

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, June 09, 2021

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 Dr. Lackram Bodoie MP, Member for Fyzabad; Mr. Rushton Paray MP, Member for Mayaro; and Mr. Rodney Charles MP, Member for Naparima, who have asked leave of absence from today's sitting. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Carnival Commission for the year ended September 30, 2008. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Carnival Commission for the year ended September 30, 2009. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Regulated Industries Commission for the year ended December 31, 2016. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
Papers 1 to 3 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
4. Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre as at 30th September 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

UNREVISED

- Annual Report of the Environmental Management Authority for the year 2016. [*The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
5. Annual Administrative Report of the Vehicle Management Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the period of 2016—2017. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 6. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Extension of Period for Payment of Fifty Percent of Fixed Penalty) (No. 2) Order, 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 7. Annual Administrative Report for the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for the period 2017/2018. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 8. Land Acquisition (Requisition) Order, 2020. [*The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi)*]
 9. Immigration (Amendment) Regulations, 2021. [*The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds)*]

STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

(Presentation)

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

Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the First Session (2020/2021), Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the supplementation and variation of appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

(Presentation)

**Constitution (Amendment)
(Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020**

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The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have honour to present:

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020

Cannabis Control Bill, 2020**The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):**

Madam Speaker, I have honour to present:

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Cannabis Control Bill, 2020.

URGENT QUESTIONS**Vaccination Workplace Policy
(Details of)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, to the Minister of Labour: Could the Minister inform this House if a vaccination workplace policy has been formulated to guide employers and employees in the public and private sectors?

The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Couva South for bringing the question. Madam Speaker, may I say that an industrial relations policy on workplace vaccination has been identified as critical and it is currently in front of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee, a tripartite-plus committee established under section 80 of the Industrial Relations Act.

The Industrial Relations Advisory Committee commenced work towards developing a paper on consideration surrounding workplace vaccination and will submit to me shortly.

In developing such a document we must recognize that the COVID-19

pandemic, this is novel and in regard to the development of policy, that is also novel. We have a number of things to consider including health, human rights, legal considerations and maybe even personal rights under the Constitution. This is an issue which all countries are grappling with at the moment and we have not found a single country which has defined a clear policy on this issue at this time.

The International Labour Organization is currently, as we speak, it in its 109th session and I am privileged to participate in this session on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago. Whilst the issue and effects of the pandemic, inclusive of vaccination, has arisen, the social partners at the level of the ILO have also been unable to come to a consensus at this time. Some of the issues that the IRAC is considering is the industrial relations implications of mandating workplace COVID vaccination. The reasons for vaccination hesitancy and collating medical and scientific—

Madam Speaker: Minister, your speaking time is now spent. Supplemental?

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, all you have said is very nice, but the important thing is: Are you aware and could you provide to the population of this county, especially workers, because the issue of vaccination in the workplace is causing—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have 15 seconds. Could you pose the question?

Mr. Indarsingh:—a sense of apprehension and people feel that their employment will be terminated.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, please pose the question.

Mr. Indarsingh: Minister, could you give this House an undertaking in terms of making an effective policy position statement to guide workers and employers in relation to the vaccination?

Hon. S. Mc Clashie: As I indicated, Madam Speaker, this is not a simple issue and it does not have an overnight effect. We are working on it, as I indicated, and we

are committed to providing that information and the development of a policy in due course.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental?

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Minister, we are approximately 16 months into the pandemic. Could you inform this House whether your Ministry has engaged the representative trade unions, business federations, towards the realization of this policy and a timeline when it would be completed?

Hon. S. Mc Clashie: Madam Speaker, the IRAC, as I said, is a tripartite-plus committee. There are union representatives on this committee, as well as private and government members. They are in the process of creating the policy and when it is ready, we will engage the necessary persons to get their opinions.

Sinopharm Vaccines (Update)

Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Health: Could the Minister provide an update on the 1.5 million Sinopharm vaccines that were ordered thus far?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, just to correct the records, at no time did the Government say we ordered 1.5. What was said is that we have the capacity to pay for 1.5.

Two, the negotiations with Sinopharm bilaterally started in this country on September 01, 2020. We signed a nondisclosure agreement with Sinopharm on March the 16th. That prevents us from discussing any matters on the issue of Sinopharm vaccines, whether it is their patent rights, their formulations, their pricing and quantities. The hon. Prime Minister led the charge with vaccine procurement for which we are thankful, with his meeting with his counterpart on March the 15th.

Madam Speaker, we are now in the 11th hour and 55th minute of consecrating this bilateral purchase and there must be nothing that should be said in the public domain that is prevented from being said with the nondisclosure agreement to scuttle that.

As soon as we have the sign off from Sinopharm to discuss matters, we will do as it relates to shipping, arrival dates, and so on, as we have always done when vaccines are brought into the country. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Minister, in the context of the distribution of this vaccine, could the Minister indicate what process is in place at the Ministry of Health, pursuant to the recommendations by the World Health Organization, that the administering of this particular vaccine to persons over 60 years old, while it is proper and you can administer, a process should be put in place to monitor those citizens over 60 years of age? Could the Minister indicate what process is in place to do that?

Madam Speaker: That question is out of order having regard to the question asked and the answer given. Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Minister, in the context of the utter and possibly fatal recklessness of the Government today, could the Minister assure citizens that the Sinopharm vaccines will be available to facilitate your equally ill-advised ABC programme?

Madam Speaker: Again, that question is out of order. Member for Chaguanas East.

Food Cards (Distribution of)

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, could the Minister of Social Development and Family Services

inform the House when will the food cards under the current COVID-19 initiative be made available to constituency offices for urgent distribution to the affected public?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, I wish to advise that at no time did the Minister of Social Development and Family Services indicate that food cards would be made available during this current situation. What the Minister did indicate, and I would like to repeat for the benefit of the Member for Chaguanas East, and the other Members of the House, what the Minister did indicate is that each Member of Parliament will get 50 food cards for distribution to their constituents who are urgently in need.

Madam Speaker, in addition to that, we do have the current market boxes that are being distributed, and as a consequence of that, the 50 food cards are being given to all MPs for urgent situations. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Ms. Mohit: Madam Speaker, given the fact that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago made this pronouncement on food cards, and it is advertised on the website of the Ministry of Finance and the Minister is now making it clear that 50 food cards would be available, can the Minister give a date as to when these food cards would be available to the MPs' offices for distribution?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I do not know that it is accurate that such an advertisement is on the website. However, I will indicate that next week the Minister of Social Development and Family Services will be sending a letter to each MP and I do believe that the cards will be included in the correspondence. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Ms. Mohit: Madam Speaker, thank you again. Can the Minister indicate if the

amount to be received by MPs would just be 50, or at any point in time would the amount be increased during the lockdown period?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, at this time the amount will be 50.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I am advised that questions Nos. 149 and 150 have been withdrawn by the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Leader of the House.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, all other questions will be answered. However, Madam Speaker, we are asking for a further two-week deferral for the written responses to questions 126 to 129.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):

School Bus Drivers (Assistance to)

149. Given that school bus drivers have had their revenue stream severely crippled for almost a year since the closure of schools, could the hon. Minister of Works and Transport state what has been done to assist these individuals?

Vending on High Street, San Fernando (Plans re Vendors Livelihood)

150. Could the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government state what plans have been implemented if any, to enable vendors to earn a livelihood following the reported ban of all vending on High Street by the Mayor of San Fernando?

Questions, by leave, withdrawn.

**Regulation of PH Taxis
(Update)**

148. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Given the Government's commitment to regulate "PH taxis", could the Minister provide this House with an update on the work being undertaken thus far inclusive of the stakeholder's involvement?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in respect of the regulations of the taxi system in Trinidad and Tobago, the focus of the Ministry is on improving the legal framework for the operation of taxis.

Recently, the Ministry embarked upon a communication campaign to inform persons of the requirement for becoming a registered H taxi driver. Further to this, in an effort to gather information for the development of a policy to address the efficient operations of a taxi system in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry, over the period March to May 2021, conducted several consultations with various stakeholders, law enforcement, insurance and banking sector, transport academy, the PH taxi drivers, the Chamber of Commerce and the regional corporations and also the Tobago House of Assembly.

It should be noted that the development of this policy is an ongoing collaborative effort between the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, with the goal to have all modes of land transportation under one proper legal framework. Technology will play an important role in this exercise to ensure the efficiency and safety of the travelling public. I thank you.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Just a follow-up to the Minister. Minister, based on this, basically a stakeholders consultation, do you have a time frame

when legislation or some report will be laid in Parliament on this matter?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. Madam Speaker, we are going through the process. As I said, it is an ongoing process and at this point in time I do not want to give a time frame for the completion of the process.

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

**Landslips Moruga/Tableland
(Repair of)**

161. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government:

Could the Minister state the measures that will be taken to repair the landslips along Loney Road, Pooran Street and Sahadath Road in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, sorry, Madam Speaker, it is question number?

Madam Speaker: 161.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Sorry, Madam Speaker. I was looking at question No. 150. Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for your indulgence.

Madam Speaker, site visits have been conducted by the technical officers of the Princes Town Regional Corporation as well as the engineering unit of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. The objective of these site visits has been to investigate and report on the landslips along Loney Road, Pooran Road and Sahadath Road, all in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland. Based on these investigations, the scope of works to be undertaken to repair the existing landslips at these three locations was established.

Restorative works along Loney Road would entail the design and

construction of a retaining wall approximately 45 metres long, with new drainage infrastructure. The estimated cost of these works is approximately \$1,000,500. Pooran Road restorative works would encompass the construction of a retaining wall, approximately 30 metres long, road rehabilitation, the construction of a footpath and drainage infrastructure. The estimated cost to undertake these works is approximately \$1,800,000. Repairs to Sahadath Road would involve the construction of reinforced concrete retaining walls, 25metres long and 2.4 metres high. And the estimated cost is \$2million.

It is noteworthy, Madam Speaker, that these estimated costs cater for a geotechnical investigation to be conducted on each site. Prior to the commencement of repairs to facilitate the design of a suitable retaining structure and to mitigate against further failure of these structures.

Madam Speaker, the engineering unit of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has deemed these projects critical. Based on the total estimated cost of the restorative works to be undertaken, these projects have been recommended to be executed by the Rural Development Company when funding is available. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Ms. Benjamin: I would move to the other question since when funding is available, I would not ask what is the estimated commencement date.

**Marac Sporting Facility
(Details of)**

163. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development:

Could the Minister provide an update on the status of the Marac Sporting Facility?

The Minister of Sport and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question 163. The contractor of the Marac Sporting

Facility commenced works on April 02, 2019, with a scheduled duration time of nine and a half months. Currently the project is approximately 86 per cent completed, with the multipurpose courts and cricket practice nets completed. The pavilion and washroom blocks are 95 per cent and 88 per cent completed respectively, with the jogging track recently started. In this regard, the new estimated date for completion will be five weeks after construction is allowed to resume.

Ms. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister inform this House of the overall cost of the project?

Hon. S. Cudjoe: That is a separate question, Madam Speaker, and that would have to be filed and I would answer when that comes.

**Moruga Sporting Facility
(Handover of)**

164. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development:

In regard to the Moruga Sporting Facility opened in August 2020, could the Minister indicate when was the formal handover of this facility by the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago?

The Minister of Sport and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe):

The answer to this question is: a facility launch ceremony took place at the Moruga Sporting Facility in August 2020. The Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited was engaged by the Ministry of Sport and Community Development to manage the construction work at the facility. The contractor completed works for the purpose of its intended use in accordance with the contract on March 31, 2021, and the defects notification period commenced on April 01, 2021.

The Ministry is currently working with SporTT and UDeCOTT to facilitate

the handover of the facility. The Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited has prepared a proposal for the operations and maintenance of the facility which was recently submitted for the consideration of Cabinet and has since been approved.

Ms. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister indicate if the employment opportunities would be duly advertised?

Hon. S. Cudjoe: When the time comes for that to happen, the hiring process would be advertised, Madam Speaker, as we usually do.

**Rural Squatting Settlements
(Consideration of Solar Panels)**

169. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Could the Minister state whether solar panels are being considered as an option to provide electricity in rural squatting settlements so that children could engage in online schooling?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

On behalf of the Minister of Public Utilities, Madam Speaker, who is here, the Government already provides assistance to eligible low-income households in rural areas to access electricity using solar panel under the solar panel component of the Utility Assistance Programme of the Ministry of Public Utilities. This facility is available to any citizen of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago with a household income of \$6,000 or less who lives in a rural community in an area outside of the current electricity grid, where it has been identified as uneconomical for the installation of electricity infrastructure. This includes residents in squatting settlements who can demonstrate that they have legal rights to reside on the property through the provision of a certificate of comfort, or a letter of non-objection from the Land Settlement Agency or any other relevant authority.

2.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, beneficiaries to the programme include residents from La Fillette, Plum Mitan, Cumuto, Barrackpore, Penal, Mayaro, Tableland, Siparia, Tabaquite, Mamoral and Erin.

Application forms for the programme are available at the Ministry of Public Utilities' head office, 1 Alexandra Street, St. Clair, Port of Spain, or T&TEC service centres. And these applications form are also available on the Ministry's public website and the Ministry's Facebook page. Queries can be sent to the Ministry's online customer service on its website.

The Ministry has also signed an MOU with iGovTT, and this MOU was signed on October 25, 2019, to provide all utility assistance programme services along with other utility programmes, that is to say, electrification and residential electrification assistance programmes via TTConnect. As such, the entire Ministry's utility programmes are available from TTConnect's seven service centres in Trinidad and in Tobago, and their online platforms.

Madam Speaker, citizens can also access information via the TTConnect's hotline, online at GovChat, or the 24-hour chat box service. Completed forms are to be submitted to the Sectoral Programmes and Projects Unit of the Ministry of Public Utilities, 1 Alexandra Street, St. Clair, Port of Spain. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro.

**Agriculture Stimulus Package
(Details of)**

170. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries:

With regard to the \$500-million-dollar Agriculture Stimulus Package presented in the 2021 budget statement, could the Minister state:

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- a. whether there are any projects being considered for execution in the Mayaro constituency;
- b. the start date of these projects, if any?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the \$500 million allocation Agriculture Stimulus Package to be disbursed by the Ministry of Finance would allow the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to commit to the critical projects throughout the country on a timely basis.

Many of these projects would impact all constituencies, not only the constituency of Mayaro. The \$500 million includes a \$50 million component allocated to agriculture, land and fisheries activities in Tobago. Provision for direct payment to be made in the form of an incentive of up to \$100,000 to farmers, other food producers, the forestry sector, and service sectors working in support of food production are also available.

And finally, it includes projects for investments to be made to improve the state land administration function, as well as critical investments in farming infrastructure including access roads, pumps, and other physical facilities. It also includes projects in digital transformation of the services offered by the Ministry, expanding production, and youth development in agriculture.

Madam Speaker, projects specific to the Mayaro constituency include the continued focus on the delivery of agricultural land leases across that constituency, in areas such as Cucho, Plum Mitan, Biche, Navet, Rio Claro, Dades Trace, Poole, Bristol, Ecclesville, Mayaro, Guayaguayare, and Kernaham. Access roads projects include Sumair Trace and roads within the Rio Claro food crop and the Bristol food crop.

There is a \$9 million investment in water resource management in Plum Mitan which impacts the wider areas of Biche, Kernaham and Manzanilla. All these projects are in various stages of design, tendering or completion.

Madam Speaker, constituents of Mayaro will also benefit from the Ministry's proposed expansion of the capacity and capabilities at Marper Farm, St. Augustine Nurseries, and the La Reunion Estate to meet the demand from farmers and households for planting material. The capacity and capability of the Ministry's National Seed Bank at Chaguaramas will also be expanded to produce additional local seed varieties, and the Ministry will also engage in contract production of local seeds for private farmers.

Further, Madam Speaker, constituents of Mayaro will also benefit from the Ministry's digital transformation thrust where we are promoting the use of technology and digitizing services offered to the public. As far as possible, services offered by the Ministry will be delivered online as part of the e-governance ecosystem. This is expected to facilitate easier access to the Ministry's services such as processing of claims, application for incentives, and application of training courses offered. Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro.

**Naparima Mayaro Road
(Rehabilitation Work Done to Date)**

171. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister state what road rehabilitation work has been done to date on the Naparima Mayaro Road?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Highways Division has identified

the number of projects done along the Naparima Mayaro Road in both the Princes Town and Mayaro constituency.

Work conducted around the Naparima Mayaro Road in the Mayaro constituency:

1. Culvert crossing replaced at the 60.5 km mark in the financial year 2019/2020.
2. Pothole patching under the routine maintenance work carried out by the district of Nariva/Mayaro Highways Division.
3. Contracts to conduct road rehabilitation work from the 32 km to the 64 km mark were awarded and are to be executed in this financial year.

The Bridge, Landslip, and Traffic Management Unit is currently addressing a landslip at the 38.7 km mark where geotechnical investigations are currently being done. Two further tenders for culvert repairs work at the 52 km and the 59 km mark are currently being finalized by the Highways Division. Prior work was done by the PURE Unit in 2018 where a retaining wall was constructed at the 46.8 km mark.

Work conducted along the Naparima Mayaro Road in the Princes Town constituency in fiscal 2019/2020: A contract was executed for road rehabilitation between the 21 km and the 31 km mark. Contracted works are ongoing with the construction of a retaining wall at the 27.4 km mark under the Highways Division. Road rehabilitation was also done by the in-house crew of the Highway's Division repairing three major depressions between the 14 km and the 15 km mark. Temporary road rehabilitation was also conducted in-house at the landslip located at 14.5 km mark. Routine maintenance work by the district of Victoria East has been ongoing along this roadway. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Persons on Remand
(Details of)**

172. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs:

Could the Attorney General state:

- a. the number of persons awaiting trial on remand?
- b. the average number of remand cases that were determined by the courts for the last five years?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this question is posed in such a broad context that the Judiciary has advised that the statistical data requested by the hon. Member is not consistent with the current data capture systems of the Judiciary. The Judiciary has further advised that they are in the process of restructuring their research and development portfolio so that it produces the data analysis that is required from stakeholders, and therefore, will require the data captured to be tailored in a very specific way. In any event, the question posed can lead to misleading figures as the numbers will not take into account persons who have been remanded and who have had their trials heard.

Notwithstanding the above, it is also important to note the significant strides taken by this Government in reducing the remand population. The introduction of plea-bargaining legislation, the decriminalization of marijuana, the introduction of judge only trials, and the creation of specialized criminal courts are critical pieces of legislation that are aimed at reducing both the backlog of cases in the courts and the remand population.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker, just a follow up question to the Attorney

General. Part (b) of the question, Attorney General, would you not be able to state that, give a response to part (b) of the question?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, part (b) of the question is the average number of remand cases that were determined by the courts for the last five years. You cannot get vaguer than that in the context of the first part of the question. So unfortunately, the hon. Member for Naparima's question is not a very specifically drafted one. We do catch the gist of what the Member is saying, and the Judiciary has said that they would need to go back notwithstanding all of their data capture mechanisms, to go and tailor-make an answer for this, which unfortunately is not capable of being given today.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Comprehensive Geotechnical Investigation of Roadways and Landslips (Update of)

173. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister provide an update on his undertaking given on November 09, 2020, to set up a programme to conduct a comprehensive geotechnical investigation of the roadways and landslips throughout the country?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Works and Transport has incorporated geotechnical investigations as part of the basis for major designs for roadways, bridges, and other structures across all divisions. However, as more aged roadways begin to show further signs of drastic deterioration the Ministry has commenced a programme of identifying slopes prone to landslips and conducting geotechnical assessments on these critical roadways in order to determine the

protection or repair work that may be required.

The landslip repair component of the BLT Programme encompasses roadways across the country that are in need of significant slope stabilization work. As part of the design for these projects a programme of geotechnical analysis was undertaken for Year Two and Year Three projects. The relevant investigations would also be undertaken to determine the best solutions for the area.

The PURE Unit has recently invested a tender for one km of roadwork along the Garth Road, Williamsville to be undertaken this fiscal year, and as part of the primary designs test pits were excavated along the roadway to identify the soil type along that area. PURE has further identified a few areas of soil stabilization work to be done along Garth Road, Williamsville which are currently being investigated by the unit.

In an effort to undertake additional geotechnical studies in vulnerable areas, a collaboration between the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries was initiated, where the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries has provided geotechnical specialists to inspect and assess failures in areas which are prone to landslip and made recommendations for protection or repair. This process is currently in progress in Moruga, Princes Town, and will be expanded in other areas.

The Ministry of Works and Transport has also recommended to the Ministry of Planning and Development further guidelines for private developers/homeowners, who are building in expansive clay areas found mostly in central and south Trinidad. These draft guidelines developed by the Ministry are currently being reviewed by the Town and Country Planning Division of the Ministry of Planning and Development, and as an added measure of guidelines to minimize failures along slopes due to improper construction. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**TTPS Vehicles
(Total Cost of Rentals)**

174. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state the total cost of rentals of vehicles for the TTPS for the Fiscal year 2020?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very warmly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the actual expenditure for the rental of vehicles for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for fiscal 2020 was \$22,799,710.21. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House, as far as questions 126 to 129, the deferral was for how long?

Hon. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, we are seeking legal advice because these questions do involve information on persons. So, we are trying to get legal advice. We have asked for legal advice for this. I had initially said two weeks, I am still asking for that two-week period, and hopefully we will get it within that time. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: So, questions 126, 127, 128 and 129 are deferred for a further two weeks.

Hon. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia. [*Desk thumping*]

**DEFINITE URGENT MATTER
(LEAVE)**

Mass Public Vaccination Programme

UNREVISED

(Government's Implementation of)

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 17 of the House of Representatives I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely: Government's implementation of the mass public vaccination programme. The matter is definite as it relates specifically to persons who are willing to be vaccinated and the large crowds gathered outside of the health centres as a result of the walk-in system to access the vaccines.

The matter is urgent because the Government's public invitation resulted in risky mass congregations at vaccination locations nationwide today, and that is currently ongoing. The matter is of public importance because Government's decision to administer the COVID-19 vaccine in this manner has resulted in potential super spreader events which may result in a massive spike in COVID-19 infections that could lead to loss of lives. And I so move, Madam Speaker, thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have considered the Motion of the Member for Siparia, and I am satisfied that this matter qualifies to be raised as a Definite Matter of Urgent Public Importance. [*Desk thumping*] This matter also requires the leave of the House. Is the House prepared to grant leave?

Assent indicated.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, leave having been granted in accordance with Standing Order 17(4), the debate on this Motion will stand over until 6.00 p.m. [*Desk thumping*]

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF
APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2021**

UNREVISED

Bill to supplement and vary the appropriation of the sum the issue of which was authorised by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, on a point of order just for clarification. Coming out of the SFC on Monday we were promised certain responses to be made available to Members before 1.30. We have not received those responses as yet. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, notwithstanding the resolution of the House on Friday August 28th, 2020, related to the speaking time during the period of the global pandemic, I beg to move that for today's debate on Motion No. 2 only, the speaking time be as follows: Minister of Finance and the first Opposition speaker be permitted to speak for 45 minutes each, and all other Members be permitted to speak for 20 minutes with no extensions. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Assent indicated.

