IV, I think, yes, IV. It says:

“The pace and extent of recovery in 2021 will depend on the still unknown path of this deadly pandemic and the repercussions on global trade...”

So, Madam Speaker, the Central Bank was not as optimistic as the Minister— was not as optimistic and certainly not as optimistic as the Prime Minister today. And we had projections, of course, for the global economy and it says:

“In Trinidad and Tobago, the impact of COVID-19 has adversely affected the short-term economic outlook, perhaps for the whole of 2020 depending on how the situation evolves.”

So, Madam Speaker, to come out of this problem will require polices, will require programmes, and I am happy to announce that the political leader and Opposition Leader has already announced an economic transformation plan rooted in job creation. The people in this country, really, I mean, with great respect, they are not concerned with you and your sanctions and Maduro and Guaidó. Many are concerned with food, they are concerned with jobs. They have lost their jobs and more jobs can be lost at a time like this. And they boast—

**Madam Speaker:** Member—

**Dr. R. Moonilal:**—about grants, Madam Speaker, but it is a fraction of the problem.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Oropouche East, your time is now spent. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West. [*Desk thumping*]

**Dr. R. Moonilal:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to enter the debate in the House today and to bring

us back to some level of sanctity after that highly political platform speech that we just had from the Member for Oropouche East. And I will start with the last point that he made, this screaming and shouting that the Leader of the Opposition has economic plans for Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, through you, as a reminder to the country and thankfully, the sensible people in Trinidad and Tobago do not have short term memory. They would recall the period between 2010 to 2015, absolutely nothing was done by that government to promote the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, to diversify the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, to build the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, but rather what we had during that period was a disappearance of hundreds of millions of dollars with no value for money to the people of Trinidad and Tobago whatsoever. So let us be reminded that is what happened. I listened to the criticism, the unwarranted criticism of how the COVID crisis was handled. But again, Madam Speaker, thankfully the population of Trinidad and Tobago knows better. It was so ironic to hear, as usual, the babbling from the Member for Oropouche East as he said he turned off—in his most disrespectful tone, being the class clown that he is.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, 48—

**Hon. S. Young:** Madam Speaker, and to hear him say he turned off the television—

**Mr. Lee:** On a Standing Order 48(6). He cannot be referring to Members of Parliament like that.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I will ask you to just rephrase that. It borders on being unparliamentary.

**Hon. S. Young:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I retract it and I refer to the Member of Oropouche East as being the court jester. [*Desk thumping*]

So, as usual, in his most disrespectful manner, he refers to one of the initial press conferences by the Prime Minister, a leader dealing with a pandemic, a COVID crisis, coming to the nation and speaking to them and relating to the people on the ground, in his manner, by telling them what happened in the past. And the Member for Oropouche East has the gall to say he turns off the TV and turns on to BBC.

So I will tell the country now—and that he is looking at how it is handled on BBC. The United Kingdom's initial response to COVID, with no disrespect to them, was one of herd immunity. The whole COVID took off, the pandemic took off in the United Kingdom. They quickly surpassed the rest of Europe in the spread of COVID, but that is what the UNC would look forward to. All the continual reference to the United States, all of a sudden the cheerleaders. I want the country, I want all the people in Trinidad and Tobago to take note that as we stand here as patriots, we stand here in the red, white and black of Trinidad and Tobago, day in, day out, making decisions for our country Trinidad and Tobago, every single time we come to Parliament, all we hear from the Member for Naparima and the Member for Oropouche East and others, is the United States of America.

I will grant anyone exemption right now, right here, right now to go to the United States, if they would take them. The United States now has over twomillion cases of COVID. Every single day the numbers are going up and I guarantee they will have a surge in the United States in the coming weeks of more COVID cases.

Trinidad and Tobago, under the direction of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Security and all of the other arms of the Government handled the COVID crisis in a brilliant fashion, [*Desk thumping*] and the objective analysis by the international observers— even Oxford University

rated us number one, but they cannot handle that. Because, you see, the UNC is sitting there like a deer in the headlights. From the time COVID entered Trinidad and Tobago, the UNC has not known how to react because the rest of the country looked on and they admired and they were happy and satisfied with the manner that the Government handled the COVID crisis. Because you see a parallel health care system was built out and not a single shred, not a whisper of corruption, but I guarantee you if it was done under the UNC, every contract would have been overvalued, everything would have been overpriced, [*Desk thumping*] all their friends would have gotten the contracts, because that is the UNC style of business.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, on a point of order, 48(4), he is imputing—48(6).

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue.

**Hon. S. Young.** Thank you very much. The country knows it because all they ever talk about, especially the Member for Oropouche East, is giving out a contract. Always focused on contracts. He wanted to make reference to contracts, Madam Speaker. He said we butchered contracts. He talked about the butchering of the contract and the Curepe Interchange. I remind the country about the Curepe Interchange. Two Members of Government under the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar led-UNC Opposition fell out and had a public spat over the Curepe Interchange. Let the country remember that. That is why you could not give the contract, right? One remains, the other left. Let the country be reminded of that.

You want to talk about contracts? tell us about the OAS contract. Tell us about on the last working day as a government, a UNC government, why it is that you all gave away this country's rights to terminate OAS? [*Desk thumping*] Tell us about that contract. Tell us about the \$400million under the Member for Oropouche East that he distributed contracts under EMBD in the last month before

an election. Tell us about that.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Madam Speaker, 48(6)— [*Crosstalk*— you do not—a Minister does not distribute nothing. [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue.