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

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:

UNREVISED

Be it resolved that this House adopt the report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the First Session (2020/2021), Twelfth Parliament, on the consideration of proposals for the Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

Madam Speaker, just before I came to the podium, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre raised an issue. On my way to Parliament today I checked with the Budget Division to ensure that the responses to questions emanating from the First Meeting of the Finance Committee of the 2021 Session, would in fact be delivered to the Parliament at 1.30 or before. And I was advised that there was a very unfortunate incident in the Budget Division, a medical emergency which caused difficulties and the Budget Division was unable to prepare the documents within the required time.

However, I am very pleased to report that just as I came to the podium here, one of the attendants handed me the document and I have with me the responses to questions. So as soon as I have finished, I will circulate this document. Now, Madam Speaker, the—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, just interjection: Could the Minister stand down until we are able to look at what his response is?

Madam Speaker: If you have to allow your friend. If your friend will allow you with an interjection.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I said I just got it a minute ago, there was a medical emergency. These things are not planned. And fortunately, I hope whoever had that emergency in the Ministry is being taken care of and getting the best possible attention that they can get.

Madam Speaker, the Motion before us is to debate the report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives on the consideration of

proposals for the supplementation and variation of appropriation for fiscal year 2021. Now, I have printed that document. It is 175 pages long. It contains in it the verbatim account of the Committee, the various matters raised, the questions asked, the responses given, and a little bacchanal too.

And the issues that we are about with respect to the variation of appropriation on supplementation, I think have been very well ventilated and in view of the fact that I just have 45 minutes, I will ask Members to refer to the notes that were submitted for the Standing Finance Committee rather than having to go through every single supplementation of the several Heads of Expenditure.

What I would like to say at the outset, Madam Speaker, is that, we ask for the supplementation against the backdrop of the performance of the economy for the period October 01 to May/June—October 01, 2020 to May/June 2021. And I think it is necessary to put things into perspective.

Today, I asked the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to give me their most up to date information on some very important data. And I can share with this Parliament that I have been advised by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries that the weighted average price for this financial year from October 2020 to April 2021, the weighted average price of local crude is \$52.76, so it is above the budget figure of \$45.

And I think we are all very clear on the price of WTI and Brent as of June. These figures that I have received are up to the end of April. So up to the end of April the weighted average price of local crude oil was \$52.76 per barrel. So oil price is performing better than projected.

With respect to production, I am advised that the average oil production for the period October 2020 to May 2021 was of the order of 58,000 barrels per day. In fact, 57,889. So a little below the projected production at the budget time in

October of 2020.

With respect to gas production, I have seen the figures up to May and what I am seeing is that gas production has been in the range from 2.6 billion standard cubic feet per day rising to 3 billion standard cubic feet per day and dropping back down to 2.77 billion cubic feet per day in March, 2.56 billion in April and 2.5 in May. So that the budget production figure that was used was of the order of 3.2 billion standard cubic feet per day and therefore we are somewhat below that in terms production—the country that is.

With respect to the net back price of gas, what I have been told is that the price has varied from \$2.34 in October of 2020 rising to \$3 in April 2021. And if you looked at the price of—the Henry Hub price today, you would have seen for the last couple days or so it has been above \$3. But on average the net back price of gas has been lower an estimated in the budget. So natural gas production is below the forecast, natural gas prices are below the forecast. Oil prices are significantly above the forecast whereas oil production is a little below.

But since we in Trinidad and Tobago get the majority of our revenue from petroleum, from natural gas of the order of two-thirds of our revenue and sometimes more, comes from natural gas and just one-third or less comes from oil, the lower production of natural gas and the lower prices of natural gas have affected us significantly.

So, if I go to now to the outturn, the fiscal outturn in terms of what has happened in the first eight months or so of the fiscal year, what we are seeing is that there has been a significant reduction in revenue primarily from the natural gas sector. And if I give some details now. We had expected the income from oil companies' taxes on incomes and profits by the end of April to be somewhere in the vicinity of \$1.3billion, and it is in fact 900 million. So there has been a shortfall

there of about \$400 million, that is taxes on incomes and profits from the oil companies.

With respect to other companies, they are not doing so badly. We had expected income of about 3.1 billion and we have received 3.0 billion, so we had a shortfall there of about \$100 million.

With respect of income from individuals, taxation from individuals, we had projected that by the end of April we would have 3.5 billion in taxation from individuals, and we got 3.48, so that the taxation from individuals is almost where it is supposed to be in terms of our original projections.

2.30 p.m.

But all in all, when you add up the effect and this is primarily with oil companies, it is profoundly affected by COVID-19. One of our major suppliers, in fact, the major producer of natural gas, BP, has had significant problems with the delivery of infrastructure platforms to Trinidad and Tobago to maintain supply of gas. They had contracted companies in Mexico to build their platforms, and Mexico has been on a prolonged lockdown and, as a result, a number of items have not arrived in Trinidad in order to maintain gas production, platforms and so on. So that, all in all, we have had a reduction in terms of taxes on incomes, on profits, from oil companies, other corporations and withholding tax, business levy, and so on, all affected by the situation in the energy sector of some \$500 million.

In terms of royalties, this is where there has been a significant shortfall where we had anticipated that by the end of April 2021 we would have received \$2.9 billion in royalties on oil and gas and royalties is a function of production on price, so it is as simple as that. We have a 12½ per cent royalty regime on oil and gas production and we anticipated that by the end of April we would have received

\$2.9 billion in royalties on oil and gas. However, the actual receipts are 1.1. So royalties, there has been a significant shortfall there of the order of \$800 million.

In terms of extraordinary work revenue from oil and gas companies you will recall, Madam Speaker, that based on negotiations by the hon. Prime Minister and his team, going to the major oil companies that do business in Trinidad and Tobago, such as Shell, BP, BHP, et cetera, that there had been an agreement that we would get additional revenue from oil and gas companies. But it is all tied to price and because the price of gas is suppressed and because production is suppressed, the extraordinary revenue from oil and gas companies is short by some \$230 million. So all in all, in terms of income from royalties and income from extraordinary revenue, from oil and gas companies, we are short by over a billion dollars. So that the fiscal out turn up to April, Madam Speaker, there has been a shortfall of approximately \$2.5 billion. Now, I already reported this, figures similar to this some months ago in a press conference at the Ministry, just to keep people abreast of what was happening and the main shortfall I want to stress is in the energy sector.

In terms of how we are dealing with it, we are here today to deal with a supplemental of appropriation. What we had sought to do at the beginning of the year was to reduce expenditure from the range of 50 to 51 billion down to about 48 billion and we had anticipated that we could do that based on certain projects and programmes getting to the point where there will be less dependency on the Treasury. The Water and Sewerage Authority is a case in point. And if you look at the report of the finance committee, and you look at the documents submitted for the finance committee, you will see that there is a considerable supplementation that is being requested for the Ministry of Public Utilities and the bulk of that would be to support the Water and Sewerage Authority. We had hoped that we

would be a little further along in terms of reducing the dependence of the Water and Sewerage Authority on taxpayers. It costs taxpayers an excess of \$2 billion a year, and we had hoped that we would be a little further along but for various reasons we are not there yet but I am very hopeful and we are very hopeful that we will get there, that we will be able to reduce WASA's dependence on the Treasury.

I would also like to speak in some general terms, Madam Speaker, as to why we are here doing what we are doing because these supplementations we have, we are of the view these are inescapable. We need to do the supplementations to ensure that salaries and wages are paid on time; that essential goods and services are provided, particularly in the health sector, which is our number one priority in terms of providing funding to the health sector.

And within the matters before us today, Madam Speaker, you would see a supplementation for the Ministry of Health in the order of 267 million. But that is not all because we also assist the Ministry of Health on—in terms of their procurement of pharmaceuticals by way of loans, which are taken by NIPDEC with a Government guarantee and therefore become a contingent liability. So even though you would see 267 million here where we are asking for that additional sum to be appropriated, and the details are in the document, and it is an important area, so even though the matters are there and we had quite a discussion on them on Monday, I would like to return to the situation with the Ministry of Health and to point out that contained within that \$267 million is a significant sum for our ambulance service. There are arrears owed to the ambulance provider and the reason for that is that this is for additional trips and whenever there are additional trips outside of the original provision for ambulance service, these things have to be audited. So that the Ministry of Health has been in in audit situation now for quite a while to make sure that the Government is not being charged for trips that

were not made, and that the amounts due to the ambulance service are indeed required.

We are also supplementing funding for the regional health authorities because we recognize that they are in the frontline of the health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. And therefore, we must provide appropriate funding for the RHAs. There is an amount here within the 267 million of \$86 million broken down across the various RHAs with the bulk of the funding, \$34 million, going to the North Central RHA in which the Couva Hospital is located, as well as the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. So that we have been very, very careful to provide the Ministry of Health with whatever funding required, and may I also say, Madam Speaker, that we in the Ministry of Finance we have—at any time that we it is required that the Ministry of Health requires funding, for example for vaccine purchases, we in the Ministry of Finance, we have used our own allocation to ensure that payments are made on time to ensure supply of vaccines; and I can give some global information.

I would not want to go into details. As the Minister of Health pointed out in response to a question just before the session began, or before this debate began, there are non-disclosure agreements, so we cannot give detailed information. But I can say at this time that so far the Ministry of Finance has made arrangements or already spent US \$10.3 million, or 70.2 million Trinidad and Tobago dollars on the procurement of vaccines. And the balance to be paid with the current arrangements for the procurement of vaccines is US \$5.4 million. If you add that all up, we expect at the end of the day that we would spend approximately US \$15.7 million on the acquisition of vaccines or approximately TT \$107 million.

And I can give some global figures, as I said, I cannot get into any details but that \$107 million will allow vaccination of 85 per cent of the population or

approximately 1.2 million persons. And I wish to say that we have already paid for a significant quantity of vaccines and we have already made the necessary down payments for the vaccines to come, especially the vaccines that are coming from the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, or AVAT is the acronym. So that I do not know if that clears the air on how much money is being spent on vaccines. I want to repeat \$107 million and sufficient vaccines to vaccinate 1.2 million people, which is not my portfolio, but at 85 per cent of the population, I think we would certainly be able to achieve over time the objective of the Ministry of Health of herd immunity.

I also want to deal with some issues that are in the public domain. As I was coming to this Parliament I was listening to the radio and I heard one of the local commentators that talk from time to time. And this commentator was saying we should go to the IMF for money and then saying no we should not go to the IMF for money, we should go to them for technical assistance and that we should stop borrowing and that we should make structural adjustments to the economy. I just want to clear this all up. Countries only approach the International Monetary Fund when they run out of foreign exchange and they cannot service their foreign debt. That, Madam Speaker, is Economics 101. Additionally, whenever the IMF is approached for financial assistance, either you have to commit to a structural adjustment programme, or you have to get into a structural adjustment programme. And therefore, since our reserves are still in the vicinity of US \$7 billion more or less, and our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is still in the vicinity of US \$5.7 billion, more or less, we have more than sufficient foreign exchange at this point in time and therefore, there is absolutely no reason for us to go to the IMF for financial assistance, none whatsoever. And I do wish that local economists would not just say these things because it sounds nice.

With respect to technical assistance, we interface with the IMF on a regular basis for technical assistance. In fact we had a meeting just a month ago, where we asked the IMF to assist us with a number of fiscal and monetary matters, and that these are ongoing technical assistance programmes at the IMF, so we do not need to be told to do that.

With respect to borrowing, if we stop borrowing, then we cannot finance the fiscal deficit, we cannot do the supplementation that we are about today, we cannot pay salaries, we cannot finance education and certainly we cannot finance health care, and provide water and electricity to our citizens at current rates. So a recommendation that we should stop borrowing is ludicrous. And we are certainly not going to make structural adjustments such as retrenchment, removal of subsidies and devaluation at this time, certainly not. And I heard a very curious question with respect to a loan that we have negotiated with the Government of the Republic of China in the amount of approximately US \$200 million and the question was: What are the conditionalities associated with that loan? Very curious question. There are none. And people who ask these questions should know better than just throw that mischief out into the public domain.

So coming back now to the matter at hand, Madam Speaker. Let me just give you some indication of what we are doing and we will be doing with the supplementation. We have already indicated, and I want to reiterate, that we are supplementing the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries with \$57 million to allow the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to continue a very innovative and significant programme, and that is the food basket programme, which is costing that Ministry approximately \$11 million a month and we have made the decision to appropriate enough funding to allow that Ministry to provide its 25,000 food baskets per month for the next five months right up to the end of the fiscal

year in September 2021. So that 57 million that is being appropriated for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is specifically to deal with the provision of these food boxes, as I said, some 25,000 food boxes per month, significant achievement. At the end of the fiscal year, if all goes according to plan, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would be able to supply over 100,000 food baskets to needy citizens by way of Members of Parliament, and in addition to assist over 100 farmers in terms of giving them guaranteed sales for their produce. So it is a very, very innovative programme and it has backward linkages. Not only does it provide relief to poor and needy people during this pandemic period, but it also stimulates agricultural production. So it is a very interesting and a very forward looking programme.

With respect to the appropriations that are being made for other forms of COVID relief, we have—we are asking the Parliament to appropriate \$40 million to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for their income support grant programme, and from all the reports I have that \$40 million should be sufficient. And I heard some confusion today about food cards and so on. I want to remind Members opposite that the appropriation for conditional cash support, which is a technical term for food cards, is in the Ministry of Finance. And therefore, we in the Ministry of Finance, at the appropriate time, we had always said that we would start off with the COVID-19 relief for 2021 with the food baskets from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. That is up and running and doing very well, notwithstanding whatever noise Members opposite are making about it. It is an excellent programme and I want to compliment the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for that programme. So the food basket programme is up and running and we had always indicated that as soon as that food basket programme was in full swing, we could turn our attention to some

additional food cards during the remaining period of fiscal 2021 and that arrangement will be settled between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services within the next month or so. I would not want to give details at this point in time, but we are certainly going to make available—we have a block allocation in the Ministry of Finance in fiscal 2021 of \$250 million for various forms of COVID relief. We have already appropriated some of that to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for income support. We will be utilizing some of it in the Ministry of Finance for salary relief grant and we would also be allocating part of that 250 million towards additional food cards which will be distributed in the usual manner.

I can give some information on the Salary Relief Grant, which is a fully online e-portal developed by the Ministry of Finance developed in seven days—I want to compliment the staff in the Ministry of Finance for being able to do this in seven days—to create and launch a completely digital solution with respect to applications for the Salary Relief Grant. And I can give some information that we already have. As of the 4th of June, 19,030 applications submitted for the Salary Relief Grant and 10,937 applications in progress still to be completed. So we are looking there at about 30,000 applications for the Salary Relief Grant and we have about 35,000 persons indicated an intention to apply for the grant. When we look at the breakdown of the applications, the bulk of them are in the food and restaurant services sector; about 15,000 of the 30,000 are in that sector, and 13,500 are in the retail outlet sector. So between retail outlets and food and restaurant services, that is over 28,000. The vast majority of applications are in those two sectors with small amounts elsewhere.

If you assume, because the grant is a two tiered grant, \$1,500 for those who lost employment at beginning of May, and \$1,000, for those who lost employment

from the 8th of May, as there were evolving adjustments to the Public Health Regulations and that is why we have the two tiered approach, let us average it out at \$1,200 per person, and if you take 30,000 persons, assuming all are genuine because quite a few will not be, they would not be eligible, but let us assume they all are, you take 1,200 by 30,000, you will get about \$36 million for the month of May, and I can say now, because of the prolonged period of COVID-19, we would be looking at what can be done in the month of June. The figures are not yet worked out but I think we would have to do something in the month of June and as I said we have a block allocation for all COVID relief of \$250 million. Might I also say, to our surprise, that although we were talking about 30,000 odd applications for the Salary Relief Grant, and this is just the Ministry of Finance grant, not the Social Development grant, those details I am sure will be given by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services in due course, that I, we were quite surprised to see that 119,620 visitors came to the Ministry of Finance e-portal for salary grants in the two-week period between the middle of May and the end of May. Almost 120,000 persons visited portal and out of that would come about 30,000 applications. Could I find out how much more time I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Your time expires at 3.04.32.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, so about 15—about 13 minutes. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me also speak about the small and medium enterprise loan facility. In talking to the banks, we found—and this bears repeating, although this is already in the public domain. It bears repeating, the banks have told us that significant number of applicants could not qualify for the small and medium enterprise loan even though that loan is a zero interest loan, I want to repeat, zero interest loan facility, moratorium for two years, the Government pays the interest,

the Government guarantees 75 per cent of the loan. Even with all of that, the majority of persons who indicated an interest in that loan could not qualify. And they could not qualify for very basic reasons, they did not have audited financials, they did not even have management accounts, they were not up to date with VAT, they were not up to date with national insurance, they were not up to date with income tax. However, they still want to get a loan facility and it is really a reflection on a level of indiscipline among the small and medium enterprise sector that they are running businesses on a day-to-day basis, on a cash basis, without any proper planning without any accounting, and we as Government, we must assist these people, then we must do something about it, this cannot continue that situation.

So we are—I have consulted with the Central Bank and we are going to develop a programme where we can have an outreach programme to small and medium enterprises to see how we can assist them and get them to understand that one of the basic things that a business requires is proper accounting. Because if you cannot demonstrate to a bank, you are going for a loan, but you cannot demonstrate to the bank, what your income and expenditure is and whether there is any surplus, and whether you have the capacity to borrow money, then no bank is going to lend you money. So we are trying to assist, we are trying to see what we could do, perhaps we can relax the requirement that the tax documentation can be pre-COVID, up to say, January or March of 2020, because we realize that people have difficulties. So perhaps we can look at that. This is something we are discussing with the banks to see whether if persons are up to date with their documentation before COVID that perhaps that could be looked at. In addition, we are looking at increasing the guarantee from 75 per cent to 100 per cent to see if that would assist persons. But beyond that, we cannot have a situation where persons would want to

approach the banking sector for loans and have no accounts. That cannot work. So we will have to see what we can do working with the Central Bank and see how we could assist these enterprises to at least have the very minimum of management accounts.

I can also report that this—the matter has gone to Cabinet and Cabinet has agreed. We shall extend this programme to the end of December 2021. We have done the same for the credit union programme, we are extending it to the end of December 2021 and looking to see what we could do to make it easier for people to access these funds.

In terms of the grant programme that the National Enterprise Development Company (NEDCO) is doing, again we are going to work with NEDCO and see what we could do to make it easier for people to access the grants from that programme. But we in the Ministry of Finance, Madam Speaker, we get all sorts of requests that make no sense. Just today, I received a document from a local businessman with recommendations on how to deal with the economic issues within the pandemic. And the recommendations were find \$5 billion, share it up among the population and waive taxes for the next two to five years. Now those recommendations do not make any sense, because in the first place, asking the Government to find \$5 billion, we would have to borrow. Remember they have one leading economist telling us “do not borrow” but of course, if you have to find \$5 billion to just share out, you have to borrow. And then the businessman says, do not collect taxes for the next two to five years. So where on earth is the money going to come from? And there is a lot of that going on in Trinidad and Tobago, a lot of that, where persons are asking the Government to forego revenue collection, and asking the Government to provide financial assistance.

Unlike the United States, and I think is necessary to make this point, the US dollar is what is called a reserve currency. It is held by 70 per cent of all of the banks in the world, they hold in reserve US dollars. So 70 per cent of all currency held in reserve, by various banks throughout the world is in US dollars. The next most desired reserve currency is the euro and after that, the British pound and the yen and so on. What the United States can do we cannot do. The President can go to Congress, he can ask Congress to approve a \$2 trillion stimulus package, which happened to in two Presidents, President Trump did it, President Biden did it and then once Congress approves it they just tell the US Mint open up and print.

We cannot do that. We do not have a reserve currency; we do not—our Trinidad and Tobago dollar is not held by Central Banks around the world, or by commercial banks around the world. We cannot simply call our Treasury and say print, but the United States can. And they have been doing that, since the Great Depression in 1929 that is how they have been dealing with their issues, they just print more and more US dollars. And because it is in demand, because the US dollar is in demand, there is no issue with it. The Euro region has also relaxed all of its fiscal rules during this pandemic, and is doing the same thing but we in Trinidad cannot do that. We have to watch our debt to GDP ratio, we have to look at our overdraft in the Central Bank which is prescribed by law, we have to look at our essential and mandatory expenditure, we have to look at revenue and we have to try and walk a tightrope of maintaining the momentum in the economy, maintaining as much employment as we possibly can, maintaining as much business activity as we possibly can, while not running afoul of the legal constraints with respect to expenditure. Those other countries do not have those constraints. So I want to make that absolutely crystal clear.

3.00 p.m.

Now, coming back to the matter at hand, Madam Speaker, we are forecasting, as we go down into the year, that the overall shortfall in revenue for the fiscal year will be somewhere in the vicinity of \$5 billion. We are looking at this supplementation, we expect that we will have to spend most of it. So if you take that 3 billion, more or less, and the five, we are looking at an unplanned event in the vicinity of \$8 billion. But we will only know at the end of the year what the outcome is.

But I want to make the point that we think that this supplementation is absolutely necessary. When you look at what it is for, it is not frivolous. When you look at the allocations, for example, in the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, we are giving supplementary funding to the 14 municipal corporations in the sum of \$94 million for payment of wages and salaries to make sure that they can maintain their staff, as well as sums owed for the provision of goods and services, so that they can meet the various payments that they have.

If we look at the supplementation for the Ministry of Works and Transport, a lot of outstanding matters that have to be dealt with, like obligations to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission. Because what we have been fighting for this last several years, is trying to do our best to work within the constraints that exist and, therefore, there are situations where Ministries owe statutory authorities and service providers like TSTT, T&TEC, et cetera, owe them significant sums. They owe landlords money for rental accommodation and contractors funding for projects already completed and so on.

With respect to the police service, and with the few minutes left, Madam Speaker, I just want to reiterate a point. We are appropriating or seeking appropriation for an additional \$57 million for the police service. We have a loan which has already been executed, money already deposited in an escrow account of

\$200 million, and the police already had an original allocation for goods and services. This is all goods and services. This is for supplies, this is for the rental of vehicles, this is for service providers to the police service, this is for their equipment and their weapons, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Madam Speaker, \$200 million by way of loan, \$57 million by way of supplementary appropriation, and they already had over \$300 million in their original appropriation. When you add that all up, you get close to \$600 million for the police service for fiscal 2021, of which there is no doubt, somewhere in the vicinity of 150/ \$200 million will go to pay previous bills, but that will clear them off. So that the police service, if all goes according to plan, would have had available to it, after it clears its liabilities, almost \$400 million for goods and services for fiscal 2021 if this is approved.

And, therefore, I want to put to rest the old talk about under-funding of the police service. That is nonsense. I want to repeat that with all that we are doing, the police service will get almost \$600 million for goods and services this year, and when you take the \$200 million for past bills, they would have available to them, some \$400 million for 2021, which is a significant sum.

And, therefore, Madam Speaker, as I said, the details of the supplementation are contained within the very comprehensive report of the Standing Finance Committee, the 175-page report. As I indicated, I got the responses to the questions. I will just take a quick look at them, and then give them to the Clerk for circulation, and I beg to move, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] *Question proposed.*

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, as I join this debate on the Motion to adopt the Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives. I believe that report is dated June 07, 2021. Madam Speaker, it is objectionable and really intolerable that as we

proceed into this debate with respect to Standing Finance Committee, wherein the majority of questions would have been put to Ministers about \$3 billion more that is to be supplemented, that that report has not come to Members of this House to allow us to properly debate the matter, and I think that is very objectionable and really reeks of a kind of discourtesy to Members of Parliament, and to transparency and accountability in the way we do business. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, when we speak here, when we raise issues, we raise questions, we raise it not just with our own voices, but these are the voices who have voted for Members of the Opposition, over 309,000 people [*Desk thumping*] and those are the voices that we come here to raise concerns that they have, and we will raise others. So it is totally objectionable that the Government has failed and/or refused and/or neglected to provide the answers to the questions.

And if we look at Standing Finance Committee Report, if we look at the verbatim notes contained within that Standing Finance Committee Report, we will see that the majority of questions, not answered—okay, Wednesday, Wednesday. You could do a word search to see how many questions not answered, how many Wednesday, Wednesday. Wednesday has come, the debate has started, and no such documentation has come. Always, PNM: promises never materialize. [*Desk thumping*]

Whilst I sympathize with the medical emergency that the Minister is raising, that is not good enough. This House, the Members here should have been given an opportunity to have a look at the documents, have the debates stood down and, therefore, have that time to properly debate the granting of approval for \$3 billion more. This is not \$3 or \$300 or 3,000. You are asking the House to approve \$3 billion more for expenditure on top of what you have already allocated to yourselves for expenditure. And so, medical emergency, we sympathize with that.

But, Madam Speaker, we are using the COVID all the time to block transparency and accountability. [*Desk thumping*] That is what is happening. So when we come to the curtailment of speaking time for Members, “Oh, it is in the interest of the curfew and people have to get home”. Well, if you know that, why do you start the debate at 1.30 p.m. when you could start it at 10.00 a.m.? [*Desk thumping*]

Indeed, the SFC was scheduled first to start at 10.00 a.m. or 10.30 a.m. and then we got a subsequent notice to put it for 1.30 p.m., so curtailing proper debate in the House. So, whilst I sympathize that the workers have to go home and because of the curfew, two things could have been done: Start earlier and/or provide the persons with passes, curfew passes, so that they will not be inconvenienced. [*Desk thumping*] So, we cannot use the SOE and the Regulations to shut down the debate in the Parliament and what we need to do.

As I move along, Madam Speaker, I look at the SFC Report and we have to say that that meeting from which the Report emanated, was a very historic one. It was very historic in that it was the first time we held a virtual Standing Finance Committee meeting. It was historic, perhaps, being amongst some of the largest moneys being supplemented, \$3 billion, and it was also historic, because the report indicates, at pages 15 to 16, that all 41 MPs are recorded as present. Maybe this is one of the few times that all 41 MPs have attended a Standing Finance Committee.

At page 15, Madam Speaker, the record starts with the name of your good self, Madam, as being present. There can be no denying your presence, because Madam you were consistent throughout in chairing the meeting. Your voice is in there and your words are in the verbatim notes. About 109 pages of verbatim notes—and let us understand verbatim notes, eh. When the meeting started, what people were saying throughout the meeting until the end. Madam Speaker, 109 pages of verbatim. About six and a half hours of speaking time. And I found it very

strange. I know a lot of strange things happened that day, and I will not go into that, but the second name recorded as being present is that of the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

Now, throughout that six and a half hours, throughout that verbatim notes covering about 109 pages from start to finish, never once did we hear the voice of the hon. Prime Minister. Not a pipsqueak from the hon. Prime Minister for six and a half hours. I do not know if his mike was muted. I do not know if he got “pips”—I learned that word from him—but something strange has very much happened here and I ask for clarification. [*Desk thumping*] I seek clarification on this very important matter.

You see, none other than the hon. Minister of Planning and Development is reported to have said the Opposition behaved in gangster behaviour, was dishonest and was indecent. Well, if it is that the Prime Minister was not present, then this record of him being present is dishonest and should be corrected. [*Desk thumping*] And if that is the case, if this is erroneous, given that in six and a half hours, not one word spoken—109-about pages of verbatim, not one word. And I am sure when we go back and look at the video itself, the question will arise: Was the Prime Minister present? Madam Speaker, this is a very serious matter that needs to be clarified and corrected. Secondly, given this, if this is erroneous, then questions may also arise about other matters in the Report, whether they are also incorrect or whether they are true reflections. So it casts doubt on the rest of the Standing Finance Committee Report.

So what were we doing then in that committee and what are we doing today? We are being asked to adopt the Report, and the Report has to do with two areas, two matters: Supplementation in the sum of \$3 billion for 14 Heads of Expenditure, Ministries as they were, 14 Ministries, and that 3 billion more,

Madam Speaker, is to supplement expenditure of these 14 to the end of 2021. So we have five months more to go. I want us to note carefully that this additional money is on top of \$28.6 billion that these Ministries were already allocated. So, in effect, for 14 Ministries, \$31.4 billion of expenditure.

As pages 4 and 5 of the SFC Report tell us, these 14 Ministries are to receive allocations should the Report be adopted and then the Bill be passed as follows. The EBC, 4.1 billion; the Office of the Prime Minister, 16.5 billion; the THA, 80 billion; the Ministry of Finance, 115 billion; Ministry of National Security, 725 million; Office of the AG, 118 million; Ministry of Health, 267.1 million; Ministry of Public Admin, 24.8 million; Public Utilities, 944 million; Rural Development, 142.2 million; Works, 294.4 million; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 90.9 million; TTPS, 57.7 million and Ministry of Planning, 44.7, bringing us to about \$3 billion.

Now, as I say, this is supplementary. This is added to what was already allocated. And I would think that Ministers would come to tell us what have they already spent money on that they are now seeking to get an additional, a top off, as it were, for allocations for expenditure. We would need Ministers to tell us that. Now, if we had the Report and the responses to questions, some of that would have been answered. And so, I think the Ministers owe us a duty, all these Ministries, to tell us the moneys that you were already allocated, what have you done? And, in the SFC Report you are telling us some of the things that you will be going to do with the new allocation.

The second area has to do with variations. And, interestingly, out of all the moneys jumping up and down here, it is in the variation, which is \$107 million to be taken from the Ministry of Finance to go to three Ministries and, again, the SFC Report at page 6 tells us what it is for. It will go to three Ministries. The Office of

the Prime Minister, I believe is about \$10 million. It goes to the Ministry of Social Development, 40 million, and will go to, the third one, Agriculture; the famous grow boxes the Minister of Finance spoke about, market boxes, in the Ministry of Agriculture of 57 million.

But you know what is interesting? When we look at the original allocation in the Ministry of Finance, there was \$500 million allocated for, what? For fiscal incentives to farmers. The Minister is now taking only 57 million out of that to give it to help people for COVID and to be as incentives for farmers. So, what has happened to the rest of it? So many months of the year, seven months of the fiscal year have gone, and you come now to give a measly 57 million out of \$500 million to help people to help the farmers in this country. Shame on you, Minister. Shame on you. [*Desk thumping*]

My colleagues will go into a little more depth about those matters, but I really want to talk a little about some of the things the Minister himself shared with us today, things relating to the fiscal outturn and so on. And the one thing that comes over, very clearly, about the fiscal outturn, is that everything has dropped. We are on lockdown but, in fact, the economy is on meltdown [*Desk thumping*] based on the Government's policies and programmes. We are on meltdown. [*Desk thumping*] And whilst the Minister appeared to be exceedingly calm in his presentation here today, unlike his normal vivacious self, I think the only time he came up, you know, spritely was at the end when he said, "Thank you, Madam Speaker". He was happy to have completed his presentation.

But, Madam Speaker, here we are. The Minister tells us the fiscal outturn on almost every field has dropped. The Minister then says, well, people are telling him to go to the IMF, but no, no, no, no, we should not go to the IMF. You know why? You go to the IMF when your reserves are very low. Well, Minister, if our

reserves are not low, and if we do not have a foreign exchange problem, then where are you living in this country at this time? At this time there is a serious forex crisis. Madam, may I get a little water? And I did have a COVID vaccine. I did have a COVID PCR, so I think I am okay. It is just a bit dry. Thank you very much. [*Crosstalk*] Thank you, Madam, I think they will bring me some.

Yes, so not to the IMF. We do have issues with foreign reserves. People in the country are really feeling that shortage of forex. We see people in the business community all the time complaining about it. So, I do not buy the story, and I am not suggesting that we go to the IMF at all. But what the Minister has failed to do today, is to tell us how he intends to fund this \$3 billion. The SFC Report tells us that the moneys will come from the Consolidated Fund. The moneys to fund the supplementary appropriations, will come from the Consolidated Fund. And the Consolidated Fund is made up of, what? The revenues that come in. But the Minister has told us that almost every head of revenue there has been a decrease. So, where is the money coming from for this additional \$3 billion? What is the status of the Consolidated Fund?

When we look at the Auditor General's Report, we will see that the Consolidated Fund is in a serious deficit, minus almost I think it is \$42 billion—\$44 billion, if I am not mistaken. So where is the 3 billion going to come from? The Minister said based on the shortfall in the revenue and the fiscal outturn and so on, the way they are going to deal with this, is to get a supplementary appropriation. But that is not dealing with your shortfall in revenue. That is not dealing with a deficit projected about \$8 billion. The deficit for the last six years, we have had a deficit in almost every single year under this Government, every single year.

Even though the Minister came and boasted about turnaround, about

resetting the economy and about a new paradigm, every single year there has been a deficit. Indeed, in one year, before COVID, the deficit was almost \$16 billion in deficit, and now we have projected for this fiscal year, for about \$8 billion. The Minister told us five plus three. Where is the money going to come from to finance the \$3 billion in additional expenditure?

So that I think the Minister has failed to explain completely. Is it going to come out of the HSF again? We have seen the drawdowns out of the HSF. Is it going to come from borrowings? The Minister needs to tell us. The Government needs to tell us, where are you going to get the money into the Consolidated Fund, as the Report tells us, in order to fund the 3 billion in supplementary appropriations?

The Minister then tells us that he has come to us today to ask for a supplementation against the backdrop of the performance of the economy from October last year to May/June of 2021. He tells us that the average price for October, weighted average price for October down to now on local crude is about \$52. So he says that is just about above budget, and that might be the only one at the moment, just about budget. But production has fallen, gas production has fallen, the netback gas price he tells us has fallen, the netback for national gas has also fallen. And then he tells us, well, we do not really depend too much on natural gas, it is more on the oil and the oil seems to be rising. I do not believe a word that the Minister says. It is platitudes for us today without any real plan as to how we are going to fund the deficit and how we are going to take our economy out of the meltdown that it is in now.

The Minister talks about taxes. Again, shortfalls he speaks about. From the oil and gas companies, the energy revenues, all in shortfalls. And then tells us about no need to worry about foreign reserves. Our official reserves, Madam, net

official reserves have been on the decline since 2015, before COVID—2015, falling from US 10.4 billion when we were in office, to 6.93 billion at the end of 2019. The Minister has not told us what it is now. That is the position with the net official reserves, and this data comes out of the Central Bank data about the net official reserves.

In 2020, the figures stood at 6.95 billion, notwithstanding foreign loans and withdrawals from the HSF which would have been used in part to bolster foreign reserves. By April 2021, the reserves position declined further to US \$6.7 billion in 2021, moving from when we left office, 10.4 billion, all long before COVID, down right now to, what? Madam Speaker, 6.7 billion, and you tell us you do not have a problem about foreign reserves and about official reserves. It is clear the economy has no solution being advanced to resolve the forex crisis.

Government has resorted to borrowing to buy US dollars as external borrowings together with the HSF withdrawals to shore up. It is not a real foreign reserve position. You shore it up by taking it out of the HSF and say, “Hey, look, we have foreign dollars”. Not a cent which you ever put into that HSF. [*Desk thumping*] Not one cent has this Government in their six years put a cent into that HSF. And then you borrow external loans. Again, take the US and say, “Hey, look we have US”. But not a plan, not a programme, not a policy for how we earn forex. In fact, what you did was to further deplete any forex that we could have earned when you shut down Petrotrin. [*Desk thumping*] When you shut down Petrotrin, we would sell those products for forex. Now we have to find forex to do, what? To buy from foreign sources. So companies that would have repeatedly repatriated US dollars, they are now sceptical on shoring those funds. They are further exacerbating the issue. So, I am not convinced by the Minister’s platitudes about our reserves being okay. We have more than sufficient reserves he says. We have

more than foreign exchange, so we do not need to do anything else.

Then the Minister spoke to us about NAMDEVCO and the food basket. Well, this is a total scandal. That NAMDEVCO food market box or whatever it is—it is market box, I think it is called. The story changes each time we speak—every single time we speak about this NAMDEVCO market box—which was in principle a good idea because you will be buying products from farmers, thereby assisting farmers. And, secondly, that you would be helping people, you would be helping people in need of the food supplies. So, let us talk about this. This is a very expensive initiative. Madam Speaker, 57.3 million is being made from the variation Item being put into agriculture. It tells us that it is for 20,000 market boxes per month, May to September, which will take us to 100,000 market boxes over the five-month period. This is contained in the Standing Finance Report as well as in the notes we dealt with in the finance committee.

Now, we have seen that the manner in which the Government has conducted distribution increases the need for transparency and accountability. These were matters that we really did not get proper answers to in the SFC and that is why we were hoping we would get the answers today. Yet, still I do not think any Members yet received them. The time is now almost 3.30 p.m. Some issues arise. One, the reduction in the number of hampers from 600 to 400 per MP. So, first we were told, we were advised by letter, each MP would get 600. Suddenly that changed. It was then 400 hampers. And then something else happened. We were told that this was only for MPs for distribution. I, again, I have no problem with NGOs and others receiving hampers, but you cannot set a policy and then break your own policy. [*Desk thumping*] You cannot set a policy position and break your own policy, and then what was the criteria? Where is the accountability and transparency? So then the allocation of 100 hampers to individuals who were not

MPs.

On 03 May, 2021, the hon. Prime Minister announced that MPs would be provided with 600 hampers containing these market goods. By letter dated 10 May, 2021, from NAMDEVCO to MPs, they stated that the number of hampers will be reduced by 200—from the 600 to 400. By May 11th, typical right hand does not know what left hand is doing or left foot, right foot, Minister Imbert tweeted 25,000 food baskets per month for three months. So what is correct? Which one is the right figure? The real reason for the reduction, we think, is that the Government went outside its stated policy and was choosing its friends and its PNM appointees and PNM persons to give them.

On the 17th of May, there was a Facebook page, Sharda Satram, PNM candidate for Couva North Constituency, 2020. This is not an MP. This is a candidate. And the lady posted, “today a 100 hampers were distributed throughout Couva North”. These hampers were donated by, who? By NAMDEVCO. So you moved. How does Madam Satram know that she could apply? Would other NGOs not want to apply? We want them to apply and we want other NGOs to be able to be distribute because the suffering out there is tremendous. [*Desk thumping*] Even your Minister of Labour is reported to have said that, “Oh God, it is overwhelming”. “The demand for hampers is overwhelming.” The stories and the pain and suffering of people without food. Every day you pick up the newspapers, you look at the social media, it is there. So the more that can be distributed, yes we agree with that, but then there must be transparency and accountability.

On the same night of the 17th, again, more postings from a different Facebook now, with the name of an NGO but it was in effect the same person posting it about the 100 hampers market boxes. Now, just remember, you know, the current Chairman of NAMDEVCO was a former PNM Senator. The Madam

Satram was a former PNM candidate contesting the 2020 elections. That lady lost. That happens from time to time. But when we look at the Government policy contained in a Cabinet Minute, Madam, that is why, you see, we have to ask—left foot, right foot, left hand, right hand—people do not seem to know what they are doing.

3.30 p.m.

After the result was exposed by MPs for Barataria/San Juan, I believe, Couva North and the Mayor for Chaguanas, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries backtracked. He said then the hampers were also to be given to whom? NGOs and MPs. After he had already broken your own policy. The Cabinet Note—there is no authorization in the Cabinet Note for hampers to NGOs. So I do not know if since then, when their outcry came, they have changed it. But I hold in my hand here, placed in my postbox, a Cabinet Minute, May 12, 2021, provision of market boxes to vulnerable persons adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, under phase two of Emergency Food Support Measures. A Note was noted; comments from the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, and so on, and Cabinet agreed to the provision of 20,000 market boxes estimated to cost \$573.10 by NAMDEVCO to vulnerable persons. So first of all, the cost of these boxes; the 20,000 to be distributed and thereafter, that the distribution of these boxes referred be done by 41 Members of Parliament. The Ministry of Finance identified funds, identified \$11.4 million in order to implement this decision that was taken.

So let us move to the cost then because there is a discrepancy here to the cost of these. The Cabinet tells us \$573.10—Cabinet Note. When we look at what is contained in the Standing Finance Committee's Report and the Note that was shared with the committee itself, the cost of the market boxes—we have

calculated—they say \$57 million for 100,000 boxes because it is 20 per month for five months. How much of that will go to per box?—\$573.10, the same price located in the Cabinet Note. But then when the Minister comes here he told us that it was going to cost 400—and what?—46 dollars or something. He told this Committee here that the—he said the true cost is \$456. He told us here in the Standing Finance Committee. I saw it in the verbatim. So that means that 100,000, it will come up to \$45.6 million. The question then is, you are be allocated \$57 million, where is the additional \$11.7 million going?

If we use your costing, your costing of \$456, then there is \$11.7 million not accounted for. Whom is this being paid to? It is to farmers? Is it to middlemen? And this \$11.7 million would be able to provide so many more food boxes. So tell us Minister, where is \$11.7 million going to? [*Desk thumping*] Where has the money gone? We did a cost analysis ourselves. We had persons go to the markets along the corridor and we had persons go to markets in the south. And the cost of the items—we took all the items—we got about eight or 10 oranges and whatever you got, whatever—your items—and it came up to about \$300 per market box when you did do those prices. And those prices were not the wholesale discount prices so it would be even less. But again, somebody is pocketing the additional moneys. If these things cost only about \$300 per box, where is that excess money going to? Who is pocketing this money [*Desk thumping*] when we could be providing so many more hampers for people in need, Madam Speaker? And I hope that the Minister would provide us with some answers as to the true cost on how this money is being spent.

I want to turn to another matter that the Minister raised and it has to do with the Salary Relief Grant. Income support: The Minister was very happy and we are very happy that support will be provided in this regard, but there must be

transparency and accountability in how it is going to be spent, how it is going to be distributed. And I was disturbed to read in the Auditor General's report, the latest report, at page 112, in relation to the Salary Relief Grant and in relation to the food support grants— income support and food support grants. At page 112—this report is dated the 29th of April, 2021, and it refers to the last fiscal year. Now, I referred to this, Madam, because we would want to know, are any systems being put in place to prevent what occurred the last time you were giving out these grants? And the Auditor General tells us what happened.

In one instance, the Auditor tells us that:

“The criterion for payments of the Income and Food Support Grants, is that only one (1) payment should be made per household. Evidence was not seen that proper checks were made to determine whether one (1) payment was made per household. In three hundred and twenty-five (325) instances for payments of Income Support Grant and three hundred and eighty-eight (388) instances for the Food Support Grant the same bank account was used by more than one person.”

Three hundred and eighty-eight instances—325 using the same bank account. How could this happen? Is it that it was one person who has that bank account is receiving all this money? That is what it means, Madam. That is what the Auditor General is wising us about.

It goes on further to say that—one bank account that was used by more than one person. The same bank account by more than one person. It goes on to say:

“Payments to these applicants totalled, \$2,028,000.00...”

Not a few dollars that you could have, you know. In everything, you said, there is a transaction cost that matters for all. This is \$2.028million for the income support grant. It does not end there. And \$1.213million for the food support grant,

duplications of this money. We are asking then, what checks and balances will now be put in place where the Ministry of Finance is giving out the food support grants, giving out salary relief grants? Such grants are also being given out by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And then under the Office of the Prime Minister, another 10 million is going to be distributed. What is the process? How are the persons recruited? How is the money to be given? And I think we need the answers because we are talking about taxpayers' moneys [*Desk thumping*] that has to be spent and has to be accounted for.

The Auditor General still continues on page 112:

“There were...Income Support Grant records that food support records where...”—the—“National ID card number was used by more than one person.”

You are using the same ID card number to go to collect grants; several payments, 26 payments total, \$48,600, using the same ID number. Madam Speaker, we have to find a way and I would welcome—the Minister of Finance told us very cheerily today that his Ministry has come up with an app and a digitalization—well, tell us a little more about that because this is taxpayers' money, and secondly, it is for people who are most in need, the most vulnerable, so we need to have that accountability and transparency. [*Desk thumping*]

Under the “Ministry of Finance”, the “Salary Relief Grant”, page 113, the Auditor tell us:

“As part of the audit procedure, the...”—Salary Relief Grant—“database was joined with the Income Support Grant database. An analysis of the joined databases revealed that two thousand, six hundred and seventy-two (2,672) persons received both grants...”

“Both grants”. Where is the check and balance? Where is the accountability and

transparency? These matters need to be addressed before we go and spend billions more on COVID relief, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

In the time I have left, I would raise a few more matters and one has to do with the CEPEP matter, Madam. There is a line Item here seeking an increase for CEPEP workers for wages and salaries for CEPEP and what we noted is that CEPEP workers are now being asked to take a—what? A 33 per cent—these are the 10,000 normal, ordinary, lower-income CEPEP workers, 33 per cent in pay cuts. On the other hand, the big boys in the CEPEP programme are continuing to receive thousands of dollars. All the persons at the top of the organization—and I had shared these numbers before—they are continuing to receive large sums of money. So why is it that you are asking the ordinary 10,000 workers to take the pay cut but you are continuing to pay the higher-ups, the administratives, the big boys, you are continuing to pay them these huge salaries in thousands of dollars? And if it is that there is less work to be done, then they also have less work to do.

You are cutting the CEPEP time, you are cutting their payments, they also have less work to do. So that is another area which needs to be given—the CFO is getting \$42,000 a month—Chief Financial Officer—\$42,000 per month. CEPEP, the ordinary CEPEP with a “P”, now below minimum wage because you are booking a 33 per cent cut compared to the CFO, the Chief Financial Officer, getting about \$42,000. The Chief Executive Officer—my colleagues are reminding me—Chief Executive Officer. And that figure was given by none other than the hon. Minister of Planning and Development in answer to a question here in this Parliament last year in this House.