**Hon. S. Young:** Text messages.

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue.

**Hon. S. Young:** Tell us about the Beetham waste water contract, tell us about all of those contracts. You see, the Member for Oropouche East, all he can do is sit there, slander and throw talk, but all of these are facts, all of these are facts. Tell us about you being a defendant in an EMBD proceeding. That is the fact, right? You see—and this is what they do.

So do not come here and use the parliamentary time to try and destroy a country. Do not come here and tell us about what it is you would have done, because you did not do any of it. I also want to refer to the energy sector because they did absolutely nothing for five years plus in the energy sector, apart from destroy what was good before. Not a single contract, negotiated—“ah”, yes, one, CGCL where they gave away the country’s gas resources. They breached every single—they like to talk about, downstream and the pet/chem industry at Point Lisas.

As we entered office, the first thing the Point Lisas persons told us is that they are hearing that the new CGCL plant is getting all the gas and they would not get. That is what they did. We had to go and negotiate with the Government of Japan to get us out of billions of dollars of potential claims. That is their legacy in the energy industry. To stand here and criticize the Prime Minister for going to Houston to do what he did, to unstick stuck negotiations. He did not negotiate, but to unstick unstuck negotiations. I want to remind the country the equivalent in



2010 to 2015, the then Prime Minister met BP's executives in her bathroom slippers.

**Hon. Member:** 48(4).

**Hon. S. Young:** And that is what they did to the energy sector.

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, 48(4) and 48(6). What is bathroom slippers?

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue.

**Hon. S. Young:** Thank you very much. You see, the truth hurts, but do not stand here once again and try to mislead the country. Be reminded what is it that happened to this country between 2010 and 2015, how they decimated it, how persons who had nothing before, all of a sudden became millionaires. That is what happens under a UNC administration.

I want to remind the country, through you, Madam Speaker, when COVID started in Trinidad on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March and the Government moved into action, taking the scientific and the medical advice of our public health care sector experts, the Chief Medical Officer and his staff under the guidance of the Minister of Health, I want to remind the country what Oropouche East came here and said. "Open the bars", that was his cry, that was his shout. His clarion call was to open the bars, when it is accepted, medical evidence, the scientific evidence, that would have been one of the worse things that could be done.

So let the country be reminded, if they were under the governance of United National Congress, what would have happened. They made it clear— the Leader of the Opposition stood in the midday sun, under a tent, stammering and "stuttering" to tell the country the only reason we do not have a spread of COVID in Trinidad and Tobago is because the sun shining. That is the evidence that they would have led this country with. But no, you have sober leadership, you have leadership who meets in a structure, you have a Cabinet that decided to

appoint a sub-Cabinet committee led by the Prime Minister with the Minister of Health, Minister of National Security and the co-opt of whoever needs to be co-opted, who took advice every step of the way from the experts, from the scientists and that is why today we are in the position that we are in.

That is why today, even with the management of the borders as we stand here now, there are over 300 people being tested down at the port, because we were able to negotiate for those last sets of cruise ship workers to come in on a ship and allow us to test them. That is why right now, as we stand here, we have the plane coming in from Venezuela to take those nationals. And what you have on that side, is you have the rabble-rousers, those who running to try and tout themselves, and to go to people and say, “We will get you in.” It is not that we do not want our nationals to return. Every single one of them will return but we will continue to manage the country in an appropriate manner and to ensure that the lives of the people in Trinidad and Tobago are not put at unnecessary risk, and that is the difference.

You see the results, the objective results at the end, at three months into the COVID crisis— not at the end— three months into the COVID crisis, the objective results that can be measured and that are undisputed is that we had, fortunately up to this point, no community spread. I do not know how many countries in the world, Madam Speaker, can say that there was no community spread of COVID in their country, and that is not by fluke, that is not by luck, that is not by coincidence. That is because you had a responsible leadership, a responsible Government that, at every step of the way, took the right decisions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So if I sound a little angry today, I am, Madam Speaker, with the greatest of respect, because to come here every single week and to listen to those on the other

side preach about United States of America and to call down sanctions, and the audacity of the Member for Oropouche East, who has left the Chamber, to say that nobody on the Opposition called for sanctions. He himself was the first person out on the blocks. The Member for Oropouche East, I remind the nation wrote to the United States Ambassador. He is the one who called for it the first time. Because that is the plan, the plan is to destroy. They have a scorch and burn technique. If we cannot rule, if we cannot be in charge, burn it to the ground.

But I will tell you what, Madam Speaker, in September 2015, the people of this country took a decision, a sober decision and they put in place a PNM Government and this Government has done all that it can. Let us talk about the energy sector. We had a Prime Minister, a former Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia, Leader of the Opposition in the last budget debate, the Leader of the Opposition who is a former Prime Minister, did not even know what was the shareholding composition of Atlantic LNG. And they want to talk about energy? You had a Minister of Energy who did nothing. Him and the Prime Minister stood up with the then chairman of Petrotrin, with a bottle in their hand, saying they had the largest oil find ever, jubilee, for years—is the largest—where is it now? All they did is fool the population or thought they were fooling the population. It will not work. It did not work then and it will not work now. What we are facing, with the greatest of respect now, Madam Speaker, in the energy industry, is a global crisis.