Madam Speaker, I want to raise a matter related to the NCRHA. I know that there are line Items here for increasing the moneys, the allocation, supplementary allocations to the NCRHA. I raised a question and the Minister brushed it off when

I said, “Well, what is the legal authority for the NCRHA?” Minister: “That is not relevant. It is not relevant.” Madam, it is very relevant because you are asking us to increase an allocation to the NCRHA who has management responsibilities for the Couva hospital when they have no legal responsibility whatsoever. You are asking us to approve taxpayers’ dollars to be spent by the NCRHA when they have no legal authority so to do. That is like picking up any organization and say, “Look, NCC, you go and manage Couva hospital. You go and manage any government entity. That is okay. Doh worry about legal authority.” This is a very serious matter and I am warning some public officers that under the Exchequer and Audit Act, there is provision that where a public officer, the accounting officers and so on, make payments that are not within their remit and within their jurisdiction legally, that they could be personally surcharged for such payments being made. Because here we have now—you will have your accounting officer, your PSs and so on, giving this money over to the NCRHA to spend when they have no legal authority.

I have asked for the document showing the legal authority, they have refused, failed and/or neglected so far to provide any legal authorization. It is my respectful submission that there is none and therefore this is a serious matter. Why it is serious too? You have the NCRHA conducting work at the Couva hospital. You have the doctors coming out in arms. They are being transferred. They are being rotated. They are being moved out. You have the Nursing Association coming out complaining as well about the management skills of these people. You have the persons working at the Couva hospital itself complaining bitterly. Registered nurses have serious issues. You have the crisis where, 25th May, you had 11 senior doctors, 10 of whom were heads of the NCRHA, complaining about the sudden and unprecedented decision by NCRHA to remove four senior physicians from their positions at the Couva hospital and reassigned into various

other institutions. This matter still has not been dealt with.

When the region was approached about the timing and unusual manner of this arrangement, the CEO of the NCRHA said, “Look, it is twofold you know; one, that the NCRHA via press release, Thursday, May 19th, took the position that the removal was a rotation. This was a rotation they said that was recommended by Dr. Don Martin, Chief of Staff at the Couva hospital. Dr. Martin had to come out and give the lie to the statement. On May 21st, he said unequivocally, “This is not so. This is not the case.” [*Desk thumping*] In another interview, the CEO attempted to clarify the region’s statement but significant—and there is a lot of dissonance still persisting. So serious cause there.

According to senior doctors, again, they are very concerned because those movements involve the removal of the most experienced physicians in our country, in the case of patients with COVID at the time when services are most desperately needed. Again, in the letter of 25th of May. According to the head, senior doctors appeared to have been removed without any clear or any justification against their will and with no thought as to the adverse impact on the wider public. So all well and good. You know, someone said, “Kamla, why are you complaining about the use of the Couva hospital, whether they have legal authority or not?” That is not the issue. I am very happy that that hospital is up and running. [*Desk thumping*] It took a pandemic to open it. It was built under the previous government and from government to government it continues from wanting. I am very happy. The problem is not with the fact that the hospital is being used, the problem is with the fact that you have an authority with no—you have an entity with no legal authority and jurisdiction to manage the Couva hospital. And in doing that management, they are making all kinds of very serious mistakes which impact on the health of persons in that institution.

So I hope, Minister of Health, do not just wash it away and say, “That is okay. I will take you to court and I will take you to the Commissioner of Police,” and so on. I mean, as a public official you have a greater duty to ensure that the law is followed rather than to be flouted to take you to court 10 years down the road. [*Desk thumping*] That cannot be the attitude. It is the health of persons now that we are concerned about. This is what it is about in the management and the proper management of the NCRHA-managed Couva hospital.

Madam Speaker, as I close my contribution, let me make it very clear that we are not just here to naysay and “dey-say” and not say. We are happy for any relief that would be given to those most in need but there must be transparency and accountability in the manner in which funds are disbursed. We cannot continue in the same way. We find out when we request information, they cannot provide information in some of the Government Ministries because they say, “The data is not collected. It was not captured in that manner.” Whatever that means—“not captured”. So we asked, “Well, how was it captured?” Well, we are still waiting to find out how was it captured and therefore, give the information in whatever way, whatever format it was captured.

I would like to make some suggestions and I know we have a matter coming up at six o'clock, so I will not preempt matters there because I have some recommendations with that too. But we do have some recommendations so it is not just to come here and shout. I want to make it clear very, I am very patriotic. We in the Opposition, we are very patriotic. [*Desk thumping*] We are committed to the health and safety and the sustainability of the lives of the people of our country, just as I am sure every Member here is, Madam. And suggestions—look, we have to open up the non-essential services. We have to get these workers back out. They need to get back to work. [*Desk thumping*] We need to open our borders. We

cannot continue to lock out our citizens. Promises, “We will open it. We will open.”, but no dates, no times. It is like the vaccines, they are forever coming, they are forever coming and cannot reach. We need to pay the businessmen. We have to give them their VAT refunds. We should pay the VAT refunds. [*Desk thumping*]

We should consider—the Minister says he does not want to take off taxes but I remember when we removed the VAT on food items, [*Desk thumping*] 7,000 food items, the VAT revenue did not fall by very much at all. And in fact, the Minister had projected he would get what was a \$12 billion more in VAT and when you looked at the numbers, they were far less. That is another way you can help without impacting seriously on your revenue stream from the VAT—VAT things that come in. So my colleagues will go into details, Madam. I have stayed out of the line Items to prevent them from getting repetitive. They will go into details on the various line Items.

I want to make it clear, whilst these things may seem necessary and urgent at this time, they must be disbursed, the \$3 billion, with transparency and accountability. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much for recognizing me. Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure to join in this debate on this appropriation for the financial year 2021, presented by the hon. Minister of Finance and the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East. And before I go into the gist of my contribution, Madam Speaker, I must say that when I listened to the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the Member of Parliament for Siparia, it reminds me of a very famous statement made by the founding Member of the People’s National Movement and our first Prime Minister, that the alternative to the PNM is chaos

and confusion. [*Desk thumping*]

I listened with a degree of pain, Madam Speaker. As a young Member of Parliament, in my first year, in my first term, and I sat in my chair, riveted to the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition and I thought that as an alternative government and as an alternative Prime Minister, she would have taken the opportunity to present her vision and to present her alternative policies to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But unfortunately, I sat here, Madam Speaker, and all that I witnessed was a constant prompting from the Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan, having to constantly prompt the Leader of the Opposition who would have spent all these years in Parliament as an Opposition Leader and as a Prime Minister that is now reduced to having to be prompted by one of her junior colleagues. Very, very sad, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I listened again to the Opposition Leader and constantly she started her contribution by complaining of what transpired in the Standing Finance Committee, old grouses and noises. And I thought for the moment that she would have taken the opportunity to apologize to you, Madam Speaker, and to apologize to the people of Trinidad and Tobago for the behaviour of her caucus yesterday, [*Desk thumping*] which was very shameful for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. She came and she continued her grouses as though it was an overnight hangover from what transpired yesterday and I feel absolutely sorry for the Leader of the Opposition because I thought she would have taken the opportunity—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 48(5)—

Hon. M. Gonzales:—to come and present alternative facts—

Mr. Lee: Standing Order 48(5), please—48(5).

Hon. M. Gonzales:—and alternative policies to the people of—[*Desk thumping*]

[*Madam Speaker rises*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Let me also say that I, as a Member of Parliament for Lopinot/Bon Air West, I feel absolutely proud to be a Member of this Government given the contribution and given the hard work done by NAMDEVCO and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries [*Desk thumping*] to support families, to support the people of Trinidad and Tobago who have found themselves in unfortunate circumstances as a result of this global pandemic. It is very difficult, Madam Speaker, and it is very difficult for all of us. We cannot possibly respond to every single case and every single plea for help. But at the end of day, Madam Speaker, the complaints coming from the Leader of the Opposition and just a selected few Members on the Opposition—but the vast majority of them sat there and the vast majority of them are all beneficiaries and their constituents are all beneficiaries of the hard work, and the thousands of families who continue to benefit from those food boxes, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, she said 1,000 food boxes in five months; 1,000 food boxes in five months. But apparently, she did not get her maths correct and that is also quite understandable. But, Madam Speaker, 25,000 boxes per month in five months will give you 125,000 food boxes. [*Desk thumping*] That is the reality, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries said yesterday, in yesterday's Standing Finance Committee that with the \$57million allocated for food boxes, 125 food boxes were distributed to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And you break it down, Madam Speaker, the maths will simply tell you that for every single food box, each will cost TT \$456. [*Desk thumping*] And I go on, Madam Speaker, out of the said \$57million, as indicated by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, 50 additional—50,000 additional food boxes will be distributed to councillors so that they can also distribute to their burgesses and the people that they represent.

So I feel absolutely proud to be a Member of Parliament and to be a Member of this Government. It is extremely difficult in extreme difficult financial circumstances but yet still, Madam Speaker, as a Government, every single day and every single week that we meet around our Cabinet table, we try our best to utilize the limited financial resources to ensure that it go towards the people and the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And therefore, I reject out of the hand, the noise, the constant noise by Members of the Opposition, by the hon. Leader of the Opposition who will not present their alternative policies to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and take every single opportunity it is to mislead and to fool the people. But our people are far better than that and they understand. [*Desk thumping*] They understand that regardless of what, you may not agree with all the policies of the PNM but you can go to bed comfortable knowing that as a Government, we seek the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, let me go towards the utilities sector. In this supplementary appropriation, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance has supplemented the budget for the Ministry of Public Utilities in the sum of \$917,373,000. Quite a large supplementation, Madam Speaker, but I must say—and let me also put on record that I am very proud of every single worker in the utilities sector in Trinidad and Tobago. I am proud of the T&TEC worker that goes out to work every single day during this very difficult time to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have electricity in their homes; to ensure that businesses continue, as limited as it might be; to ensure that proceedings in this Parliament can continue unabated with a certain level of stability. I am proud that they continue to do their work in very difficult circumstances and I want to put on record my distinct honour and my congratulations for every single worker in the utilities sector.

The same for WASA. With all the challenges we are having in the Water

and Sewerage Authority, not now but over the years, I feel proud and I congratulate every single WASA worker who rejected a call to stay away from work some months ago by a misguided union leader and who, during this very difficult time, ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are provided with a reliable supply of water. And it is not perfect, Madam Speaker. I am not standing here to tell this country and to tell this Parliament that it is all perfect in WASA. We know the challenges. We are all victims of the challenges. And as I have said yesterday, it will take the support of every single Member of Parliament, not only from this side of the House, because as Members of Parliament we are all in receipts of complaints from our constituents or segments in our constituency who are not getting an efficient water supply. And therefore, it stands on our shoulders, as representatives of the people, to come and put our collective minds together to ensure that we have a water management company, a Water and Sewerage Authority that can respond adequately to the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I stand and I feel very proud that during this very difficult time, the workers of the Water and Sewerage Authority continue to play their part.

Madam Speaker, the same for SWMCOL, the same for MTS; I feel very proud of them. In this supplementary appropriation, Madam Speaker, it is quite simple, \$152,673,000 will go towards the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission to ensure that we cover and we pay all the outstanding sums so that they can provide street lights to all the communities across Trinidad and Tobago and the lighting up of spaces and recreational spaces. And notwithstanding the fact that we are in a lockdown mode, I can tell you that all our playing fields and all our streets are all lit. And despite the difficulties being faced by the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, this sum of \$152million will go towards the paying of outstanding bills and arrears up to June 2021, so that the people of

Trinidad and Tobago will be able to go about their affairs with a feeling of safety and a feeling of comfort, that when we come out of this lockdown that they can go to the parks and their recreational spaces, feeling that great sense of comfort.

I thank the hon. Minister of Finance for making this provision, to ensure that T&TEC can provide the very vital service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

4.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, \$72 million for the rebate on rates for domestic A customers. A lot of us may not be aware that 220,000 domestic A customers of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission all benefit from this rate rebate. It simply means it is a result of a policy taken by this Government in 2016, that every single domestic customer that has a utility bill from \$300 below, are entitled and would be entitled to benefit from this rebate. The Ministry of Public Utilities will make the necessary payment to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission on this rate, on this very important policy. And I can tell you this \$72 million will go towards paying the outstanding sums to T&TEC up to June 2021 and, therefore, 220,000 rate A customers, domestic customers of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission will be beneficiaries of this payment.

Madam Speaker, \$108 million will go towards payment of loans on behalf of the Electricity Commission, the principal and T&TEC fixed rate bonds over a period of 2010 to 2018, and \$7 million will be paid towards the Solid Waste Management Company Limited for sums extracted so that it can continue its operational expense towards the end of the year.

So, therefore, Madam Speaker, whilst I cannot go into all the details of the allocations made to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, I wish to add that despite the very difficult and challenging circumstances, the people of Trinidad and Tobago should be proud of the work being done by T&TEC and their

frontline workers. And despite the very difficult circumstances, the debts owed to NGC which amounts currently to \$2.2 billion, the fact that in Trinidad and Tobago we continue to be the beneficiaries of the lowest electricity rates around the world, in the Caribbean, in the Western hemisphere, and if I happen to go into some statistics, I can tell you—just allow me one minute—that in the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago, when you compare the rates paid in other Commonwealth countries, in Trinidad and Tobago we pay the lowest in electricity rates. St. Lucia, on average in TT currency, \$1.76 cents per kilowatt; in Barbados, 1.90 per kilowatt; in Canada, 81 cents; in Jamaica, \$1.96 cents, and in Trinidad and Tobago our customers pay TT 33 cents per kilowatt in electricity.

Therefore, I am to say that very soon, if we have to continue with a reliable electricity service for this country, and to avoid what is taking place in the water sector, where some of our communities are placed on a schedule to be provided with water, we cannot afford to do the same for electricity. Therefore, we have to empower T&TEC to be able to raise its own financing and to remove it from the dependence on state coffers for its operational expenses, to pay that outstanding sum to the National Gas Company to the tune of \$2.2 billion. And, therefore, I am going to say that at the appropriate time we will have to revisit the rates that we pay for our electricity services, and to come up with a structure, whilst protecting the very vulnerable in the society, but to ensure that our electricity company can have the financial capacity to be able to undertake routine maintenance, and the stability in the provision of electricity service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, let me go on to WASA. I have laid a report in this Parliament on the operations of the Water and Sewerage Authority. That report was put together by a subcommittee of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, and we

reported to the Cabinet our findings on the Water and Sewerage Authority. We have told the people of Trinidad and Tobago that WASA is dysfunctional and, therefore, we need to change the way in which we do business in the Water and Sewerage Authority.

Madam Speaker, in this allocation, \$245 million will be paid or, rather, go towards the payment of salaries and wages for contract workers. When I asked the question as Minister of Public Utilities, can you please tell me where those contract workers are situated on the structure of WASA, I can tell you approximately 3,000 contract workers and daily-rated workers cannot be found on the official structure of the Water and Sewerage Authority, which is costing the people of Trinidad and Tobago over \$600million. I am to say, if we have to change this, we have to make very difficult decisions, because with \$600million, if we can only invest it and invest it to improve the water infrastructure in this country, then none of our constituents will have a challenge when coming to the reliability in the supply of water. It is very difficult. Madam Speaker, 3,000 workers not on the official structure, on the established structure of the Water and Sewerage Authority. That is mismanagement to the highest level, and I am telling you, Madam Speaker, in my capacity as Minister of Public Utilities, I understand it is going to be very difficult. It is going to be very traumatic. I expect it to be very traumatic. But I am telling you that as a Member of Parliament, and as the Minister of Public Utilities, I am not afraid to work with my Prime Minister and my colleagues in the Cabinet, and my colleagues on this side of the House, to do whatever it takes to ensure that every single Member of Parliament can boast, and come here and be assured of a reliable water supply for every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. We are capable of it.

So I talk about the employees. It costs the people of Trinidad and Tobago \$50 million in desalinated water; \$50 million per month on desalinated water.

Approximately \$600 million it costs the taxpayers of this country. And the Opposition, when they were in government unfortunately in 2012, extended this desalinated contract, take or pay, to 2036, and that means that the taxpayers of this country, the citizens of this country, are now saddled with a yearly desalinated bill of over \$600million.

Madam Speaker, I walked around in several facilities in the Water and Sewerage Authority, I can tell you. Fifty-six water treatment plants, 51 water wells, 51 water intakes, 237 wells, 123 booster stations, most of them are in a state of disrepair, not producing water up to their fullest capacity, and yet still we are burdened, we are burdened with a desalinated bill of over \$50 million per month. Therefore, if we have to turn around the water sector, we have to make very difficult decisions and put a structure that is consistent with a modern water management company.

Madam Speaker, can I ask you how much time I remain?

Madam Speaker: You have about 15 seconds left.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Fifteen seconds? So, therefore, in winding up, I am to tell you that we will do what it takes as a government to ensure that we have a utility sector, water, electricity and waste management that will be for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central. **Mr. Arnold Ram** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity this afternoon to share my views on the mid-year review for financial year 2020/2021. My contribution this afternoon will answer some of the points raised by my colleague opposite, who was previous to me. But today in this juncture, it allows us on this side to gauge the performance of this Government, or lack thereof, Ministry by Ministry, sector by

sector. [*Desk thumping*]

When we look at the numbers and we start to engage them further, and following our Standing Finance Committee on Monday, it is clear as day that this Government has outlived its usefulness. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, in direct answer to my friend before me, the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air, who was griping and complaining about the behaviour of Members at the Standing Finance Committee, I want to let him know that we as the official Opposition, we have a duty to hold the Government to account, [*Desk thumping*] and we are a check and balance on the operations of Government and governance in this country. Therefore, when we ask these questions, we do not ask these questions on our own accord, we ask them on behalf of our constituents, of citizens and of our general populace. [*Desk thumping*] So he will know that the behaviour, or the questions posed which he called behaviour, and which someone else has termed differently, it was based on the fact that Members on his side, Members that sit next to him, refuse to answer pertinent, relevant questions.

Madam Speaker, there is an old adage that says a government cannot solve all the problems in the nation, because if that was to happen there will be no need for government. Well, it seems as though the PNM has their own spin on that saying. They decide to solve none of country's problems, and will come day after day, year after year, sometimes creating problems, then present themselves as the solution. As we will see later on today at 6.00p.m., there was a serious fiasco that happened nationwide, and that will be debated later on at 6.00p.m.

Madam Speaker, I was on the phone with someone yesterday, and they said to me, it is as though this country is on autopilot. Nothing is happening, none of the sectors are performing. The Government is in limbo, and they come here today to seek approval and supplementation of almost an additional \$3 billion, having failed

to adequately govern, protect the needy and most vulnerable in our society, from the ravages of their own COVID-19 failures.

When this appropriation is done, and together when added to the deficit in the original budget of October 2020, we shall be close to a deficit of 11 billion. I predict at the end of this financial year we are going to see a deficit somewhere in the region of between 16 to \$18 billion. Simply because, as stated earlier by the hon. Minister of Finance, there are a number of revenue streams which were overstated, and the production capacity was also overstated. So, therefore, when all of this is added together, I predict we are going to see a deficit in this financial year in the amount of between 16 to \$18 billion. In the fullness of time, those things will come to light. We are very close to the end of the financial year into the next financial year and, therefore, those figures will be forthcoming shortly, as you know.

Madam Speaker, having given my opening remarks and so forth, I shall like to concentrate my contribution here this afternoon on Head 39, the Ministry of Public Utilities. What is most instructive from the opening remarks given on Monday by the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, is the savings in overtime of almost 84 million at the Water and Sewerage Authority. I would like, with your permission, like to highlight some of the things that he said.

I quote:

“In respect of WASA...the Minister of Finance was very clear in his budget presentation...that as a country we cannot continue to fund huge transfers made to operational expenses as we have done in the past. A sizable cut was effected and the WASA board and management was put to task of rationalizing expenditures in several discretionary areas.

By this action alone, the Government was signalling that transformation of

the Authority had commenced. I am pleased to report”—so again he is boasting here—“that...have already had a positive impact. Over the past six months, significant cost reductions amounting to approximately \$84 million has been affected against the original allocation in areas such as overtime and allowances, goods and services, short-term employment and office equipment. These savings, together with the supplementary allocation to WASA of \$575.9 million will be used to meet major expenses related to salaries, wages and cost of living allowances, contract employment and payment to DESALCOTT for the remaining period of the current financial year.”

I have a difficulty, Madam Speaker, because when you look at the allocation of 575.9 million in this mid-year review, you cannot, and you will agree with me, Madam Speaker, you cannot just view this in isolation against what was presented at the beginning of the financial year. When you look under Sub-Head 06/004, Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, the amount that was not made available to WASA then, there was a decrease in the allocation at the beginning of the financial year, was \$595million. So if what the hon. Minister is saying, and you know he questioned the Opposition Leader about maths just now, I would want him to also take his advice, 595 minus a savings of 84 million, is \$511 million, simple as that.

So, therefore, it stands to reason that if there was a savings of 84 million, then the amount requested from the original estimate ought to be 511. So maybe you would like to clear that up, or one of your Members can clear that up, that, you know, the savings as highlighted by the Minister may not be totally accurate, or there may be some other reasons, and they will clear that up, Madam Speaker. So, therefore, this \$84 million reduction ought to have been 500—with this 84 million

reduction, it ought to have been 511 million being requested today.

The Minister has then not indicated what this extra 64 million is going to be used for, and I am using his estimates, so those are not my estimates. I am using his estimates. Can the Minister indicate whether this is going to compensate and remunerate the new Executive Chairman? Because up to recently in this House there was a question asked, what is the compensation and remuneration package of the new Executive Chairman, and the hon. Minister he indicated that it is still under consideration, and those are not verbatim. Those are just what I understand it to be. So my question is how much longer must this country wait to know the compensation package of the PNM-appointed Executive Chairman? I hope that the answer of the Minister of Public Utilities is not that he has gotten legal advice, and that both the legal advice and the amount in compensation cannot be disclosed. I hope it is not that, Madam Speaker. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker, just some noise on the floor. So I want to also caution a colleague who is also young in this House, and new to the House, of executive chairmen and the disaster they have cost in their trail over the years. Two names come very close to my tongue, Executive Chairman Calder Hart and Executive Chairman Malcolm Jones, and those—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, point of order, 48(1).

Madam Speaker: Member, in terms of the debate I will ask you to move on. I understood what you said in terms of before this. I uphold the objection.

Mr. A. Ram: So just for clarification, Madam Speaker, and I will move on shortly, I was asking whether the amounts allocated to WASA will also include, the extra amount will also include the compensation and what is the compensation for the newly appointed Executive Chairman, seeing that there is a 64 million deficit, and I now move on, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. A. Ram: So next on the item is related to street lighting repairs. Upon further interrogation on the numbers presented to the Standing Finance Committee, the hon. Minister intimated that this was for a period of December 2019 to April 2021. Now, as I indicated then, we as Members of Parliament are inundated with calls and persons visiting our offices are requesting streetlight repairs be done, and rightly so, because persons are very frightened in their homes. I know that crime is on the rise. Persons are seeing vehicles parked up, passing and so forth, they have their cameras installed, and there are no lights to add to creating high visibility, so they are concerned. It is because crime is on the rise and so forth, and it is causing a high degree of anxiety and there is an increase in break-ins and so forth in many parts of the country, which are unabated and undetected, so there is a sense of insecurity by many persons. So we can hope that this amount in the transfers to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission will go towards mitigating some of the fears that many residents and constituents have throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

So, the information that we have on this side is that there has not been any procurement of a number of street lighting spares, parts and accessories for a number of years, and this is the major reason that the population is experiencing this delay in the repairs of street lights. That is the information that we have on this side.