We trade those pet/chem industries at Point Lisas, the petrochemical industries, methanol, ammonia, urea, are international commodities. I know they do not understand that. But if they go and look at the global markets and the prices, they do not exist anymore. It is based on demand and supply. The demand dried up. COVID killed the demand. So it has nothing do with the Government of

Trinidad and Tobago. It is a global crisis in the energy sector. Even LNG, there is more supply now than there is demand. And in the coming days it will be announced what we have done. In the coming days it will be announced that, once again, this Government took charge in a crisis in the energy sector, and what we did, and what we went and renegotiated, and what we have achieved, once again, for the Government of Trinidad and—for the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the energy sector. And all of the people in the energy sector know how hard the Government has worked.

**7.00 p.m.**

We have started a gas value chain, a conversation that has never taken place. We have already had two meetings, Minister Khan, myself, and Mr. Wendell Mottley. Every single player in the energy industry, upstream, downstream, midstream—I do not know if they understand what that means. Every single company in the energy sector, upstream—those who pull the gas out—downstream—those who are using it to produce their products—Atlantic LNG, NGC, all of us have been meeting for the first time sharing information, having discussions. You know why? To plan for the future of gas industry in Trinidad and Tobago. That is how this Government operates. Pull everybody into the room and we are having those conversations.

So all these cries and these shouts that they want Trinidad to fail, under this administration we will not allow that to happen. But we do not listen to them. What we have done is doing the hard work. Once again, going and find the best in class in the world to help us, to guide us, to guide the country forward, and that is what is going on. All the fuss the Member for Oropouche East I hear him making about hampers and about this, always coming here to “buss a mark”, I saw the Member for Oropouche East on the television news a few nights ago giving out

money, handing out a cheque to people in his constituency saying I am giving money to this one, and I wondered to myself where did he get that money from to give out, to give out to this charity and that charity? Every single MP on both sides, I am sure, is trying their best to help all of those in their constituency. It is not an easy job. Every single constituency is going to have people in need especially at this time, and any MP worth his or her weight in salt would be trying to find the means outside of the state structure to get hampers however, taking out of our own pockets, begging persons for assistance to get to the people on the ground and to help, any MP who is saying that they are waiting on the State to provide them with the help to help their constituents is not representing his constituents.

We try to get that as best as we can, but we go over and beyond that. Do not come here and try to create the impression that there is some corruption going on in trying to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is wrong. It is wrong to suggest that because quite simply that is not what is going on. It is wrong to come here—and I will remind the people again, I remember in 2015 being told that there were some Ministers at that time who were giving out food cards from the back of their trunk. I have never seen a food card five years as an MP, because we as an administration took a decision that Members of Parliament should not get involved in the handing out of food cards. The first time I saw a food card was yesterday in the grocery. The person in front of me was using a food card to pay and that is how it should be. As Members of Parliament what we have to do is serve the people, do the best we can, but protect yourselves as well, protect the Treasury. So to come here and to try, as usual, to create this cloud of corruption, it simply does not exist; and to stand up, I have it here, I have pieces of paper.

I stand here, Madam Speaker, today and hopefully for the last time, but I am

pretty sure it would not be the last time, and to plead with my friends on the other side, stop calling for the worse on Trinidad and Tobago. Stop calling for sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago, stop talking and making things up, this thing about how you need a Cabinet Note before you take a position at an OAS meeting. You need a Cabinet Note before the Minister of Caricom and Foreign Affairs, under the direction—I am sure of—the Prime Minister gives a directive as to what position should be taken at the OAS. It simply does not work this way. So stop trying to give the population the impression that is how you govern a country. As we stand here right now my phone is ringing, ringing, ringing, because at seven o'clock tonight I was supposed to be on a call with the Minister of Defence from Canada. The Cabinet Minister in charge of Defence of Canada was supposed to have a call with me at 7.00. I tried to get a message that I will be on my feet in the Parliament, but I could not. You think there is a Cabinet Note that is going to say “Minister of National Security is going to have a conversation with the Minister of Defence”?

We trust—in this Government at least—our Members, we trust our Cabinet Ministers to carry out and to do what is best for Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, there are occasions, but we have to come to Cabinet to get direction as to what is to be done. But the continual trying to create these false narratives and create an impression in the public that something is wrong, something is afoot, rather than stand with the rest of Trinidad and Tobago and say, this is position taken with the Rio Treaty?—fine. This is the position. How could you actually side with somebody else over and above your country? I do not understand that, Madam Speaker, and that pains me. Another mistruth, untruth, trying to mislead the population, the Member for Oropouche East stood here and said the Prime Minister said that they had corruption in relation to the purchase of a ferry. He should be sent to the Privileges Committee for that. The Prime Minister for the first time, a

Prime Minister, this Prime Minister, went to a joint select committee with respect to the procurement of a ferry service. Not the purchase of a ferry.