Additionally, we are being told that for a new street light installation a memo has to be sent from the General Manager of T&TEC to the Minister of Public Utilities, and await approval to conduct a survey and submit an estimate. So the process to obtain a street light on a pole erected is like applying, for example, the social security grant and so forth. So it has become quite cumbersome. The

point is it has become cumbersome. A lot of paperwork involved when a new street light is to be installed. I know the process very well, having been there previously.

Now I must say, when you write to T&TEC, a response is generated and solicited by the relevant person in a quite timely manner, and it is quite an efficient organization in most respects, I myself having served there for close to 10 years. I think the reason that it is so well is because there is something in T&TEC called “best area”. You do not receive any remuneration for it. You do receive any moneys or anything like that, but it is something called “best area”, and different areas thrive to compete against each other. It is a philosophy that drives and motivates the employees, especially the managers and the engineers within the organization. So I think that is one of the major reasons the level of efficiency of T&TEC far outweighs other utilities, which will learn from T&TEC if they apply certain similar strategies.

Now, I will like to turn to a different aspect for consideration, and this is the Community Water Improvement Programme in the amount of 16million. Madam Speaker, we have been told in this Parliament, time and time again, that the leakage in the Water and Sewerage Authority in their pipe network is 50 per cent. This is something that is known. I believe the last Minister, one of the last Ministers in the PNM Government during the 2018/2019 budget, indicated that 75 kilometres of pipelines needed to be replaced, and there was only budget for four kilometres. My question to the hon. Minister is whether any of 16 million aimed at community water improvement, is going to improve the pipe network and the asset integrity at WASA, because we all know that the leaks are the major problems affecting delivery.

Now, Madam Speaker, again, just going back with your permission very shortly, in 2019, there was an announcement by this Government that they are

going to replace ageing infrastructure in the southeast area. Now, that would have affected quite a number of constituencies, eight or nine in my estimation. The announcement was made in the budget, and to date that project has not been realized. So, therefore, I ask my hon. colleague, having been put on record of announcing quite a number of areas which would be affected by this latest subvention to the Water and Sewerage Authority, whether it will bear fruit, whether that will bear fruit, or whether they will continue to make announcements without follow through and implementation, and I ask that with the greatest of respect to my hon. colleague.

Now, again, with respect to that 16million, there has been talk about another project coming on stream. So I ask my colleague, with respect to that 16million, whether any will be made available for the new hydrogen plant that is about to be launched in the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, because from my calculation, and from the technocrats within the Water and Sewerage Authority, they have indicated that the new hydrogen plant to be built by Kenesjay and NewGen, will require 240,000 gallons of drinking water per day. I ask my colleague opposite: Where is WASA going to get that water? Will they depend on DESALCOTT? What were the concessions made to Kenesjay or NewGen? Those questions are very pertinent as we move forward. Because if, Madam Speaker, this amount of potable drinking water is to be provided to Kenesjay or NewGen, then it has to come out from the grid, the domestic grid and, therefore, that is a concern on this side, and an early warning to the hon. Minister.

So, Madam Speaker, I have heard the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, and I had cause to write him on the issue of water within my community. For example, in areas such as Preysal and Chickland and the Freeport Mission Road, and amongst all the tributary side streets, they have moved from a supply, some of

them seven days a week, between 2010 to 2015, to one in seven, one in eight, one in nine. Some one in 10 and 15. So, therefore, we are concerned. We are concerned. I did not hear those areas mentioned by the hon. Minister when he made his contribution at the Standing Finance Committee.

Mr. Gonzales: Hon. Member, can you give way?

Mr. A. Ram: Sure.

Mr. Gonzales: So I am pleased to let you know that currently work is going on in that area, and you are going to see an improvement in the supply of water for the people that you complained about.

Mr. A. Ram: I am much grateful for my friend's interjection. So, Madam Speaker, there is a lot happening, and we would need the details to understand because our constituents are being affected daily.

So with those few words, Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

4.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to enter into this debate. Madam Speaker, during the Standing Finance Committee I was asked a question about care and protection and the well-being of children in Trinidad and Tobago by one of my hon. colleagues opposite. And my response I would have noted that there is an all-of-government approach to ensuring the care, safety and wellbeing of nation's children.

Madam Speaker, before I go into the report on what we intend to do with the sums that the Children's Authority would receive, I just want to put some things

into context. Madam Speaker, yes we have indeed adopted an all-of-government approach but we need all hands on deck. We need all of society, we need an all-of-society approach. I am taking the time to make this point, Madam Speaker, and to appeal to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago before I discuss the supplementation to the Children's Authority, because the Children's Authority cannot ensure the safety and well-being of our children alone. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service alone cannot ensure the safety and well-being nor the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs. We need every citizen coming on board and joining us.

And, Madam Speaker, it is important for me to make this point because recently there was a local study conducted by the Office of the Prime Minister in collaboration with UNICEF. And I was quite amazed when the report from that study would have revealed that 78 per cent of adults would have indicated that if they were aware of instances of child abuse they would not report it because it is not their business.

Madam Speaker, 78 per cent of adults who were part of that study would have reported that if they were aware of instances of child abuse they would not report it because it is not their business. Madam Speaker, that is frightening, because regardless of the work that we do at the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, despite our advocacy, despite the resources pumped into the Children's Authority, if adults are not responsible enough to report instances of child abuse, if adults are not conscious enough to recognize that child abuse is everybody's business, then we have a problem, Madam Speaker, and I wanted to take this time to put this into context.

Madam Speaker, in an ideal Trinidad and Tobago, in an ideal society if adults were doing the right thing, if we were indeed putting the safety and well-

being of our children first, we would not have the need for a further supplementation to the Children's Authority. We would not have the need—actually, Madam Speaker, for an institution called the Children's Authority if we were in an ideal Trinidad and Tobago, but the reality is, it is not an ideal Trinidad and Tobago. And while we work towards changing mindset, we still have that 78 per cent of adults out there who believe it is not their duty, it is not their business to report instances of child abuse.

Madam Speaker, I want to now just go through briefly what we intend to do with the supplementation, and in my contribution also address some of the concerns raised by my hon. colleagues opposite during the Standing Finance Committee. Madam Speaker, we received a supplementation in the amount of \$16,520,000 for the Children's Authority, and that, Madam Speaker, the bulk of that would go, 70 per cent would go towards HR. Madam Speaker, it is envisaged that approximately 102 positions will be filled by September 2021. There will be a mix of children services associates, emergency response personnel, clinical staff. The breakdown of the 102 positions required to augment the service delivery is as follows.

Madam Speaker, the Authority is expected to fill these 102 positions by recruiting 33 children services associates, six security officers, one security coordinator, one psychologist, 16 children services assistants, seven legal associates, seven senior legal associates, six legal associates, one legal secretary, one monitoring and evaluation associate, two audit associates, one audit assistant, 12 senior licensing and monitoring associates, four licensing and monitoring associates, five licensing and monitoring assistants, one accounting assistant, two procurement assistants, nine registered nurses and two team leads.

Madam Speaker, in order to recruit new employees the authority follows its

approved recruitment HR policy which includes confirmation of the vacancy, the board's approval to advertise both internally and externally via social media, Caribbean jobs and newspapers. Once applicants are short listed an interview panel is convened and several selection tools are used to determine the best fit person. These selection tools include competency-based interviews, psychometric testing and simulation exercises.

So, Madam Speaker, in response to that question that was raised by hon. colleague, we have the breakdown of the number of persons we would be recruiting, we have the different categories and we also know by when we intend to have those vacancies filled. And again, I want to reiterate that we are looking to have these vacancies filled by September 2021.

Madam Speaker, I want to take the opportunity to commend the staff of the Children's Authority. It is not an easy job, day on day, to listen to the stories and to provide that type of intervention and service. And the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs would have been working alongside this Children's Authority to ensure that we provide the right support, not only for the staff working with the children, but also the right support for the children in care of the Children's Authority.

Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague for Princes Town would have asked about a situation in his constituency but I wish to allay the fears of the hon. Member. We indeed, as I would have mentioned at the Standing Finance Committee, we indeed have arms of the Children's Authority operating 24/7. We have our emergency response team, we also have our registry; our emergency response team, Madam Speaker, which will also be supplemented by the income coming in now. The funds coming in now to the authority, we will be able to recruit more persons, but that emergency response team is the arm of the

Children's Authority that would go out when children are in imminent danger. So once the calls come in, that team is ready on standby every day of the week, 24/7 to reach out and provide that support.

In addition to the emergency response team we also have a registry. So when persons call our hotline number, we have persons there every day regardless if it is a public holiday, a weekend, whatever time of day, somebody is always there to answer the call.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So, Madam Speaker, just want to—Mr. Deputy Speaker, sorry, I just want to let my hon. colleague opposite, Member for Princes Town, know that we indeed have the emergency response team operating as it should be operating at this time, and that matter he would have reported would be fully investigated, because at no point in time should any arm of the Children's Authority say to any citizen or any child, we cannot reach out to you, especially if a child is in imminent danger. And I want to give that full commitment that that matter will be investigated because the Children's Authority, even though we would have been going through a pandemic, we would have been having our little challenges, would have maintained constantly, consistently our emergency response team and our registry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the Children's Authority we also have a number of facilities. We would have been able over the period to expand the number of service centres and support centres for children in Trinidad and Tobago. And again, in response to a question raised by a colleague in the Standing Finance Committee, I wish to put on the record that year on year under this administration the Children's Authority would have received either an increase in allocation, would have been able to recruit more staff, and would have been able to increase the number of service facilities for children in Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to put on record that despite the fact that we would have had to make cutbacks, despite the fact that we would have had to prioritize, this Government, this Prime Minister, this Minister of Finance would have always placed as priority the resources required for the children of Trinidad and Tobago, and later on in my contribution I will go on to demonstrate that point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because I was asked about, you know, the cost for those children who are at our service centres, you know, how many we have and how much money we are putting out on those children. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the services of our child support centres are accessed by an average of 50 children per year. So we have four service centres on average—four support centres, on average we have 50 children per year accessing the services of our support centres. The annual cost per child is approximately \$172,205. That is the average annual cost per child across four service centres, and that is approximately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an average of 50 children per year accessing the services of our support centre.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the sums that would be going to the Children's Authority would also go towards ensuring that the authority has the ability to meet its commitments from prior years that we were not able to realize in the last fiscal. So we have outstanding gratuities to pay, we have outstanding payments to service contractors. And it is important for us to meet those commitments because we want our staff to feel as though they are valued, we want our service providers to feel as though they matter and they will be willing to continue providing service to the Children's Authority, and continue providing service to the children of Trinidad and Tobago. Yes it may be difficult at times for us to meet the commitment in a timely fashion but we have always in this Government, we have always aimed to ensure that our children, our service providers, the people who work for us, we put them as priority. So I just want to reaffirm to the people of Trinidad and Tobago

our commitment to ensuring that whenever funds are allocated, we put them to the right use and we ensure at the end of the day we put the best interest of the children Trinidad and Tobago foremost.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have mentioned that we need an all-of-society approach, and in an all-of-society approach it calls for every citizen to be a part of the response. The Office of the Prime Minister through Gender and Child Affairs would have been putting out a number of programmes. We would have been training child rights ambassadors, empowering all children to go out into the communities so they themselves become change agents, they themselves go out and are able to educate the public, educate their peers so that we can bring about the change in mindset that is required in Trinidad and Tobago for us to combat the issue of child abuse.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have been fortunate to be one of those countries selected to pilot the Spotlight initiative to end family violence. Spotlight initiative not only focuses on domestic violence and the adults in the home but it also caters to the children in the home and what we can do to help to improve the living circumstances of our children. But again there is the key component of a change in mindset, and why I want to stress this point is because, I mentioned before I was really troubled when I heard that the 78 per cent of adults did not want to report instances of child abuse because it was not their business. We cannot continue to carry this mindset. So I want to encourage my colleagues opposite to join the conversation, help us in the Government to start promoting a need for us to be each other's keeper, a need for us to all come on board to protect our nation's children.

There are some persons who would listen to Members opposite because they believe in them. They may not readily buy the information and take it and accept it from us. So if you go out there and help us to carry that message that it is

unacceptable that 78 per cent of adults believe that they do not have a duty and a responsibility to report a child being abused, that is wrong, then something is really not going to be working out in Trinidad and Tobago.

And why is it important for us to address this matter? Every hurt boy or girl would grow up to be a damaged adult, and the money that we are going to be investing later on in rehabilitation, we could be investing that money now into something else. So I really want to just use this opportunity to encourage the people of Trinidad and Tobago to come on board. Some of you may say, well \$16 million-plus is not enough money for the Children's Authority, but take into consideration our current economic situation. We all have to learn to prioritize. We all have to learn the cut and do what is best with sums that are allocated and that is what we are trying to do, that is what we are aiming to do, utilize limited resources and get the best value, the best possible result, not only for the Government but for the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to just remind Trinidad and Tobago that every child who would have to access the services of the Children's Authority represents a family, a community that is in trouble. And while the Government would partner with international development agencies, while different Ministries and Departments would collaborate, we need our churches to get involved. We need our community-based organizations to get involved. Because of the pandemic children are home now, but outside of the pandemic, outside of COVID-19 children would be spending most of their time at the school or in community groups and so on, so we need all these different agencies saying the same message and taking the same approach towards protecting our children. The Children's Authority cannot do it alone. The Office the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs we cannot do it alone, we need every agency, every citizen to come on

board and assist us. Let us work together to safeguard our children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Office of the Prime Minister would have also received a \$10 million to go towards our faith-based organizations, the ecclesiastical bodies to help to provide hampers for those persons who are vulnerable and affected during this pandemic period. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a clean-cut process in place, organizations would have registered and cheques would be distributed. I want to urge those persons who are genuinely in need to reach out. And I want to encourage persons who have but just want, to allow somebody who really, really, really is in need to get the support from the State through the churches.

I have been watching on in amazement and I told one of my colleagues recently, the problem is not a problem of need but a problem of greed, where people who can afford mean that they must get because, and those who desperately need the support either they do not know how to access it because they may not know to contact their MP or their councillor or they are too ashamed to reach out for the support. Let us ensure that this \$10million reaches the most vulnerable.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have had the opportunity to address some of the concerns raised by my colleagues during the Standing Finance Committee. I would have been able to say exactly how the money would be utilized; I would have given account of the number of persons and the category of persons to be recruited. I would have explained what we intend to do in terms of meeting outstanding commitments and that.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close I just want to again reach out to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, it is something that I say every time I contribute. The seeds we sow into the lives of our children today, we will reap as a nation tomorrow. Let us sow good seeds. I want to urge that 78 per cent to change the

mindset. Let that 78 per cent become responsible and start reaching out, lending a helping hand, a listening ear, reporting instances of child abuse, speaking up, speaking out and saying it is wrong so that we, all of us in this honourable House, all of us in our communities, all of us in a different association, that we could work collectively to protect the children of Trinidad and Tobago. Wherein the history books being drafted in the future, let the account of our time be a positive one. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you sincerely for this opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize—

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, 20 minutes for the record.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute as we adopt the Standing Finance Committee Report that we participated in on Monday.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened very attentively to the Member for Tobago East, the Minister of Gender and Child Affairs and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, listening to the Minister and the seeing that an additional \$16million has been, a little bit more than \$16million has been supplemented with respect to this Children's Authority, I could not help by feel as though that this was long overdue. Long overdue six years later because we have heard of the many challenges that affect the Children's Authority. We have heard about the Children's Authority being under-resourced and being understaffed.

On Monday in the Standing Finance Committee I raised these issues with hon. Minister. The hon. Minister denied that the Children's Authority has been under-resourced and understaffed. But today when we hear of what this \$16million will be utilized for, it is a clear admission from the hon. Minister that they have failed the children through the Children's Authority by under-resourcing and

understaffing the Children's Authority for five-plus years, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will use some of my time to go through some of the woes at the Children's Authority that this supplementation would seek to address, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But these challenges are not new to the Minister or not new to the division and therefore, while there was the twiddling of thumbs by the Member for Tobago East and others, what happened? The children suffered. The children suffered because the Children's Authority has been under-resourced and understaffed for several years and that is why we continue to see the plethora of problems affecting the Children's Authority.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we look at the Standing Finance Committee Report especially the verbatim notes and we look at pages 27 to 32, you would see some of the issues that were identified in the Standing Finance Committee Report as it relates to the Children's Authority and the supplementation of \$16million.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to also share that some of these issues that were identified by the Member for Tobago East gives one the impression that all is well at the Children's Authority, that this is a perfect scenario. It is almost as though the Minister is living in denial. The Children's Authority is plagued by a number of problems and I will go into some of these issues. The Minister has indicated at the Standing Finance Committee that 70 per cent of this allocation will be used for operationalising matters together with recruiting new staff. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we look at the explanations that were provided by the Minister with responsibility for the Children's Authority, the Minister indicated that a little over \$172,000 is what needed in terms of the costing per child at the Children's Authority. The hon. Minister indicated the number of children in facilities across Trinidad and Tobago was on average about 52 children. And the Minister indicated

once more that the Children's Authority was not being under-resourced and understaffed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to turn your attention as it relates to the Standing Finance Committee Report to page 26, and the Minister in no uncertain terms denied that this allocation would address specifically the issues of under-resourcing and understaffing because it was a denial from the hon. Minister.

I wish to turn the attention of the hon. Minister and the honourable House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to Sunday 28 May, 2017 a headline that read, "Suffer the children: How the empowered Children's Authority is failing Trinidad and Tobago".

These were not the words of the United National Congress. These were not the words for the Member for Siparia or Member for Princes Town, but these were the words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I go into this article and if you allow me to quote. And this has specifically to do with what we had discussed in the Standing Finance Committee as we adopt the report today. And it says and I quote:

"These are just some of the many stories whispered by caregivers, parents, social workers and officials who question whether the authority is fulfilling its mandate to help endangered children. It has, it appears, managed to alienate most of its major stakeholders."

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while we understand the explanation that was provided by the Member for Tobago East of the breakdown of the recruitment of specialized persons that will now come into the Children's Authority to add additional support, what we are being told is that for years the Children's Authority has failed to engage the stakeholders who would determine what were these specialized areas that were most in need of. So again this is a clear case of putting the cart before the horse years later.

And therefore, when we hear Members speak about one crying crocodile tears, today we can clearly see it is six years later the Member for Tobago East is coming here to cry crocodile tears to say well, we are giving \$16million through this Standing Finance Committee that we saw in terms of the explanation on Monday, the hon. Minister comes and cries crocodile tears, well we are giving specialized areas, we are hiring additional persons, when we knew very well, as indicated in some of these reports, what the challenges were. Mr. Deputy Speaker, “Suffer the children: How the empowered the Children’s Authority is failing Trinidad and Tobago”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quote the same article and it says:

“Employees—

And these are the employees of the Children’s Authority speaking to Dr. Sheila Rampersad of *Trinidad Guardian* dated May2017, almost three years later.

“Employees say many staffing problems derive from the absence of social work/child psychology backgrounds in the resumes of key senior managers. Sharifa Ali-Abdullah, the Authority’s first director, is according to a November2015 newspaper interview, an economic policy professional with work experience with the Ministries of Finance and planning and since at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. She was succeeded by current director Sophia Noel a consultant chartered accountant who once served as the authority’s finance manager.

In a wide-ranging interview in the 20 February *Sunday Express* Noel admitted that ideally those positions including her should be filled by people with clinical backgrounds and management experience.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if were to take the explanation that was fleshed out today coming out of the Standing Finance Committee on Monday by adopting the

report, taking the explanation on the floor provided by the Member for Tobago East today, one has to beg the question: Where has this hon. Minister been? Therefore, if the Authority was aware of these challenges in terms of specialized persons being needed by the Children's Authority years ago under her tenure, then it is really crocodile tears that the hon. Minister is coming to cry today, because you very well knew of the problems that existed at the Children's Authority in terms of getting persons in these specialized areas to assist in supplementing the important needs of children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you would allow me to continue. What are some of the challenges of the Children's Authority that this \$16million, six years later will seek to address? Six years later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is why the headline read, "Suffer the children..." And who is suffering the children?

You cannot tell me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, six years we are coming through a supplement for the national budget, a mid-year review, the Minister comes with \$16million additional to say that we are now going to fill these specialized areas. So what would have happened to these children during the period 2015 to 2021 who would have fallen through the cracks.

5.00 p.m.

Therefore, what would have happened is that they would have had no support coming from these specialized professionals that are needed in the Children's Authority. And therefore when the headlines read, "We have failed the children", who "we" are they referring to? They are referring to people like the Member for Tobago East, the hon. Minister. Because it is the hon. Minister's responsibility—who would have analyzed the situation at the Children's Authority in terms of what is needed that would have either taken to her Cabinet colleagues or through the Prime Minister's Office, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to say early o'clock,

these are the positions that are required and this is the funding that is needed to bring on these persons. But what are we doing here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Six years later we are supplementing the Children's Authority with \$16 million for specialized areas that could have provided support to children who would have fallen through the cracks between 2015 to 2021 where we are today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer to the same article where it says:

“‘We have found that a lot of the psychologists and social workers who are strong may not have the management skills,’ she said, ‘so one of the strategies of the Children’s Authority is to have them home-grown because ideally that is what you want; you want a hybrid with blended clinical and management experience. Ideally we want a hybrid, so maybe five to ten years from now you will see that.’

But employees say the problems are deeper.”

And these are not employees of a RHA, these are the employees who are working in the Children’s Authority, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is what the employees of Children’s Authority had to say. They say:

“...that the problems are deeper. They describe themselves as working in ‘an atmosphere of fear and intimidation’ and one which is ‘extremely toxic’. They cannot, they say, speak freely, and are isolated when they challenge decisions made by differently qualified seniors.”