We were put into a crisis as a country with the sea bridge when a person who had a ferry rent it from someone in Europe, decided they were not getting their way, and they picked up and they left with their ferry from Trinidad and Tobago and what we uncovered afterwards is that there was an attempt to suppress information when we are trying to get a ferry. When we were trying to procure a ferry there was an attempt to suppress options and offers being given and that was what the Prime Minister spoke about, and there was corruption in the process and persons were terminated from the port for that corruption. So there was no corruption in the purchase of a ferry. You see, this is what they like to do because they know the Government subsequently went and purchased two fast ferries, and then they purchased the *Galleons Passage* together. So they like to put these spins and hope that it sticks. Another red herring thrown to mislead the population and to start this incurrence of doubt into the psyche of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Governments all over the world use the guise of COVID to suppress free speech, throwing that out there and massaging it to try and link it to this Government. At no point in time did that happen under the COVID Regulations here. In fact, it was the exact opposite. For the first time you had a Government at the start of the COVID spread in Trinidad and Tobago—every single day, seven days a week, you had a Government going and doing a live press conference with the media in Trinidad and Tobago and subjecting ourselves to any question the media has to ask. You have a Prime Minister who has led from in front in post-Cabinet press conferences, in press conferences now under COVID, to announce decisions and to subject himself to questions by the media, and I ask myself,

anybody go back and look from 2010—2015 how many times did the Prime Minister then subject herself to any media conference and take questions. This is what transparency is about. This is what accountability is about. So once again, direct, and contrary to what is being suggested about a suppression of freedom of speech, that did not happen.

This week gone we had in the savannah over 100 people gathered in breach of the regulations, but the Government did nothing to suppress that because the Government understood that citizens wanted to go and express themselves about a global issue, and I congratulate the police force because even when an incident occurred at that gathering the police did nothing to shut it down, and that is how this Government operates. Not like a former Minister of National Security, under the UNC, who took the army down to bulldoze people and to remove people who were protesting about a highway. That is not how we operate. The facts speak for themselves. The criticism about giving out hampers, and giving out hand sanitizers, and this is being that—and the suggestion that somehow that is tied into the Government, not on this side. That is not how this administration works.

The MPs, the prospective candidates, those who have been selected for an upcoming election, do their own thing, and they are getting out there, and they are on ground, and they are walking, and they are doing what they have to do. The use of the Couva Hospital, the use of other facilities that were built, they are there not as UNC relics or UNC pedestal. They were built with the taxpayers' money and they are being utilized for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and every single one of those, there are questions as to value for money and the amount of money paid for it. Every single one of them. In fact, this week we were being reminded about the same Debe Campus that they call the St. Augustine Campus.

So, Madam Speaker, I thank all of the frontline workers who have done



yeoman service as we are going through this COVID pandemic that has not left as yet, every single one of them, in our health services, our protective services, the sanitation workers who continue to do their job, the taxi drivers who continue to their job, the members of staff here at Parliament who did what they had to do so we continue with our parliamentary sittings, all of the public servants, the private sector who continue to look after their employees. That is what Trinidad and Tobago is about. That is the country that I have the pride and the privilege to represent, and I will never, never stand with any other country criticizing Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] That has to be one of the worse things a citizen could do, taking sides with another country over your own country.

So, Madam Speaker, as I end here today, I thank you for the opportunity. I thank my constituents in Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West for continuing to give me the opportunity to represent them, to represent their views and to represent Trinidad and Tobago, and to do the best that we can as a Government for all citizens in Trinidad and Tobago and not taking sides with any other country over Trinidad and Tobago, and every creed and race find an equal place here in my Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Rodney Charles** (*Naparima*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is with shock and awe that I stand here this evening coming after my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West because he made two comments that we need to clarify immediately. The comment he made first was that we on this side should stop asking the United States to impose sanctions on Trinidad and Tobago. Nothing could be further from the truth. [*Desk thumping*] And the second thing he said and I take personal umbrage to this because I am patriotic, my navel string was buried in Ste. Madeleine, when he says that I am taking sides with the United States, may I tell him that my ancestors in the 1918

war fought against the United States Government and we ended up in Moruga, and I am a proud descendent of those who stood up for Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

But you see, Madam Speaker, the Minister of National Security is a stranger to the truth and the truth has to be said here today. It was not Rodney Charles. It was the US Ambassador who had to remind him of a May 6<sup>th</sup> meeting in which the Embassy had to state:

“...I wish to affirm that I expressed concern to the Minister in that conversation about...Trinidad...”

—and the fact that the visit of the Venezuelan Vice-President was inconsistent with our obligations under the Rio Treaty. The US Ambassador had to remind him. But, Madam Speaker, it does not end there.

It is the Barbados Government who sent a diplomatic note to Trinidad and Tobago, when they had to write that we had indicated that Barbados was assisting in a plot by Trinidad and Tobago nationals to violate our border restriction policy. That was a letter they had to remind him that what he was saying is inconsistent with the position of the people of Barbados. So it is not the US Government, and it is not Barbados that had to point out the fact that his utterances veered somewhat from the truth. And I wish to say that if at all sanctions are placed on individuals in Trinidad, we have nothing to do with that.

Madam Speaker, a simple question today is: In the light of the visit of a senior envoy, is our country still standing by its position that it is not bound by sanctions imposed by the Rio Treaty? How in God’s name could a simple question like that be morphed into Naparima asking for sanctions on the country?

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order 48(1), respectfully.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Naparima, I will give you some leeway. Please

continue.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. If we could only win cases at the Privy Council with that facility, if we could win those cases, then I would not mind being interrupted. I withdraw.

**Madam Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]*—*to invoke Standing Order 48(1).

**Mr. R. Charles:** Madam Speaker, it is—you see, they have repeated it on more than three occasions today and it requires a frontal refutation. If there are any sanctions, it is not us on this side who took umbrage to the US Ambassador's statement in this Parliament, it is not us on this side that said that we will not recognize and stand by the Rio Treaty. It is not us that voted against the reservations of the Rio Treaty at the OAS—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order 48(1). At least connect it to the Bill; at least.

**Mr. R. Charles:** I am responding to the comments made by the Prime Minister and the comments of the Minister of National Security. *[Desk thumping]*

**Madam Speaker:** If you would just allow me to rule? If you would just allow me to rule? Please proceed.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Madam Speaker, thank you very much. I appreciate it. I genuinely appreciate it. It is not—*[Interruption]*

**Madam Speaker:** I am not doing you any favour. Just proceed.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Yes. It was not us on this side that invited the Vice-President of Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago; it was not us who brought a sanctioned airplane—to open our borders for a sanctioned airplane. It is all part—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** I rise on Standing Order 48(10).

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I will give you again, I do not know there is a 48(10).

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Sorry, 46(10), Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Attorney General, I do not want to read into what you are asking. I do not know that there is a 46(10) either, but, what I do observe is that the Member is very wedded to his notes. He is quite experienced and remember it is a debate, okay, and I know that you can do without those notes.

**Mr. R. Charles:** Yes, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister today indicated—and it was dealt with by my colleague from Oropouche East—and I had to take a note of it, that the last time we experienced economic growth in Trinidad and Tobago was in 2008.

Madam Speaker, in 2010 the growth rate in Trinidad and Tobago was 3.32 per cent. In 2013 it was 2.23 per cent, in 2014 it was .91 per cent, in 2015 it was 1.82 per cent. So how could a Prime Minister come and provide utterances that are clearly inconsistent with the facts? And may I remind them that whereas when we were in office the growth rate was consistently in the positive area, 3.2 per cent, 1.7, 2.3, from 2016 onwards, it has been in relative decline. In 2016 it was minus 6.3 per cent growth rate, minus 2.31 in '17, and minus .25 in 2018. So our performance is totally incomparably better than that of my colleagues next door, opposite.

Madam Speaker, I wish to indicate that the Minister of Finance boasted that we got an excellent rating from Standards & Poor's and Moody's, and again I had to check because I misheard that the Moody's—I read it, it was a fact that Moody's credit rating for Trinidad and Tobago was last set at Ba1 with negative outlook. It moved from stable to negative. Moody's downgraded Trinidad to negative and you know what that placed us, Madam Speaker? Non-investment grade bond. That is where we are, a non-investment area. That is where we are. "Speculative" is the word that Moody's uses to indicate the risk attached to lending to Trinidad and

Tobago. Our credit rating is one step above junk bond. It reminds me of Sanford and Son, celebrated junk, buying and selling junk. That is where we are today.

And if it were only Moody's, Standard & Poor's says the same thing, it has downgraded TT in 2020, a long-term rating from BBB to BBB-. We were downgraded from BBB to BBB-. The rating agenda was revised because of the risk associated with the future prospects of our development, and they said it places Trinidad and Tobago on the lowest investment grade above junk status, Madam Speaker. That is where this PNM administration has placed us, and that is where the Minister of Finance would wish us to not understand and celebrate our one step above junk bond status.

Madam Speaker, my friend from Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West talked about corruption. I would not deal with that yet. I will just give you some comparisons in terms of our performance with their performance, and our performance is spectacularly better than theirs. Economic growth 2015, 1.8 per cent; 2020, minus 4.5 per cent IMF projections. Ease of doing business, we were ranked 79<sup>th</sup> in 2015. You know where we are ranked today, Madam Speaker?—105, ease of doing business. Foreign reserves, \$10.4 billion we left them. They said we left them in fumes, nothing to run the economy, but US 10.4 billion. As in 2020 it is 6.6 billion. Nothing positive. No growth, no development. Refinery throughput, when we left it was 125,308 barrels per day. Let me repeat that, 125,308 barrels per day. You know where it is today? Zero! We have moved from a net exporter of refined petroleum products to an importer. That is where we are. You know what they used to talk about a colonial economy? They eat what they do not produce and they produce what they do not consume. That is the standard definition.

We, a hundred-year history of energy, exploration and refining, and today

we are in the unenviable position of being an importer of refined petroleum products, and I saw a figure of about 218 million it costs us every year to import gasoline and refined petroleum products. Madam Speaker, natural gas production, 3.95 billion cubic feet per day; today it is 3.52. Nothing, no development, no idea, no transformation of this economy. Everywhere you look is hopelessness. No wonder Standards & Poor's tells us we are junk bond. And if I say that Standard & Poor's is saying that, they will say we are happy that that has happened. Nothing is further from the truth, but facts are stubborn things. You cannot hide and we have to present it.

Rig days' exploration: Rig days first quarter 2015, 596—that is the first quarter—and first quarter 2020, 169. For heaven sake everywhere you look—our energy sector which used to be—as of the old people say, “It uses to be”—the lifeblood of this economy. Today, we have the failure of the Dragon gas deal. We have the failure to utilize the gas master plan. We have failure to maximize efficiency in the use of natural gas in the downstream sector. We have failure to ensure gas intensive industries such as petrochemicals and heavy industries remain competitive.

Right now, it is a closure of industries from Point Lisas because we have been unable to present a model for the Point Lisas industry to upgrade it to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We have failure to deal with issues surrounding LNG. We have poor negotiation of gas contracts, Madam Speaker. A litany of failures in Trinidad and Tobago at this time. And the energy sector issues; closure of the Mittal plant in 2016; MHTL methanol plant, 2017, closure of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, 2018; YARA Ammonia, 2019; Titan Methanol, 2020; MHTL M3, 2020, is idle; MHLT M2, idle; ammonia plant, idle, 2020. So we have a situation in Trinidad and Tobago where we are facing the realities of a post-COVID economic

reality and we have nothing to turn back to. Nothing! Absolutely nothing!