So the director of the Children’s Authority is telling us, up to 2017, that if we put these professionals to be home-grown in terms of, they get the necessary experience, having been qualified but they get the necessary experience on the job, then they will be more effective in terms of getting the results that we want through the Children’s Authority. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is 2017 we are talking about. When, at the Standing Finance Committee, the hon. Minister was asked of whether

or not these persons will be recruited, or they are to be recruited, the Minister indicated, well some of them are there but they are looking at bringing on addition. This is 2017 when, we identified what the problems and challenges were, we were told by the director that what is needed is that persons should be really like OJTs, on-the-job-training, specialized in the position so that they can be more effective because it is difficult to get persons on the outside coming in with the requisite experience.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$16 million, six years later, and today the Member for Tobago East comes to cry crocodile tears and say this Government cares about the children of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to ask the Member for Tobago East, if this Government cares about the children of Trinidad and Tobago and you provided \$16 million through a supplement six years later to bring effect to some of the work that is needed, that was needed six years ago through the Children's Authority. Where is your voice, Member for Tobago East, when we are asking for years that the legislation for the Children's Life Fund to allow children who are in need of surgery but fall outside the remit of the current legislation to be allowed? We have called—the Member for Siparia and myself have indicated that we are willing to work across the floor to ensure that that legislation is amended to assist more children. But today six years later and \$16 million through a supplement, when this should have been happening at the very beginning, the Member for Tobago East now comes to tell us that they are recruiting nurses and they are recruiting psychologists. So what was happening while the Member was twiddling her thumbs, was children were falling through the cracks and they were not getting the requisite assistance that they required.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to also turn to something that was said in this same article that I quoted, where it said it is not an easy question, and this is the

director of the Children's Authority speaking.

“It is not an easy question but it is a reality we are facing. The Children's Authority admittedly has had a rocky 20 months. The feedback you got from staff is also what we would have received. I do not want to seek to explain how we got to that...”

I am asking the hon. Member for Tobago East, in probably another forum, she can probably explain, the hon. Member that is: What has changed at the Children's Authority? You are bringing in additional staff in these specialized areas, but when the director of the Children's Authority can tell us that this is a very toxic work environment, that there is no continuity in terms of these specialized areas that would provide support, and there is a high turnover of staff and so, what have you done at the Children's Authority to ensure that these challenges in that work environment where you are bringing on additional employees, you have told us 70 per cent of this allocation would be used to bring in these specialized areas. What has changed since 2017?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the same article says:

“This reporter had conversations with spokespersons for several children's homes, all of whom requested anonymity. One complained that the authority was ‘badgering’ them to accept children who they could not accommodate.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we all saw and we all heard of the fiasco that occurred under the Children's Authority as it relates to the two young men who were brutally murdered. And the headlines again read: “Ex-minister claims Children's Authority failed murdered teens.” Sunday 09 May, 2021. And it says:

“The authority failed miserably in their handling of this atrocity. Some of what irks me may seem pedestrian to people outside the field of work. The humane aspect of the situation is critical to the work that we do. Being

humane must be the essence of what we do, who we are, and who we strive to be.'

"...she felt that the director of the Children's Authority Nichola Harvey-Mitchell was 'abandoned' by the Ministry of Child and Gender Affairs, headed by"—Minister—"Ayana Webster-Roy, after the...killing.

"She said the Children's Authority must accept liability for the teens' death and 'fully supports' the mothers of the children taking legal action against the state.

'Yes, of course, they should be liable I fully and actively support the parents pursuing legal action against the state and its agents.'"

I think for that, blame must be appropriated there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look and you read these statements as they relate to the Children's Authority and the role that the Children's Authority had to play in this circumstance, where it was known that these children were most at risk, that these children had issues that were identified by the professionals that are in the Children's Authority, they were left on their own. They were essentially abandoned and there was little or no support coming from the Children's Authority in this particular matter. And I ask the Minister again, \$16 million later, six years later you come here and you cry crocodile tears, if that support was provided and this funding—

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

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If this funding was in place then this situation involving these two young men could have been totally avoided. Mr. Deputy Speaker, while we do not begrudge, because we understand that the Children's Authority is in need of additional resources. As we have indicated they have been under-resourced and under-staffed for years. But to see the hon.

Minister today unable to answer why for six years they have had and placed the Children's Authority in the position that they have, is a sad, sad state of affairs, and the Minister has failed once more and has admitted today, like she admitted on Monday, that the Children's Authority continues to be under-resourced and under-staffed. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me. I just listened painfully to the Member for Princes Town and I trust that he will understand that shouting and volume is no substitute for substance and/or for sincerity. I understand his passion, since within recent times he has become a parent of sort. He acquired that status outside of Trinidad and Tobago, circumstances unknown to me, but he does whip up quite a lot of apparent passion as an authority on the business of children. As we say colloquially, "Johnny come lately or Jean come lately", as we would say in Trinidad and Tobago. But his noise is no substitute for substance.

He said, interestingly enough, and I took note of this, and this is a fact, that he and the Member work very—for Siparia—work very closely together. Well this country knows that. They worked so closely together, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that some of that close working is now the subject of the attention of various agencies of the State, including elements of law enforcement. That is a fact. But that is not my purpose for elucidation here today. I would leave that for the law enforcement people. Just to note in passing that the Member for Princes Town went rather silent over the last few months. Maybe like others he thinks that the past is a distant past, but some things just do not go away. Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the Ministry of National Security we offer, as I keep saying, a service to this country, a national security service, elements of safety and security, disaster responses, public order, public safety. These are the issues that engage us in the Ministry of National

Security.

In the 2020/2021 budget allocations, as the Minister of Finance would have pointed out, we like all other agencies and departments of government experienced what we understood to be a shortfall in the amounts we requested. We went through the budgetary process, we put up requests, and at the end of the day the Minister of Finance from the Ministry of Finance, working the experts, understanding what our revenue projections will be, would have allocated each Ministry in accordance with the request, in accordance with spending patterns in the previous budgetary period, and certainly in accordance with what was available. So we at the Ministry of National Security did not take it too badly when we did not get all the money we would have liked to get, because that in the context of the economic circumstances of Trinidad and Tobago and the world, particularly with COVID in our faces, we understand the constraints.

We understand that this country suffered insofar as oil and gas is concerned a 94 per cent slash in what it would normally would have earned. We understand that. And my friends on the other side behave as they do not understand that. And we know why they do not understand it, or why they pretend not to understand it. We know why. So adjustments had to be made, and the Ministry of Finance would have been doing this balancing act between revenues and expenditure patterns and would have come up with the figures that it did. Revenues raised generally from taxes, the sale of state or government assets, profits from investments, and even with all of those the Minister of Finance explained that there are still shortfalls which he makes up by way of borrowings. And when we talk about borrowings we talk about the public debt, and I looked at some figures recently provided to me by the Minister of Finance, and among the public debt element that we still deal with today in the year 2021, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that we are still making payments

on a loan, in fact three loans that were taken through NIPDEC to fund the Piarco Airport terminal building back in 1997/1998, where we were paying about \$112 million a year for the last 20 years; still paying as we speak today.

So when my friends on the other side get up and talk about public debt, it is cumulative over a period. But the Minister of Finance explained today, in light of the slash in revenue that we experienced, that borrowing is a feature of our circumstances that is inescapable. But we are still paying back money on a project at the airport that was supposed to have cost us \$400 million, ended up costing \$1.6 billion, and we are still paying. That is still part of the public debt today. [*Desk thumping*] They are shameless. And when we tax they complain, when we borrow they complain, when we drawdown on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, our savings designed for these circumstances, they complain. I do not know. It is only the UNC could tell us, where else do we get the money from? Do we “tief” it? Decent people. Civilized governments know only the ways I have described. Some people know how to get it otherwise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and just before I get into my variation of appropriation, a colleague of mine told me last night, and I must share this with the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because the Attorney General told us, that as they are talking about revenue we had to spend \$14 million to defend cases that they went to court on, challenging the COVID Regulations, the COVID Public Health Ordinance, the ordinance to deal with it, and all of the things we have done. They and their friends in the legal fraternity, some including current Members of Parliament, cost this country, at least on our side, \$14 million in wasted expenditure. They lost every single case, but we still had to send lawyers to defend against the UNC, which some people consider they behaved worse than COVID-19. In fact they are a political version of it. If COVID had a face it would look like the UNC.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(4).

Hon. F. Hinds: What is my crime?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled!

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much. You are a fair judge, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, proceed. Proceed.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very warmly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Unlike the Member for Siparia, who by her choices of personnel to represent the UNC demonstrates that she does not have the capacity to judge as well as you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But, \$14 million—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member! Member! Member!

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Excuse, I am on my legs. I am on my legs? Member, please.

Hon. F. Hinds: I am obliged.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Do not bring the Chair into the debate, please.

Hon. F. Hinds: I should not do that, especially comparing with the Member for Siparia. I am obliged.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6). [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, just proceed, please!

Hon. F. Hinds: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Attorney General told us \$14 million, and I my friend last night pointed out, we have been developing starter houses in a programme from the Land Settlement Agency under the auspices of the Ministry of Housing, costing a \$120,000, housing people in Sangre Grande, housing people in Moruga, housing people in Valencia, housing people in San Fernando, all over the country. Had we not wasted \$14 million on wasteful legal matters propagated by the United National Congress we would have been able to build 116 of those

houses for citizens of this country.

And by similar token at \$450 or \$456 each per food basket which the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air reminded us about, and which the Member, Senate Member Donna Cox organizes from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Affairs, we would have been able to provide citizens in this country with 31,000 hampers or food boxes. And if you divided that into 41, by the 41 Members of Parliament, each one of us would have had an additional 758 hampers to make available to the needy people who they pretend to be speaking for in Trinidad and Tobago. But no, they shamelessly run to court to fight their political failures. “What they cyar win in here, dey go to court to try to get outside”, and they lost everyone. They tried to discourage people to use vaccination—to be vaccinated. Now the public is ignoring them, coming out in large numbers in order to do that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, insofar as the Ministry of National Security is concerned, we received a variation of \$725,608,340 to supplement the allocation from 2021, of which \$287.5 million was for—will be for Personnel Expenditure; \$220.3 million for Goods and Services; \$221.8 million for grant and transfers and Subsidies, Current Transfers and Subsidies.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in respect of the Personnel Expenditure, as I said \$283 million, some of this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 20.2 million of this is to pay the government’s contribution to the NIS on behalf of the employees. During the course of that fiscal, so far in fiscal job 2021—so to speak—in the general administration of the Ministry we employed 12 new persons, contract persons. The defence force took on an additional 535 recruits and the fire service a 187 auxiliary personnel to support our efforts to keep the people safe out in the south-western area. And that would have accounted for the \$20.2 million to pay NIS to ensure, because the original provision for the ’21 allocation will cover expenditure up to

June 2021.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as well for Goods and Services, it included travelling and subsistence, uniforms, rental and lease, accommodation and storage, materials and supplies to pay, for an example, to pay for new passports from the contracted vendor, and for the acquisition of PPE and other hygiene supplies for inmates and so on in the prisons, and for the purpose of fire hoses and related materials for the fire service. So these are some of the issues that we are addressing with the money that has now been directed to the Ministry of National Security.

Maintenance of vehicles: We are in receipt of an additional \$44.7 million, because we have vehicles to repair and maintain to keep the fire service, the prison service, the coast guard and the lifeguard unit under the Ministry functional, mobile and functional. The fire service has 61 vehicles to be dealt with, the prison service 28, the coast guard 73. Some of the vehicles, and I will deal with the police if time permits, these are some of the matters that these public moneys are being utilized to service, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So when my friends pretend they do not know, we have to let them know, and the country know we are not taking this money and casting it into the sea, it is for tangible service of the Ministry. Repairs and maintenance of buildings, \$18.1 million; the Carrera Convict Prison requiring repair and maintenance of the very buildings, perimeter lighting and maintenance of the facility at Hart's Cut. Insofar as the Youth Transformation and Rehabilitation Centre, former YTC; repairs to the perimeter fence. Not just putting up perimeter fence around nothing like they did for millions of dollars. Golden Grove Prison, repairs to dormitories and the admin building. As I speak, work is taking place to try to bring us up to standard with the expectations of the court and the Constitution with the repair work that is going on. Repairs to ceilings out there, and in the Port of Spain Prison plumbing, electrical

and painting works. So we are continuing with that, and these are what some of these monies are for.

In respect of extraordinary expenditure, it perplexed them during the committee. Well I want to remind them that we have covert and intelligence operations to carry out as we combat transnational and organized crime, as we combat counter-terrorism, as we combat white-collar crime generally. We have the Inter-Agency Task Force of the police service which uses covert vehicles and does a number of things in our communities. We have the very Transnational Organized Crime Unit, the Witness Protection Programme, where we secure people who are at risk because they are witnesses in matters against criminals in this country. And as we know witnesses are the lifeblood of any justice system. When you do not have witnesses, when you can scare them away, when you could kill them dead, as has happened in this country and other parts of the world, we have a problem with justice. So we spend money to make them safe, to keep them in covert locations. And, of course, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force has covert operations as well.

So the allocation of the \$30 million that they queried in committee will be used for operational expenses such as leasing vehicles, salaries, equipment, supplies, rental of properties and maintenance of our coastal radar system which works in tandem with our vessels in the coast guard fleet, and in the police riverine patrols which we have just introduced, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the context of trying to keep the borders around Trinidad and Tobago up and right and tight so as to protect us from all of the perils that the alternative would generate.

As for an NGO by the name of Vision on Mission, this Government, recognizing that that NGO has been contributing substantially to our well-being by dealing with deportees, ex-inmates, delinquent individuals and women at risk. And

talking about that, I have publicly declared, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I do again today, I take personal concerns for the question of violence against women, gender-related violence, and I intend to use this office, working along with the UNDP, and with Vision on Mission, and all the other local and interested bodies, and most of all my colleague who is the Minister for Child and Gender Affairs in the Government, Member Webster-Roy, to work closely in the next few months in dealing with this question. And Vision on Mission makes its contribution, this Government took the decision to subsidize their work and that is what we are doing.

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

Hon. F. Hinds: Say again, Mr. Deputy?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes.

Hon. F. Hinds: Two more minutes. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have had an opportunity—as for the police, let me tell you very quickly, doing a fantastic job to protect and serve us. We are getting a \$57.7 million boost to take care of certain expenses, and then this \$200 million loan to purchase and to pay for debt that we already incurred to ensure that the police service is well oiled and continues to do its business of protecting and serving.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they too have need for vehicles for covert operations, they need stationery, PPE equipment, and they have hired approximately 26 persons within recent times on contract for certain special units, all of these things so that the allocation, the variation of \$57.7 million for the police is, of course, very, very useful, very necessary, and that loan facility will give the police an opportunity to fund itself and to continue the work for Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this very important debate popularly called a Mid-Term Review, but a Motion for the supplementation and variation of finances to satisfy the Government's needs in the next three months or so. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I listened to the Member for Laventille West I had to receive a note from a Priest in the Constituency of Oropouche East who said:

Do not attack him personally, do not get vex, do not rant and rave, be stately, be calm, ignore his—I cannot use that term—ignore what he was saying.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank my constituents for their advice which I may not take.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to put on record to state that at 5.30 p.m. on this day debating this Motion before us, I have not received and my colleagues on this side of the House have not received those secret answers, [*Desk thumping*] to the questions we asked at the Standing Finance Committee on Monday. We have not received that secret box of answers that was in the possession and embraced by the bosom of the Minister of Finance I believe four hours ago or so. The Minister when he spoke he said that there was a medical emergency at the Ministry of Finance and we pray that that person who incurred such a medical emergency would be doing well and recovering. And the Minister then said to this Parliament that [*Interruption*]—I am not prepared to give way unless it is a Standing Order. The Minister then indicated that he had in his possession, in his bosom, at his bosom the answers to the question, the questions we raised on Monday. As of this time we have not received it on our desk and we have not received it by email. If it is somewhere else existing in cyberspace, we will try to see if we retrieve it in that way. But one would have thought, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Finance immediately would have made that available.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance made some statements a couple of which I might just like to correct or to enquire further. It is no secret that this country is now experiencing the worst of its times certainly since becoming an independent nation. Yes, it is caused by COVID and the pandemic, but no that is not the sole cause and it may not even be the biggest cause of our economic decline. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we have said before, this economic decline started long before COVID, it started long before COVID. And today we have reached a place in the world, this once proud energy manufacturing and commercial hub of the Caribbean described once as the jewel of the Americas, we have reached a stage where on June 4th, Bangladesh banned travellers from T&T. Now, there goes that vacation to Dhaka that the Minister of Finance was planning. Now the United Kingdom has us on a red list, countries all over the world given the exponential and explosive incidence of the infection and death rate, are all looking at Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in a negative light. We are now the Caribbean basket case, the capital of COVID in the Caribbean.

On Monday last, Barbados welcomed its first cruise ship, first cruise ship in over a year and a half. In Barbados the Government two days ago invited residents to come outside and exercise, to reduce their stress; come out, exercise, walk, run, in Barbados. In Trinidad and Tobago we lock down, lock down, lock down, state of emergency. And today anybody listening to the Government would not know we had 454 cases and regrettably, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 17 deaths that took the death toll of COVID to 616. That is 616 sons and daughters of this land perished—and I believe many preventable—because we have not been able to vaccinate Trinidad and Tobago and be where we must be in the shortest possible time when Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts, St. Lucia with less resources have moved further ahead, but more of that I believe later.

The Minister made an amazing statement, he said that the persons making mischief in the public domain, we have a loan from China and there are no conditionalities attached. Yet on May 11th in the *Trinidad Express*, in an article the Minister says 15 per cent of this loan must go to what is called “Chinese elements”, meaning goods and services. So is that not a conditionality? Is that not a conditionality? But the Minister of Finance must be a Minister that the population trusts, that the population would have confidence in.

So when you stand in the Parliament and say the Chinese loan, no conditionalities, but you informed the nation before that 15 per cent of that loan must purchase Chinese elements of which vaccines are one, how can we trust you? This is a Minister of Finance who in a critical debate like the one today came, and part of his presentation is that he was listening to radio and an economist said A, B and C. So that was part of a presentation, listening to an unnamed economist who said go to the IMF, and he then gave a speech about not going to the IMF. So it depends now, the content of the Minister’s speech is determined by what radio station he was listening to on the way here. It cannot be how we conduct business; that cannot be how we conduct business.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, the Minister of course spoke about some other matters which I would like to move away from and get quickly to an area that concerns me. The speaker before me, Madam Speaker, someone listening who is not from these parts would not have known that the Member before me was indeed Trinidad and Tobago’s Minister of National Security. Because he spoke about the Piarco International Airport from, I think a generation ago, telling us that we should not talk about debt because we are still paying loans to the terminal at Piarco. But I noticed the Member did not mention that we are still paying loans on the Brian

Lara Stadium that moved from 365 million to 1.4 billion. He did not mention that, he forgot that, I think. You see, the Member for Laventille is very nimble on his feet and we have seen him on his feet already run, but he is very nimble and he in and out dodges the issues. The Member's Ministry, National Security, is coming today for ask, Madam Speaker, for an additional supplementation of 726million more or less, \$726 million and there is a breakdown for that of course.

But what troubles me, Madam Speaker, and I ask the questions, several of my colleagues did as well, that at a time when the Minister speaks about priority and what is the priority and we know we have to take a cut and we know resources are scarce. If resources are scarce and today let us say they are more scarce than before given what we have to face, should you not prioritize, should you not say look, let us take the moneys to put it where it is needed immediately most and we can forego in the three months to come, we can forego some things. But certainly when it comes to the TTPS, and I come back to that, you cannot forego because they are on the frontline. They are required to work day in and day out to fight a pandemic, not only their traditional area of crime and so on, but to fight a pandemic.

Today, the debacle today where a Commissioner of Police had to close— Madam Speaker, today the Police Commissioner had to close down the Ministry of Health operations because they were violating health regulations. [*Desk thumping*] Only in Trinidad and Tobago. That is what they had to do today. Now, the police are working every single day. I believe unless I am mistaken, we have had infected 200 police officers. I regrettably and sadly, I believe two or three have died from COVID. The police are on the frontline everyday risking their lives and not only from bullets and weapons and so on, but today from an infection, a dangerous and deadly infection, that is the police. And the police came to this Parliament in 2019 to 2020, they received \$550million. That was slashed by over \$200million for the

current fiscal year. It was slashed to 320 or 340 more or less. It was brutally, brutally slashed. And today you come to give the police, Madam Speaker, \$57million more, a drop in the bucket. This can lead to the collapse of the police service as we know it. Members will not know, some may not know, but the fact that over the last year we could not get certificates of character, that system broke down, was because the police were owing providers for services.

So when the police owe a landlord, a service provider, that carries serious and dangerous implications, Madam Speaker; \$57 million can do nothing. I want to ask the Minister, can \$57 million buy the pepper spray which we all agree we should have? I mean, I do not want to bring up the young lady who perished badly earlier this year, I do not want to get into that, but the Government made a commitment through the Attorney General that they will introduce legislation for pepper spray. We have not debated it yet here, but there is no money for that. So if that is debated and we give the support that all of us believe that we can support, if that is debated and supported, there is no money to buy pepper spray. There is no money for Tasers, no money for body cameras.

The Minister in his contribution amazingly spoke about the Coastal and Riverine Patrol Unit and he is so happy that it has been launched. Well, not launched but established. Mr. Minister, where is the money here for the Coastal and Riverine Patrol Unit? —none. You do not have money here to buy a boat engine. You do not have money here to pay any unit in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for the Coastal and Riverine Patrol Unit that is so important to assist now defence force, coast guard with patrolling rivers, off shore patrol in shallow waters and so on. There are six Damen vessels that the Partnership Government bought, all parked up and abandoned in Chaguaramas. Could you not take two, fix two and give it to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for the Coastal and

Riverine Patrol Unit so that they can begin using resources that are there to assist in border control and border management, which we all agree is a critical matter that we face.

So the resources to the police service will not help. This is peanuts for contract employment fees and so on. In one of these areas they are providing \$3,500,000, while the overall cost there is \$45million. But the Minister of Finance, true to form, this Minister of Finance told us on Monday, could not give us the answers to the questions but told us on Monday that this involves a loan of \$200million for the TTPS. In his speech earlier today he said the TTPS will have \$600million and then he dropped his voice and say if you take away 200 you will have 400. The \$200 million as approved by the Cabinet, and let me make the point, not a dollar—and I am on page 20 of the initial report, NIPDEC 200 million, interest payment fixed rate loan for the TTPS. And not a dollar from that \$200 million has been disbursed. And the Minister has for months bills from the TTPS, owing suppliers for goods and services, he has them there piling up on his desk, in a box and then puts it on the ground and pushes it in a corner and not a dollar from \$200 million which Cabinet approved to pay back-bills. That is not to go forward; that is not for any capital project; that is not to pay any of the TTPS bills of today. It is to pay what is owed and not a dollar has been released.

So you are boasting \$200million and not a dollar released while the bills are before you. But look at this one. The first payment is scheduled for October 6th. Interestingly it is written here, the first payment October 6th. Now, if the first payment is October 6th, that means nothing will be spent from that from now until the budget in the next three months more or less. So this means nothing to help the TTPS at this moment. But you see, the Minister of Finance in his typical, you know, style announces 200million for the TTPS, we are so happy, we are giving

them that, then drops his voice to say that was to pay bills from 2019 fiscal, drops his voice then and then did not tell us, because clearly he did not have time from that 45 minutes to tell us that the first payment is October 6th. The budget is due at the end of September. So this has absolutely nothing to do with payments for the police in the next three months or so, absolutely nothing, take that out. The requirements of the police will not be met, it will not be met.