Madam Speaker, the Member for—the previous speaker spoke about a number of issues with respect to corruption and I wish to point out a number of things that have occurred with respect to this Government, and we could go back whether the story is about the AV Drilling, whether the story is about the number of plants that were closed down, et cetera, we have issues. But, Madam Speaker, one of the things I came here to discuss today was the national security budget in the Appropriation Bill, and one of the things was the question that the National Security will receive 177.8 million in addition to the 16 billion spent and allocated by this Government during this year. So far since this Government has come into power they have spent \$16.8 billion on national security, and the Ministry of Caricom and Foreign Affairs will receive 35.37 million in addition to the 1.2 billion over the past five years.

Now, when you look at the breakdown of these funds and you ask what were the allocations, what were the outputs, you would see that the allocations represent a characteristic PNM laziness, lack of planning, and backward thinking. Madam Speaker, whereas the literature, and the IDB, and the world, and they tell us do not speak about the US.

### **7.30 p.m.**

And before I came here today, I was listening to Governor Cuomo and he was talking about the need to take funds away from national security—in their case, policing, the NYPD—and put it in areas that would stop and prevent crimes being committed. So they are moving into crime prevention. We are totally focused on crime suppression and they are also looking at crime rehabilitation and the budget allocation today and the increases do not suggest that we are thinking about crime prevention or crime rehabilitation. Instead, we have money,

significant sums, being allocated to the SSA.

I will explain, Madam Speaker. Of the sums, the Government is requesting an additional 177.8 to be allocated to the Ministry of National Security. Out of this, 63 million is to be allocated to the prison service to effect payments for increments, overtime, allowances due to fiscal 2020 to the officers of the prison service. I was told on Wednesday that it resulted from the fact that they recruited additional officers. For budget 2020, only salaries and cost of allowances were increased by 11.3 million. And the question we ask is, if you increase the salaries, it follows automatically that you will increase allowance, NIS contribution and cost of living contribution. It follows. You cannot budget for one and leave out the rest. So seeing that NIS and overtime allowances tend to increase hand in hand with salaries, we are asking the question: Why was this not made initially?

Madam Speaker, under Goods and Services, it increased by \$26 million and we heard today it was the coastal radar system, the Counter Trafficking Unit, the Witness Protection Programme and the rental of vehicles for covert operations. But, Madam Speaker, we are now spending money to upgrade the coastal radar system but two years ago, during a post-Cab briefing and specifically, it was August the 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the National Security Minister, Minister Stuart Young, confirmed that the radar system used by the coast guard would be given an upgrade costing US \$7.5 million as part of the effort to strengthen the country's maritime capability. So, in 2018, we spent US 7.5 million. Furthermore, it was reported in *Newsday* August 29, 2019, the Minister of National Security also announced that Government was in the process of upgrading different aspects of the coast guard operations, specifically the current radar system. So we had upgrades in 2018, we had upgrades in 2019 and today, we have come to provide significant sums to upgrade the radar system. So the question is: What has happened to that money



that was allocated in previous years and is it the fact that when we approve this sum, this increased sum, that the coastal radar systems will function optimally?

Because, you see, Madam, it is critical. We keep hearing stories that our borders are locked down and anecdotal information, scans, tell us that Venezuelans are coming in even as we speak. If you go to Cedros, I challenge the Minister of National Security, interact with the people down there, the councillors, et cetera, and they would tell you. So the question is: Is this coastal radar system functioning or not? Just a couple of weeks ago, 60 Venezuelans were caught coming into Trinidad illegally. We are happy that they are caught but we are saying that that is indicative of an activity that is happening. So we are happy to approve this money but we ask the Minister: Is this the end or will we be coming next year, or when we form the Government, will we be coming next year to ask for additional sums to improve—

But, Madam Speaker, the major concern we have with this allocation, this Appropriation Bill, is the fact that after spending \$625 million on the SSA over the past four and a half years, the SSA still requires \$87 million; \$625 million, more than “half ah billion dollars” of taxpayers’ money being allocated essentially to “ah spy agency”. Madam Speaker, that adds up to \$910 million in five years. “Ah billion dollars for the SSA.” Has this \$198 million that was allocated in the 2020 budget, has that been allocated efficiently? Can they not reallocate funds within the division, virements, in order to keep the SSA going?

We are told that the supplementary Vote allocation is required for payments associated with CCTV project, contract for technical support to the National Operations Fusion Centre and procurement of 30 operators. In other words, additional spying; spying that is not reducing the murder rate. Six hundred million spent and the murder rate in 2018 was 517, Madam Speaker, and in 2017, 2019, it

was over 500, and this year, notwithstanding the fact that we had a stay-at-home system in operation, the murder rate is slightly less than it was last year at this time. I think the figure is 18 or 19. Why is the intelligence provided by the SSA not giving us the information that is necessary to prevent the crimes?

We would suggest, Madam Speaker, that the time has come for this Government to invest in our young people, invest in our “inner-city youth” and yes, it is a code word for young black inner-city males. As I said before coming to this meeting, Governor Cuomo was saying that they have realized that the more money you spend on rehabilitating young men, in giving them worthwhile options, in giving them educational opportunities, that that pays dividends in terms of crime reduction. In fact, the United States is now finding out through the death of the gentleman who died with a knee on his neck, they are now finding out that the communities that spend more money on education, that spend more on health, that spend more on youth and social services, those communities have less police and less crime. It is not by accident that places in Trinidad that are wealthy, good schools, good families, children with activities, sporting and cultural and social activities, it is not by accident that those communities have less crimes and less murders but still we would not learn. Still we would not learn.

So we have New York City Mayor, Mayor de Blasio suggested on Sunday—this is days ago, Sunday the 7<sup>th</sup>—that there should be an increased focus on a new wave of police reform by shifting funds from the NYPD to youth and social services. But we come here to spend millions, “ah billion in five years on SSA”. For heaven’s sake, if you spend “half ah billion” on young people, “half ah billion”, we would provide them with the opportunities and a sense of belonging in the society. And it is going to get worse because, Madam Speaker, in the COVID environment where our economy is likely to suffer reductions, the jobs would not

exist for young people, and if the jobs do not exist, you are going to have young men and women coming out of our secondary and tertiary educational institutions and there are no opportunities for them.

The Minneapolis City Councillor announced that they would disband the Minneapolis Police Department entirely. We are not saying you do that in Trinidad. What we are saying is that you use and you spend the money intelligently, intelligently. If you invest \$100 million in cadets, you know what that will do and you tie that to employment in the protective services. “So fellas join, they train, they learn discipline and they know there is a job waiting for them.” That is the kind of intellectual thinking that is required and it is not available on the other side.

Madam Speaker, at least 16 US cities have proposed or make pledges that they would divest some resources from the police. But you see all of that is irrelevant to us. We live in “ah balisier world” where we know this is how it was done, this is how it should be done and we are going to do it forever and if the Opposition speaks, we are going to call them unpatriotic or we will use the words that “we do not like the police”. I wish to say that the officers of the police and the coast guard are hard-working officers, lacking direction, lacking supervision, lacking the policy framework so that they could perform optimally and perform their duties.

Madam Speaker, retired Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force Rear Admiral Hayden Pritchard, former Chief of Defence Staff, said during an interview in May 07, 2019, he said and I quote:

“It’s critically important to providing avenues for positive expression of the youth’s energy, as it’s much easier to prevent somebody from becoming a criminal than to change a criminal’s mind.”

So not only are we getting it from the United States, we are not getting it from experiences abroad and we believe in best practices wherever, the persons in Trinidad and Tobago who have been involved in the national security defence apparatus, they have said and are saying we need to think differently. Foolishness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. So every year, we come and we put 200 million in the SSA, 200 next year, 200 the following year and the murder rate continues and we want to know why is this happening. Rear Admiral Pritchard spoke highly of MiLAT and the CCC and mentioned that youth involved in criminal activity were able to get back on their feet, redirect their minds and adjust their attitudes and behaviours.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Naparima, your time is now spent. Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam Speaker. There is virtually nothing to respond to. None of the Members bar maybe a few seconds of the contribution from the Member for Naparima had anything to do with the matter at hand. Madam Speaker, we came here today to debate the Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives where at that committee, we looked at supplementation of Heads of Expenditure for fiscal 2020 in 15 Heads, namely: the Judiciary, Service Commissions, Elections and Boundaries Commission, Office of the Prime Minister, Tobago House of Assembly, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, Ministry of Works and Transport, Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for a total supplementation of \$2,686,000,800. Not one of the

Members opposite paid any attention to this report, Madam Speaker, or anything in it or anything to do with the matters that we are debating today. Instead, they spent all their time speaking untruths, uttering irrelevances, making misleading, misguided statements, fabricating fantasies.

And, Madam Speaker, let me start with one of the fantasies that was put into the House by the Member for Caroni Central who has a penchant for just saying things that make absolutely no sense and are simply not true. I have in my possession a rating action published by Moody's Investors Service on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2020, and in that rating action, Madam Speaker, Moody's affirmed Trinidad and Tobago's rating and I read from it:

The rationale for the affirmation of the Ba1 rating, Moody's decision to affirm Trinidad and Tobago's Ba1 rating recognizes that the sovereign maintains sizeable fiscal buffers which underpins the Government's fiscal strength, low Government liquidity risk and limited external vulnerability.

I am reading from Moody's latest rating action report where the rating was affirmed, Madam Speaker, but I had to listen to all of them today talk about Moody's downgrading Trinidad and Tobago's rating.

Now, I cannot excuse some of the hon. Members opposite because they should know the meaning of the word "affirm". You go into any dictionary, any dictionary, an affirmation is "ah big yes". It says that something is true. [Crosstalk] Madam Speaker, it is just incredible the behaviour of Members opposite. They want Trinidad and Tobago to fail [Desk thumping and crosstalk] and it angers them. They become enraged when this administration scores big on the international scale. [Desk thumping]

For example, it drove them crazy when the Oxford University, the Blavatnik School of Business rated Trinidad and Tobago as number one in the world in terms

of being able to emerge from the COVID. It drove them crazy when that number one rating was issued for Trinidad and Tobago. It simply sent them berserk [*Desk thumping*] when *The Economist* magazine rated Trinidad and Tobago as the 15<sup>th</sup> best emerging economy, 15<sup>th</sup> strongest emerging economy in the world amid the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. They went berserk. [*Laughter and crosstalk*] And when Standard “& Poor’s maintained our investment grade rating in the face of oil collapsing from \$60 in January down zero, down to zero, when that happened, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago was still able to maintain an investment grade rating, it drove them mad. It drove them mad.