Madam Speaker, today, this what they provide here is amazing, in the very document for national security when you study that document, Madam Speaker, imagine under extraordinary expenditure, \$30million for covert operations. The Minister says we are chasing down white collar crime, while his video was failing. They are chasing down white collar criminals so they need spying equipment, cameras and all sorts of devices and so on, \$30million they need for three months, that is \$10million a month. Then Strategic Services Agency needs \$188 million in three months. Three months you are going to spend 200, I can tell you, \$220 million, almost a quarter billion dollars you are spending on spying and the spy agency but you cannot give the TTPS the resources that they need to fix cars. None of these resources here will go effectively to fix any motor car.

There are units in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service that can shut down because of the bills they are owing. And let me put it again on record, that loan first payment is October 6th, it is not today, it is not in June, it is not in July, it is not in August, it is not in September. Today the police incurring additional expenses. Would you believe they have little or no money to sanitize vehicles, to sanitize vehicles which they have to do so regularly given the health crisis that we face? They have no money to fix vehicles, to sanitize vehicles. They have 35 million due for certain garages, they cannot pay. They have outstanding overtime, salary, wages, benefits for police officers, nothing here will go towards that. It is

very interesting. You know, sometimes I believe that this Government and this Minister treats the TTPS like an outside child or some type of you know, foreign element to law enforcement.

So they provided for national security, Madam Speaker, if I could just take us to national security, they provided funds for salaries and COLA, allowances, government contribution to wages and COLA and so on, but you know for the TTPS they did not provide any for that particular category of workers. So police officers who have outstanding overtime, who have payments for other types of benefits that are occurring to them, they will not be able to get that payment until October, November, possibly December or next year. And that is the sad news for the TTPS today. And to come as the Minister said, 200 million for this fiscal they will have 600million when your first payment is in black and white, it is October 06, 2021. So it cannot be for this fiscal. It has to be for the next fiscal year.

Madam Speaker, the Minister for Laventille West—the Member there, of course he made a very, very, I mean, the Minister said and this is on the *Hansard* record, if COVID had a face it would be the UNC. Now, I mean, for a Minister of Government to be saying that is like if I said if the, you know, P1 variant had a face it would have been from Laventille West, but I cannot say that, Madam Speaker, I cannot think of that.

Madam Speaker, the Member spoke and they keep on, you know some things they keep on repeating. The last government, the Partnership Government built a perimeter fence by the prison and it surrounded a piece of land and so on, and they wasted money. I want to tell the Government, “lay off that, nah”. When a government builds an installation in a prison a Cabinet Minister or politicians do not decide that, that comes for a recommendation from the Prison Authority, it comes from a recommendation from law enforcement and a government acts

pursuant to Cabinet Notes and so on. They know that. And when you build a fence at the prison that is not a wire fence to grow caraili vine. Those are serious installations that carry all types of complex and technology driven security and so on. A prison fence is almost like the Great Wall of China. So they come all the time to say we spent money and excess money on a prison fence. But you know to this day that prison fence is standing strong and no prisoner went through a hole in the prison fence, eh. Nobody ever escaped through the prison fence that was built by the Partnership administration.

So, Madam Speaker, I dealt with that, the Minister of course touched housing, on the housing matter I would use the opportunity to remind the Minister of Housing that just today in fact I had the opportunity, just today would you believe someone sent a note to me with a letter from the HDC in which the HDC is still at this time writing letters seeking to evict persons for one reason or another for failure to pay. What is interesting here, Madam Speaker, is that the HDC offices themselves are closed so people simply cannot pay. So I ask you to please exercise some empathy and sympathy to those persons. Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Penelope Beckles): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I of course thank you for the opportunity to participate in this debate on the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) Bill as we seek to adopt the Report for the Standing Finance Committee. Madam Speaker, let me first of all take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance, for his continued proficient performance as he continues to navigate the nation's economy in these challenging times.

Madam Speaker, before I address the issues under my portfolio there are just

a few things I would like to address. First of all, it has to do with the statement made by the hon. Member for Princes Town as it relates to the hon. Member for Tobago East. Now, you know what is unfortunate, Madam Speaker, is the extent to which the hon Member personally attacked the hon. Member for Tobago East. You know, I mean, his statements relating to that she is crying crocodile tears, failed the children, twiddling her thumbs, you know, Madam Speaker, I think what the hon. Member for Princes Town failed to realize is the passion with which the hon. Member takes her Ministry and the issues relating to children and women. [*Desk thumping*] You know, the hon. Member, I think it is not very often that the hon. Member for Princes Town would have heard some Ministers express their passion and their love and commitment for what they do. Because if the hon. Member for Princes Town listened to the hon. Member for Tobago East carefully, he would have heard her speak about the issues and concerns that she has in relation to abuse of children and domestic violence. And what I understood her to say is that it takes a village to raise a child.

She expressed her concerns about the indifference of members of the public and persons, citizens in certain areas in Trinidad and Tobago who are indifferent about child abuse and domestic violence. That is the point that the hon. Member for Tobago East was making.

Madam Speaker, and the hon. Member for Tobago East was making it abundantly clear that issues relating to child abuse and domestic violence are not only the responsibility of the hon. Member of Tobago East or the Member for Princes Town or just the Government or just the Opposition, it is the responsibility of the entire Trinidad and Tobago. That is the point that the hon. Member was making. You know, he would have the people of Trinidad and Tobago believe that this Government, the hon. Prime Minister and the hon. Member for Tobago East,

that we do not care about children. But you know, Madam Speaker, there are very, very few countries in the world where the hon. Prime Minister takes the responsibility for children and women under their portfolio. And this Prime Minister has taken decision to accept the responsibility for children and women under his portfolio and for that the hon. Prime Minister must be congratulated.

[Desk thumping]

So I just want to say that, you know, the hon. Member for Princes Town speaks and he says, “Oh, six years”, in other words he is giving the impression that this is the first time that this Government is allocating money to the Children’s Authority. But I am wondering where he was in the last six years, because as far as I recall, on almost every single occasion that the hon. Member for Tobago East has stood up in this honourable House, the hon. Member has given and has reported the allocation which has continued to increase over the years. And I am clear in my mind that the hon. Member for Princes Town was not listening, because what the hon. Member for Tobago East has said is that they have now done a strategic plan, following that strategic plan they now have, they are now going to be new facilities which would need new resources, new personnel and therefore this \$17million that is being allocated would be as a result, of course, of what has happened over the years but more importantly that this strategic plan has resulted in new personnel new facilities and therefore I only hope that this is going to clear up the point and the efforts of the Member for Princes Town to give the impression that this Government does not care about children and women is totally and absolutely false.

I just want to quickly address two other issues as it relates to the statement made by the hon. Member for Oropouche East referring to Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the issues of COVID. There is a Motion on the Adjournment, I am not

going to go into too much because I think that the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the Minister of Health can adequately deal with that. But I want to place on the record my total and absolute disagreement with any statement that Trinidad and Tobago is the capital of COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

And just quickly on the issue of housing, again, raised by the hon. Member for Oropouche East, Madam Speaker, I have said it, the chairman of the HDC has said it, we are asking persons, especially those who are chronic and delinquent in relation to their payments of their mortgage instalments and their rentals monthly at the HDC, we are saying to you, please pay your mortgage, pay your rent monthly and we are focusing mostly on the persons who are delinquent. We understand that this is COVID and that there are challenges for people to pay, some people have lost their jobs and we have said publicly come into the HDC and have a discussion with us. Do not just sit there and conclude that you do not need to pay and the Government does not need the money, because we are aware of the challenges but at the same time we understand the responsibilities and therefore when letters are sent out to our respective clients, it is also to let them know that we are asking you to come in. But for those who have taken it almost as though it is the norm not to pay the HDC, please note that that is of course going to have its consequences.

Now, I just want to now quickly go on to my portfolio because I know that we are going to stop at six o'clock. So I just want to say, Madam Speaker, that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development through its units and agencies has been working to improve the lives of citizens by providing adequate shelter and land solutions to qualifying low and middle income households in a transparent and equitable manner and in so doing stimulate the economy.

And further, the Ministry is also engaged in the regeneration of East Port of

Spain in keeping with Government sustainable development plan for our capital city of Port of Spain as well as public education and awareness programmes to assist citizens in making informed decisions as it relates to the housing sector. Madam Speaker, I think it is probably appropriate that I, I know it is not quite six o'clock but it is like 20—you know, I do not want to stop mid-sentence so, is it okay? Yes, okay, well, I just want to say that notwithstanding the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry has continued to execute its core responsibilities by providing subsidies on land and housing, housing grants and subsidies and assisting in the regularization of tenure and housing squatters. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, I will continue after the Motion.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the debate on the Adoption of the Report of the Standing Finance Committee shall be postponed until 7.00 p.m. I now call on the Member for Siparia.

6.00 p.m.

**Mass Public Vaccination Programme
(Government's Implementation of)**

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, thank you and to the House for allowing us to discuss a definite matter of urgent public important, namely the Government's implementation of their mass public vaccination problem. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health indicated some time ago that he shed a tear. I think today he will be shedding more tears. It is clear that in order for T&T to vaccinate, Minister Deyalsingh must vacate his office. [*Desk thumping*] When it is that a public official has to apologize unreservedly for reckless endangerment of citizens of this country in the height of a COVID-19 pandemic, then it is clear that the Minister should resign. [*Desk thumping*] In this regard, Minister, I have drafted a letter for

you of your resignation which I will be happy to share with you at some point in time. But I think it is clear that your apology today is proof that you need to vacate this office at the earliest opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

And why do I say that? Yes, we want the vaccines. Yes, we want the population to be vaccinated. We have called for this from day one, but when you open the *Daily Express*, today's paper, the Minister really was inviting everyone, come one, come all for the vaccines. The Minister said on the front page, walk-in vaccines, crowd control, security in place, and none of that happened today, Madam Speaker. None of that happened, crowd control, security in place. What happened instead—and I read from an article by Carolyn Kissoon in today's *Express* as well:

“Mass vaccination call leads to mass confusion”

“The Health Ministry's called for citizens to come to health facilities today for the...”—vaccination—“on a first come, first serve basis, has led to mass confusion.

Crowds are being reported in Chaguanas, Princes Town...Gasparillo”—Chaguanas—“with people expressing anger that the health officials had not organised it in a more humane system.

Police officers were called out to health centres, and in Princes Town, loud speakers and sirens were used, with officers asking that people social distance and form a line...

In Ste Madeleine, hundreds were turned away after the police told the crowd that only 60...”—persons—“would be vaccinated...”

And this is why I say it is reckless to tell everyone come out, when you only have 60 vaccines there for members of the public.

“In Princes Town, those gathered were told only 150 would be vaccinated

today...

Some said they were in line from early as 5 a.m., only to be sent home without a vaccine after waiting more than three hours.”

You know, I recalled the hon. Prime Minister telling us in this House, where in any country in the Caricom that you have mass gatherings and so on, and vigils? So, where in any country, where in the middle of a pandemic, you have state-sponsored super spreader event? That is what it was. [*Desk thumping*] A state-sponsored super spreader event on the invitation of the Government and the Minister of Health. Madam Speaker, the Minister apologizes, but this is too little too late. That apology, would it help us when we see what results from the gatherings that took place in the line? I am not sure, hon. Madam Speaker, if you may have had opportunity to see the videos that were sharing all day where persons were grouped in these large gatherings, very closely put together.

In fact, the Commissioner of Police had to come out and put out a press release indicating—and I quote from that press release June 09, 2021:

“CoP: Police disperse crowds at Vaccination Sites

“...police officers in several...Divisions had to disperse thousands of people who had assembled outside Health Centres, this morning, to receive the COVID-19 vaccines.

‘It became very clear that persons, many of them elderly, began assembling outside the...sites around 6 am to receive their vaccines...’”

The—“...vaccination roll-out was being done as first-come, first serve...

‘By 9 am videos and photographs revealed crowds of persons waiting in long lines with absolutely no social distancing.’”

So this state-sponsored super spreader event indeed erupted into breaking the very law that the Government had put into place, [*Desk thumping*] that is to say under

the various regulations that the law was being broken on the invitation of the Government.

“...‘As soon as the Commissioner of Police...became aware of the situation, he gave instructions that officers of the TTPS take charge of the situation in the various Divisions, and...it became necessary, to shut down these sites for the day.’”

So are we coming back tomorrow? We are being told they will come back A to E. Now, this was a policy decision, it seems to be taken on hoof because when the situation erupted, shortly thereafter the Minister is telling the country, through press statements, that okay, we will come back tomorrow A to E. Has the Minister done any kind of due diligence to determine how many persons will fall on the letters “A” to “E”? [*Desk thumping*] Do we know how many persons you are calling out under the letter “A” to “E”? The surname “A” has a very large number of persons under the letter “A”. And so, do we know how many these are and how many will be coming? Someone is just whispering. Would you tell them they will have their chance, Madam Speaker, please?

Madam Speaker: Continue, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You will have your chance to respond as will anyone else given the constraints that we have at the time. And so, the Commissioner of Police has said this, but listen to what he also said:

The—“Commissioner...says he will be meeting with Health officials today, to ensure that a better system is put in place for the vaccine rollout in the future.”

So here it is, instantly this has happened. A new policy is announced, forget the first come, first serve, instead we are going to take you A to E. But how many people tomorrow will come out with A to E and where will they come out? And

there will be consequences. We see already today the death rate is higher than yesterday. We see also the number of infected cases very high still. Although we are on lockdown, it is really a kind of lick down going on here now. We are supposed to be on lockdown but people are being invited to break the law. So there must be consequences. Is it that we are going to see 10 to 14 days from today, spikes in the infection rates? Is that that we are going to see more deaths?

This is what happened after Easter when everybody was invited— welcome to Tobago, everybody come to Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Do you know what is happening when there were no cases in Tobago? Now, from that Easter weekend coming forward, those cases have risen in Tobago, the death numbers as well as the infection rates. So what are the consequences? If the Government is thinking forward, what are we going to do in respect to what could result from the large gatherings that took place today? What can we do? Is it that we are going to be testing less or should we not be testing more? We should ramp up the testing, Madam Speaker, so that we can reach our citizens before we wait for the persons to come down with the infections or actually to die. COVID kills, you know, Madam Speaker. As we all know, COVID kills.

Now, whilst I am here complaining about it, I would like to share—you know, we have suggestions. We can see what people have done in other parts of the world. We can learn. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. And so, we can get some examples, things that are happening elsewhere, where we can do a better job at rolling out the vaccines. Yes, we must roll out the vaccines. Yes, we must get herd immunity, it is the only way, which we have said all along. I would tell you this, you know, if I were Prime Minister today, we would have a clear pandemic plan. [*Desk thumping*] We would have had that and have it been implemented. This Government has produced no plan. It is a “vaps”, vaille que

vaille, they make it up on hoof as they go along. You have no real plan to deal with the actual pandemic and to deal with the fallout and the suffering coming out of that.

We would have a plan that will ensure that vaccines were sourced very early to prevent the death of hundreds and to ensure swift reopening of the economy. [*Desk thumping*] We would have a mass vaccination drive so that herd immunity can be achieved without putting citizens at risk. We would put into place drive-through vaccine. Why can we not have drive-through— we have very large venues in this country, unutilized, underutilized, with large parking spaces, big open spaces to allow the social distances. Hon. Speaker, may I ask by the way, can the hon. Minister of Health indicate which of his colleagues received their second vaccine dose via a drive-through arrangement? And why were they given that special treatment when nobody else has been given it? Old people lining up there from five o'clock this morning, tell them go home, go home, come back tomorrow A to E. If the Minister cannot say which colleague, then all I can tell him that if it is planned and it is a developing story as to who took the vaccine. [*Desk thumping*]

We would look to have partnerships—I keep talking about partnerships—with private hospitals and doctors to have vaccines available at their facilities. We would have partnerships with religious bodies, medical staff deployed at large churches, mosques, temples and so on, to help in this rollout. Partnership with NGOs, such as Living Water and others, to reach the immigrant population because we have a large immigrant population or migrant—whatever we may want to call them and we do know some the NGOs interface with them. Partnership with corporate T&T. Partnership with the Opposition, local government bodies to have a vaccination rollout in all 41 constituents. Partnership

with sporting bodies to volunteer and to have a drive-through vaccination. Partnership with denominational school boards to utilize their schools, to have teachers and principals inoculated.

Let us see what some other countries have done. Other countries have done a lot of things to get their vaccination drive going: utilizing unused structures to better accommodate social distances; bringing vaccines to the elderly and not just making them line up outside to be berated by police officers; have vaccines available in pharmacies, large retail outlets, public transport hubs. This is happening elsewhere. We are not reinventing the wheel. Vaccines available—you could go in the United States to a CVS. In fact, I am told a lot of Trinis or some Trinis are indeed travelling to the US to go and take the vaccine and come back—in pharmacies, outlets, public transport hubs. We can look how well-organized and executed the local private sector-led vaccine programmes were done over the past few days. Why do we not engage the private sector? What is the fear of the private sector? Government, you cannot do it alone. You have shown you have failed. You have tried and you have failed. [*Desk thumping*] You need to partner and engage many more organizations. You tell us we are all in this together, but then you want to try to do it alone and then you are failing. That is very, very clear. The two mass vaccination sites mobilized in quick time with proper facilities with persons coming to get their vaccine shot done by local private sector-led organizations.

We could also look at, Madam Speaker, several other initiatives. We can learn from others. As I say, we do not need to reinvent the wheel. And so, some of it—the Opposition believes that the nation witnessed this morning—what we witnessed is totally unacceptable. The Prime Minister cannot divert as he has done before. He must act now. Minister Deyalsingh must be replaced now. [*Desk*

thumping] And if the Prime Minister cannot do the honourable thing, I call on the Minister of Health, show some national remorse. You must walk up with your resignation letter, walk up with your towel to shed all your tears because now you really have something to cry about.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition takes no joy in bringing this Motion. I think a lot of people were very happy that more people were going to get vaccinated. You know, there was a sense of hope based on the pronouncements made. But instead what we are really seeing, you know, some Government Members or their activists, they are already coming out there to say—to blame the population. The Government is giving you a vaccine drive, the Government is helping you to get this vaccine but look at you all. “Yuh” behaving so badly, it is your fault. Buff the people, blame the people. That is what has been happening throughout this pandemic. Buff the people, blame the people, come back and blame Kamla, and go back and buff the people, blame people, and come back and blame the Opposition for your incompetence and mismanagement. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, you know, many of us here were offered the vaccine because we were politicians. We were told that, well, we could go and take the vaccine as politicians, but many people were not given that facility. Thousands of people, in far greater need and far more vulnerable, who were not offered that opportunity. Instead, come line up, stand up outside from 5.00 a.m., go home, come back tomorrow, come back next week, come whenever. And yet, as politicians, we were told we would be given preference. I do not agree with that policy. Our Members were given the option; that is your personal option, you take it or leave it. But we have to work together to make sure that we do this vaccination drive and roll it out properly. And of course, again, aggressively

pursue, obtaining, procuring the relevant vaccines. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in responding to my hon. colleague, let me just repeat what I say this morning at the press conference. The country got an unreserved apology from me this morning. But let us deal with the facts of this Motion now. The hon. Member said, “Come one, come all.” We have always been following a careful vaccination plan: phase one, health care workers and those in our NCD clinics; phase two, a more targeted approach, health care workers, those in our clinics and essential workers. We are not yet moved to phase three. So what the hon. Member was saying, come one, come all is simply not what was the intention. It was never a total call out.

We were very specific in saying persons over 60 come out and persons under 60 with co-morbidities. What are the factors that led to what happened this morning? One, contrary to what has been reported for the past few months and even an MFO poll published in one newspaper spoke to a high degree of vaccine hesitancy. Even they got it wrong. What is happening in Trinidad now—and we are happy for it. Let us be happy because the opposite could have been no one turning up for a vaccine. There is a high degree of vaccine acceptance. Madam Speaker, as all countries grapple with COVID-19 and grapple with the fact that leading up to these events this morning, vaccines supply was outstripped by vaccine demand. One country close to us—I would not call the name. The names are not important—had to suspend their vaccine blitz due to high demand and they had to put out a press release suspending their vaccine blitz. They just could not cope with the demand and I quote that press release:

Walk-ins are not likely to get vaccinated today.

That is the reality. So we are happy for high vaccine acceptance.

On learning of the issue today, crowd disbursements started from an early as 9.00 a.m., using the RHAs' security systems and the TTPS for which I am grateful. By 12.00 noon, almost all the crowds were disbursed. That started at around 9.00 a.m. It is a learning experience. What is the solution that we are looking at? And let us contextualize this in the fact that the vaccines we were distributing were the 100,000 vaccines thankfully donated by the People's Republic of China. In trying to satisfy demand, we allocated 5,000 to the supermarket association; 5,000 to the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association; 5,000 to construction; 5,000 to private security targeting key populations, key industries that we need to reopen; Tobago, 2,500 Sinopharm, plus the allotment of AstraZeneca; CEPEP, which we are vaccinating this weekend, 5,000; Diabetes Association, they will get 1,000 next week; homes for the elderly, 1,000. But, Madam Speaker, what has happened when we asked all the associations for their estimates and they gave us these estimates, within one week, they came back and said we need double the amount, but the doses are not there at this time. So that left a few tens of thousands for the public, over 60 and under 60 with NCDs.

We are going to implement a solution from tomorrow and it is going to be a rolling thing. So from tomorrow A to E; from Friday F to J—surnames—Monday K to O, and going so. So if someone in the A to E does not get their vaccine tomorrow, in five working days you come back again to your particular surname grouping. So it is a rolling proposal going forward. What we have also done is engage the TTPS. We had a meeting with them today, coordinated by the Minister of National Security, the hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, and the TTPS will be

supplementing and assisting us with crowd control.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member said people are not being vaccinated. And, again whilst we do not expect the Opposition to support the Government, be factual. The fact of the matter is when the Government set up its mass vaccination sites at SAPA, at UTT Monroe Road, at the paddock, there was nothing but compliments published in the newspapers. Those are facts. People were so pleased to go into an atmosphere with excellent customer service. So when the Member says that people are not getting their vaccines, ordinary people, that is not supported by the following figures because vaccinations to date, from April 7th to June 8th, you know what the figure is? Because the Member said that ordinary people cannot get vaccines—136,597 ordinary people who wrote letters of compliment to the newspapers, praising SAPA, praising the paddock, praising the health centres. That is roughly 10 per cent of the population already with their first dose.

For the fully vaccinated we started the second dose administration on June the 7th. Prior to that, 1,179 were fully vaccinated. Those were mainly healthcare workers—not politicians—healthcare workers using the 2,000 gift from Barbados. But when it was the public's turn—because the public started to be vaccinated on May the 7th—from June the 7th to June 9th, which is yesterday, the figure of 1,179 jumped to 5,896 ordinary people. Mr. and Mrs. Trinidadian, Mr. and Mrs. Tobagonian from all walks of life have now been fully vaccinated and that will continue every day.