You see, Madam Speaker, the world recognizes the performance of this Government. [*Desk thumping*] The world recognizes the performance of our Ministry and Minister of Health. The world recognizes how resilient this Government is, how strong we are, proactive, purposeful, committed and visionary as the hon. Attorney General has just reminded me. So hon. Members opposite could say what they want you know. They could say what they want. [*Desk thumping*] It is not the PNM that has ranked Trinidad and Tobago under this PNM Government as the best country in the world to deal with COVID. It is not the PNM that ranked Trinidad and Tobago under this Government as the 15<sup>th</sup> strongest emerging economy in the world in the face of the COVID pandemic. It is not the PNM that did that, it is world renowned institutions like *The Economist* magazine and the Oxford University. [*Desk thumping*] It drives them crazy. [*Interruption*] Yes and this is real recognition, not fake recognition. Yes, I am reminded under the previous administration, they purchased an award, they paid for an award, a tourism award. Two con men came from Eastern Europe during the state of emergency to give them a tourism—imagine that. The country under “ah state of emergency”, curfew, “yuh cyah go out of yuh house”, but “they bring two fellas

from Eastern Europe to say Trinidad and Tobago is the best in the world in terms of tourism. They pay fuh that.” We did not pay for that Oxford University ranking, we did not pay for that *Economist* magazine ranking at all. So we are not worried at what they say.

Madam Speaker, let me go to a recent survey. I have just spoken about Oxford University in the United Kingdom, one of the most prestigious and well renowned universities in the world and *The Economist* magazine which is perhaps the most recognized magazine that deals with economics in the world but let us deal with Trinidad and Tobago, let us just deal with Trinidad and Tobago. And we have a local consumer research firm called Market Facts & Opinions and they conducted a survey on satisfaction with respect to the Government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and let me read from this. This is an article in the *Express* I believe, just last month, Madam Speaker and let me see what it had to say. In terms of the Government’s response to COVID-19, 80 per cent of the people surveyed were either satisfied, 44 per cent, or very satisfied, 40 per cent, with only 7 per cent dissatisfied. That is the local Market Facts & Opinions survey. [*Crosstalk*]

So before I close, Madam Speaker, let me just deal with some issues that we at the Ministry of Finance are looking at. [*Crosstalk*] Would you all be quiet, please? Let me just deal with some issues that we at the Ministry of Finance are looking at. [*Continuous crosstalk*] Will you stop—Madam Speaker, it is very difficult. Could you ask him to stop please?

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance, please proceed.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Couva South just “cyar” help it. So, Madam Speaker, I would like to put some information into the system.

We have looked to see the reasons why persons did not qualify in the first

round for the salary relief grant because we are constantly examining this to see what we can do to help people, and we had a situation where a significant number of applications have been deemed to be invalid. The highest percentage of invalid applications is for persons who have applied for this grant who lost their job long before COVID-19 came into play and even though it has been made clear to all concerned that the salary relief grant is for persons who lost their job as a result of the public health restrictions, 46 per cent of the invalid applications are persons who lost their jobs long before COVID came into being and they have applied. They have disregarded the qualification in terms of time. Sixteen per cent of the invalid applications are persons who are not citizens or residents of Trinidad and Tobago. So you have persons who are not citizens or permanent residents of Trinidad and Tobago applying for the salary relief grant. Unfortunately, at this time, we have to deal with our citizens first.

Fifteen per cent of the applicants did not fill out the form properly, they left out an entire section. Seventeen per cent of the applicants are over 65 years old and therefore they do not qualify because they would naturally qualify for senior citizens pension. So we are trying to reach out to all of these people. We expect that some of them may qualify, the ones, for example, the 15 per cent that did not complete the application form properly, we are reaching out to them to see how we could help them, assist them in completing the form. The 6 per cent also that provided no identification, they did not provide a driver's permit or ID card or anything like that.

And there is a point that we are looking at with respect to persons who are in the private school system because the Government has maintained all teachers who the Government pays for. As you may know, Madam Speaker, the Government pays the salaries of virtually every single teacher in this country but there will be



one or two private schools, particularly preschools, where the Government does not pay their salaries. Some of those persons may have lost their employment just before the 19<sup>th</sup> of March and therefore we at the Ministry of Finance are looking at this very carefully to see whether we can accommodate persons within the wider school system who are not on the Government's payroll who may have suffered a loss of income because of the decision to close all schools and that is one of the categories that we think we can accommodate and assist those persons.

But other than that, Madam Speaker, we cannot assist someone who is not a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. We cannot assist someone who has not provided any identification. So we have an outreach service in our salaries screening unit and we will continue to contact all of these people because we are a caring Government.

And with those few words, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this House adopt the Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the Fifth Session 2019/2020, Eleventh Parliament, on the consideration for proposals for the supplementation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2020.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2020) BILL, 2020**

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Madam Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to supplement the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2020) Act, 2019 (Act No. 21 of 2019), be now read a second time.

And being the only person that dealt with the matters in the supplementation, I beg

to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Question put and agreed to:* That the Bill be read a third time.

*Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.*

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Tuesday, the 16<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2020, at 1.30 p.m. Madam Speaker, at that time, we will do the Miscellaneous Provisions (Registrar General, Registration of Deeds, Conveyancing and Law of Property, Real Property, Stamp Duty and Registration of Title to Land) Bill, 2020.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 8.02p.m.*