Madam Speaker, many countries, like Singapore which we have said before and other countries, have taken a decision that because they cannot get enough vaccines, they will only be administering the first dose and foregoing the second dose. I do not know if that is what the hon. Member is suggesting. But we have

been faithful to WHO protocols going forward and doses will always be reserved for those who have received their first shots. Madam Speaker, in addition to what happened today and in addition to the 136,597 ordinary people who have been vaccinated, we have targeted key Ministries: Ministry of Works and Transport, National Security and other key Ministries to vaccinate almost all of their frontline staff. What this current vaccination programme will do is significantly prevent another wave in the future. So we accept responsibility and we have implemented a solution.

Madam Speaker, whilst it is not accepted in this Westminster style of government that the Opposition will support the Government of the day, we expect the Opposition to be an ally with Trinidad and Tobago, not to be an ally with the virus. Let us examine skillfully some of the statements made by the hon. Member for Siparia and the lack of leadership shown. One, when we were doing well, does the country remember the statement, it had nothing to do with the healthcare system, but it had everything to do with sunshine? That was the hon. Member for Siparia. What message was sent to people who depend on her for leadership? In speaking about super spreader events, it must be remembered that the hon. Member from day one was advocating for open borders. What would have been the wasteland of Trinidad and Tobago today if that advice had been taken with the variants of concern, all the legal challenges?

The hon. Member, in meeting with the hon. Prime Minister, their main therapeutic solution was hydroxychloroquine. Hydroxychloroquine, a discredited drug where people died and had cardiac events using hydroxychloroquine. And let us not forget one of the main super spreader events promoted by the Opposition when the Commissioner of Police had to stop it, and that is the issue of vigils throughout this country. For a good cause, yes, but ill-advised. Totally ill-advised.

And then the final solution that the Opposition Leader had was to build a dome over Trinidad and Tobago. So whist we do not expect the hon. Member to be an ally with the Government, do not be an ally with the virus. [*Desk thumping*] Do not be a friend of the virus by putting forward conspiracy theories about sunshine, about opening the borders from day one, using hydroxychloroquine, promoting vigils and building a dome over Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we have engaged the private sector once vaccines became available and we have been working with these private sector entities over a period of three weeks to a month to assist them in setting up their sites. They were not set up overnight. The Ministry of Health gave them a template to work with and, yes, we will be engaging more private sector entities and more NGOs once more vaccines become available in large quantities. But right now, because we only had this 100,000 to distribute, 100,000 is not a large number. One hundred thousand had to stretch between supermarket association; manufacturing, to keep them open; construction; CEPEP; homes for the elderly. When we did the initial demand curve for homes for the elderly, we were told not more than 500 to 1,000. Today, after we allocated 1,000, they now want another 1,000 and every association has come back to us asking for double the amount, but the doses are not there at this time.

6.30 p.m.

I give this country the assurance as more and more doses become available in larger and larger quantities, more NGOs will be employed. The private sector will, again, be more used because we have always said from the beginning we are in this together. But we are constrained at this time by supply and demand. The demand simply outstrips the supply at this time.

So, Madam Speaker, in looking at the Motion: “The Government’s

implementation of a mass public vaccination programme”, this was not the phase three of a mass vaccination programme. A mass vaccination programme is when you vaccinate the entire population over 18. This was a call to persons over 60 and those under 60 with NCDs. “The matter is urgent because the public’s invitation resulted in risky mass congregation.” That was dealt with within hours. And “the potential to be a super spreader event”. Madam Speaker, nothing will take away from the fact that as I close, the Opposition Leader and the Opposition has never been an ally with the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Never. They have opposed, they have taken us to court at the drop of “ah hat”.

And, Madam Speaker, we give the country the assurance that lessons were learnt and solutions applied. We will have a rolling programme from tomorrow. So if there are too many people A to E, your turn will come up again in five days and so on and that how it is going to go until we get more vaccines into the system. Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South. Yes, you could stay there.

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The most pathetic rebuttal I have witnessed in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] has come from the Minister of Health in the last couple of moments. Madam Speaker, I want to tell the Minister of Health that we on this side, and the population of Trinidad and Tobago will accept no further apology, any apology or any excuses for his incompetence over the last six years and more so in the last 16 months as the Minister of Health.

You come with “crocodile” words and hypocritical words [*Desk thumping*] telling the country that, [*Crosstalk*] Madam Speaker, at the end of the day, vaccination supply outstrips vaccine demand and in addition to that, it was a

learning experience. Madam Speaker, how could you be going off on “ah frolic” telling the country that this is a learning experience after the death of 616 citizens of this country [*Desk thumping*] and 27,533 persons have tested positive in this country?

Madam Speaker, in addition to that, the Minister seems to be a stranger to the truth. The Minister is denying “ah” front-page story in one of our daily newspapers, today’s newspaper which stated—the *Express*:

60 years and over, under 60 with NCDs, get your shots from today, walk in vaccines.

Deyalsingh. I want to reiterate:

Deyalsingh: Crowd control and security in place.

The Minister of Health is a stranger to the truth. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, we are here today because of the sheer incompetency of the Government, the Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet. And at the end of the day, the Government began a vaccination drive that was worse than a kiss of betrayal. It was in fact a kiss of COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

And I want to ask the Minister of Health what has happened to your database that you accumulated with all the appointments and so on? Has it collapsed? Have you admitted failure as a result of this? In addition to that, persons came out this morning before the rooster in their eagerness to do their part in the fight against COVID-19 by getting themselves vaccinated. But lo and behold because of the incompetence of the Minister, like the rooster, they were treated like chicken in “ah coop”.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health did not shed a single tear as we witnessed harrowing scenes of the most vulnerable groups led like lambs to

slaughter, those over 60 years and under 60 years, Madam Speaker, with comorbidities are people who we should have displayed care and empathy for. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, they were enticed in coming into a death trap. [*Desk thumping*] And the worse comorbidity affecting the people of Trinidad and Tobago is Minister Deyalsingh [*Desk thumping*] and the Prime Minister and his incompetent Cabinet. It is sickening to see that the process that was supposed to have saved people's lives actually endangered them greatly. [*Desk thumping*]

This is a time, Madam Speaker—in fact, this is the second time the Prime Minister and his Government has led citizens like lambs to slaughter after urging them that Tobago was the place to be for Easter. This shameless, wicked, vindictive, [*Desk thumping*] spiteful, criminal Government is guilty of creating chaos and mayhem and madness and Minister Deyalsingh must go. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for San Fernando East. Member, you can speak from your desk.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Good evening, Madam Speaker. Thank you for having me. Madam Speaker, from day one, the Opposition has gone out of its way to undermine the COVID-fighting efforts of this Government. [*Desk thumping*] Every single thing that we have done, they have used themselves and their agents to spread misinformation. Let me give a quick recap of what has been said by those on the other side. “They have prescribed unproven drugs” which has been proven to be false. They have said “COVID is like a cold”, also false, and then the words that will live on infamy in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, “Sunlight will kill COVID”. It has not worked. In the other place, one of the Members said “Puncheon will cure COVID”. That has also failed. “Open the borders”, “Open the bars”, something that defies every fact and every

part of science, Madam Speaker.

We have the Member for Oropouche East telling the members of the public “do not be ah guinea pig by taking the vaccine” after he has already taken the vaccine. That is the kind of hypocrisy that we are dealing with. And then finally, Madam Speaker, we have the venerable Opposition Leader and former Prime Minister who I expect so much more from, telling everyone to take the vaccine but she will not take the vaccine. That is the kind of dog whistling that we have been getting from those on the other side and that is why there is so much misinformation and confusion. And that is what the Minister of Health has had to deal with from day one and I must say that he has done an admirable job [*Desk thumping*] in really disseminating the facts and also keeping his cool.

Yes, today we had a misstep but that should not undermine the hard work that has been done by the Minister of Health and also by our caring and hard-working medical professionals who do not care about politics but are concerned about saving lives and to that, they deserve credit. Be reminded of what the Minister of Health actually said. He said it was a first come, first serve basis for those over 60 and for those under 60 with comorbidities. That is what he said. He has also said from day one that the three W's should guide your activities in your everyday life. One, wear your mask, wash your hands and also watch your distance. From looking at some of the scenes today, that advice was completely ignored.

I would like to remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago that the vaccines, though they are being produced rapidly, are still in short supply. There are 7.7 billion people in the world today. On my last check, approximately 5 per cent of the world is currently fully vaccinated, 5 per cent. I believe the Minister of Health said earlier that 10 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago is at least partially vaccinated

at this point and for that, he deserves credit.

The Minister of Health, yes, he has made mistakes but he has always done his best to protect the people of this country. [*Desk thumping*] He has never intentionally placed the health of the people of this country—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*] Is he allowed not to wear his mask?

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Moonilal: Oh sorry.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health may have made a misstep but he has once never intentionally put the lives of the people of this country at risk for political gain. Those on the other side cannot say the same. [*Desk thumping*] It is amazing.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker— [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Okay, so I will ask you to retract that and find another way to say it.

Hon. B. Manning: I retract, Madam Speaker, no problem. I may have to retract it here but the population knows the truth. [*Interruption*] It is amazing, Madam Speaker, how much the Opposition's—

Madam Speaker: Okay, so when you retract, you retract on the—

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, I retract the statement. It is amazing how much the campaign from those on the other side seems to mimick that of the Trump campaign in the United States and even though it concluded in the same results as that campaign—

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. B. Manning: [*Laughter*] Madam Speaker, I would like to conclude by saying to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we are indeed sorry, that these are

unprecedented times and therefore—

Madam Speaker: Member, your time is now spent.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan. And all Members, for the five minutes, one can stay at one's desk.

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much. Reckless, irresponsible, careless. Those are the three words that can be used to describe what took place this morning in Trinidad and Tobago as a result of the incompetence, [*Desk thumping*] the gross incompetence of the Minister of Health and this present Government. He never said come one, he never said come all, but this morning come one, come all they did. You have caused by your action thousands of persons to line up since five o'clock this morning [*Desk thumping*] trying to get a vaccine. You know why? Because they want to save their lives because they are not convinced that this Government will save their lives because of their incompetence.

Learning experience, Madam Speaker? Learning experience? Are you playing Russian roulette with the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? Learning experience? This is happening right now all over the world. Why do you not adopt a model that is taking place elsewhere? [*Desk thumping*] You come here to experiment? The lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago are important and you ought not to experiment with the lives of our citizens. [*Desk thumping*] Do not do that.

Today, we only heard, Madam Speaker, distractions, excuses but no responsibility for his actions. [*Desk thumping*] None, none whatsoever. The only action that this Minister should take now is to tender his resignation to the Prime Minister [*Desk thumping*] and vacate his office. Madam Speaker, in no other

civilized democracy will any Prime Minister tolerate that type of gross incompetence and keep a person like that in his Cabinet. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, we are right now witnessing one of the deadliest, deadliest and most infectious wave of this COVID-19 virus. We have been told that the dominant strain here is the P1 variant, Madam Speaker, yet you had elderly persons over 60 years, many of whom may have comorbidities, lining up for this vaccine only to be turned away because the Ministry of Health under this Minister of Health did not properly organize a system for these persons to get their vaccines.

Madam Speaker, do you know that they had persons lining up from the 5.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. today but it only takes 15 minutes for you to become a primary contact? Fifteen minutes. You have placed the lives of our citizens and our elderly at risk. You have done that. The vaccines, we were told that it is the solution. We were told that the vaccine is the solution but this Government made the vaccines a problem. Madam Speaker, the Minister came here to talk about “Letters to the Editor”: “Oh praise me, praise me”. But what happened today? You have put the lives of our citizens at risk. [*Desk thumping*] Any person who is infected because of your irresponsibility today or any person who died must be bolted to your chest because it is your incompetence that caused that. [*Desk thumping*] That is the responsibility of the Minister of Health. He must accept that responsibility. Madam Speaker, it is too late to apologize for this State sponsored super spreader. It is too late. The Minister has no moral authority to stand in this Parliament and apologize. He must go. He must go.

Madam Speaker, we have countries right here in the Caribbean who are doing vaccine drive-throughs. Why does not the Minister implement this? The behaviour of the Minister this morning justifies the reason why the Opposition Leader is right to call for a commission of enquiry into the actions of this

Government relating to the COVID response. This justifies that Commission of Enquiry because persons in this Government because of their negligence, their incompetence must be held to account and must be held liable for what has taken place with the destruction of our economy and the loss of lives of our citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, and I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, it is disturbing to any sensible person to have to listen after 14 months of the unfortunate arrival of COVID-19 into Trinidad and Tobago, to every single occasion, without exception, the Opposition seeks to undermine every response [*Desk thumping*] and positive response to combating COVID-19 on every occasion.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. S. Young: Irresponsible, destructive, pure contempt for our citizens. I remind the population through you here this evening, Madam Speaker, that the UNC were the first people, the Opposition were the first people to discourage citizens from taking the vaccines. Bolt that to their chest. The Member for Oropouche East was one of the first people to try and undermine the use of Sinopharm that right now we have citizens clamouring to get, embarrassingly so. Let the population be reminded that two former Members of Parliament who the Member for Siparia rejected, fired.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 48(1), the relevance, please.

Hon. S. Young: “Ahh, get real.” The former Members of Parliament had to come out and break ranks with the strategy of Siparia: Dr. Gopeesingh and Suruj

Rambachan, to tell the population ignore the hogwash coming from the Opposition and go and take the vaccine. [*Desk thumping*] The most embarrassing position for a leader to have two persons she rejected, did not allow to go to the polls and they are the first two on that side to come out and say to citizens ignore what she has to say, what the Member for Siparia has to say and take the vaccine. It continues to distress every civic-minded citizen in this country that the Opposition continuously delights, continuously delights in any issue in this country and any issue that this country faces. I have never seen a bunch of people who are happier to see a country burn than the UNC [*Desk thumping*] and that is why the population rejected them in August of 20—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, 48(6) please. 48(6).

Hon. S. Young: They cannot handle it but that is why the population rejected them time and time again and to come here today to use an unfortunate incident to try and score political points is, again, a complete abuse of any trust that anybody put in them prior to today.

This is an Opposition where we have witnessed time and time again, even standing up here today, each single Member there. The Member for Siparia standing up in her contribution today again telling the population “if I were the Prime Minister, I would have vaccinated everybody”. It immediately got me thinking I wonder where they would have gotten the vaccines from because you see it is an irrefutable fact that vaccines could not be obtained prior to the time they were obtained today.

This Government has put, the Prime Minister on Saturday gone went through the lengths of once again repeating, showing through irrefutable evidence that vaccines were not available. The first cry we heard was “bring vaccines from India”. India was not permitted to sell vaccines, we saw that. Up to April of this

year, they could not sell vaccines. As soon as things spiralled unfortunately for our brothers and sisters in India, that conversation went flat and died.

So all I am saying and contributing and adding to here this evening, Madam Speaker, is let the population know that this Government is doing everything it can, as it has been doing since January last year, to respond to COVID-19 and the global pandemic that we are facing and with the current vaccination scheme, we have vaccines coming, we continue to pursue vaccines at every single level and it really is heart-wrenching to witness those on the other side time and time again come and try to undermine everything that is good in this country because they are not in power and they will not return to power. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join. [*Desk thumping*] May I begin by first congratulating the Leader of the Opposition [*Desk thumping*] for bringing this Motion today to debate on this day one of the most important and yet tragic events that this country has seen since the outbreak of this pandemic.

Madam Speaker, today, the Opposition Leader brought a Motion to speak to the vaccination programme, to speak to the issue of the chaos of this day. The Government's response is to debate the Opposition. We are here to debate vaccines and COVID, they are here to debate the Opposition. [*Desk thumping*] Since the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West had "ah regrettable fall off ah stage" in Penal, his head has twisted upside down as it relates to debates in this House. Madam Speaker, the Member is obsessed. He is obsessed with personal attacks against the Member for Siparia and other Members of this side and fail to deal with any issue or any policy [*Desk thumping*] and I suspect that fall in Penal has something to do with it.

Madam Speaker, today, it is critical. Now I just want to take up an issue quickly that was raised by the Member for Siparia, very important issue. That you went ahead, indicated “walk in, time to come, we have the vaccines”. They have 20 vaccines and invited 2,000 people. That is the problem. Why the Minister and his Ministry, armed with a communication department, could not tell the people, clearly, “Listen, we do not have so much vaccines. We simply do not have.” But the Government wanted to give the impression.

If you remember the press conference they had the Saturday before, the Prime Minister spelling out: Vaccines coming from the USA, 400,000 coming from China, coming from here, coming from there. They set in train an expectation that there are vaccines for all. That is what they did. So today, when “de mark buss”, to use “ah local slang”, we discovered that really they have no vaccines. So you called people to come out and you have no vaccines. “The elderly with stick standing up five o’clock in the morning and you calling them again.” Tomorrow, the same thing will happen because whether A to E, D to F and G, it is the same problem. If you have 5,000 vaccines, what will happen when 10,000 people come throughout the island? And clearly as the Opposition Leader said, that is not a well-thought-out plan because you thought of that this morning when you “buss”. When “yuh” programme collapsed this morning, you then say A, B, C. Clearly you had no thought for that.

There is another possibility that the Minister just failed and ignored. You do not have vaccines so stop telling people you have vaccines. “Leh we start with that. You have none, you have ah few.” Why do you not use the existing institutions like the County Medical Officer, the health centres where they already have a database of persons with chronic illnesses who go there as clients. Allow them to call the same people and give vaccines to that critical group that are already in the

health care system? You do not advertise “walk in, walk in, we have it for you, vaccines, hundred thousand coming”, so people quite clearly walk in and when “they walk in”, you get the same Easter effect you got then, you got today. And the Minister comes and say “We sorry, we sorry”. Sorry what? When the infection rate go up and the death rate go up, “You sorry fuh that? You sorry?” What do they think it is?

So, Madam Speaker, this is a disaster. In another decent country, the Minister of Health would have tendered his resignation at 12.00 midday [*Desk thumping*] but he will not. Let me tell you, a million people could die in this country, he will not resign. Seventeen today dead, 454 infected. Those people—something is happening and it is not state of emergency and curfew. Why are people dying every day like this? Is there a problem in the ICU? Is there some problem managing patients at home? The Minister will not speak about this. All he will tell us is “walk in did not mean everybody”. Well then could you please tell A to E that you have only a few vaccines and do not come out tomorrow?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I simply rise to reject the outlandish recommendation coming from the Leader of the Opposition. Let us go into the facts. Number one, there is a vaccine programme afoot. Number two, if you look across the world, the methodology demonstrates that there will be ebbs and flows. We can look further to the fact that certainly demand exceeds supply at this simple point. We can also anticipate that the position will be managed as the vaccine numbers increase.

To listen to the Leader of the Opposition call for the resignation of the Minister of Health saying that the Minister must walk with a letter prepared by the

hon. Leader of the Opposition is a most curious recommendation coming from a leader who birth LifeSport, a leader who birth section 34 and—

Mr. Lee: The relevance, Madam Speaker, 48(1).

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—when you look to the point of resignations being called, Madam Speaker, we cannot take the architecture of Resmi Ramnarine seriously [*Interruption*] as we recall as related to COVID.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, again, 48(1). This is not the Motion.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: When we get to COVID, Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Okay, Attorney General, back on track: “when we get to COVID”.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I am on—the resignation for COVID has to have grounding by first of all coming from someone with the respect and moral authority to call for a resignation and most importantly, the Leader of the Opposition has no moral authority [*Desk thumping*] to call for anybody’s resignation—

Mr. Lee: 48(6), Madam Speaker, 48(6).

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—especially on the issue of COVID, not when that hon. Member of Parliament has been at the forefront of pushing in particular litigation to turn this country upside down on—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Lee: Again, Madam Speaker, 48(1).

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is totally false. [*Continuous crosstalk*]

7.00p.m.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the debate on the adoption of the report by the Standing Finance Committee, which was postponed at 6.00 p.m. shall now resume. Leader of the House.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

UNREVISED

Procedural Motion
Hon. C. Robinson-Regis (cont'd)

2021.06.09

Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that the House continue to sit until we have completed this debate. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

**STANDING FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT
(ADOPTION)**

Madam Speaker: Minister of Housing and Urban Development, you have 11 minutes left.

Hon. P. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development continues to execute and achieve these mandates through our agencies. And Madam Speaker, I am continuing where I left off just before the Motion.

So I just want to say the agencies falling under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development are: the Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation, the Land Settlement Agency, the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Limited (TTMF), East Port of Spain Development Company Limited and the Port of Spain Shopping Complex Limited.

Madam Speaker, the Government's policies, programmes, and projects are guided by two principles. One, Putting People First: Nurturing our greatest Asset, which is the theme of the National Development Strategy and, two, ensuring that activity in the housing and urban development sector is also focused on contributing to the country's economic development and poverty reduction.

Madam Speaker, adequate housing is central to a decent lifestyle and is recognized by this administration as of paramount importance, as the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development remains committed to improving the living conditions of eligible citizens all over the country.

UNREVISED

Madam Speaker, over the last 10 months, the Ministry has successfully navigated through this pandemic and remains committed to the service of our country. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, in an aim to achieve its mandate for this fiscal year 2020 to 2021, has made a request for an additional sum of 90,961,000.

Madam Speaker, the additional request that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development would be allocated for the purposes of the following projects, which is 39,709,000 supplemental funding would be allocated for rehabilitation and maintenance of HDC rental apartments and housing units; 2,210,000 supplemental for funding allocated for housing grant under the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit; 8,576,000 supplemental funding would be allocated for the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. Under the Land Settlement Agency, 19,213,000 supplemental funding would be allocated for the regularization of squatter communities under the Land Settlement Agency; 17,670,000 supplemental funding would be allocated for government-aided self-help housing programme under the Land Settlement Agency; 3,583,000 supplemental funding would be allocated for the development of residential lots, that is Petrotrin, under the Land Settlement Agency.

Madam Speaker, the Housing Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, as I said, requested the sum of 39,709,000 for rehabilitation and maintenance of HDC rental apartments and housing units. And these funds would be used to undertake works on housing units at Maloney, Embacadere, John John, Duncan, George, Nelson and Prince Streets, as well as infrastructural works at Carlsen Field, to address road works and drainage average.

Madam Speaker, the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit has requested, as I indicated, the sum of 2,210,000 for housing grants. Madam

Speaker, these funds would be used to enable the disbursement of housing grants to applicants currently in the system for the end of fiscal 2021.

Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2021, the Home Improvement Grant was allocated 8 million. With this allocation the Ministry has facilitated 533 grants and of these 389 grants have already been prepared, whilst the remaining 144 grants are to be distributed. And based on the increased demand for the Home Improvement Grant, this allocation has been essentially exhausted by midterm and as such, the Government is ensuring that it achieves its mandate, assisting citizens in this challenging period. The Ministry requires additional funding to facilitate payment of prospective grants recipients.

As of the 30th of April, 2021, the Ministry requires additional funds of 1,177,500 to accommodate grants recommended by the Ministry's technical officers. These recommended applicants have met all necessary requirements, and in light of the foregoing, additional funds of approximately \$2 million is required.

Madam Speaker, the land settlement has requested a supplemental funding of 8,576,000 for the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. These funds would be used to enable the disbursement of outstanding HVIP houses to applicants currently in the system, to the end of fiscal 2021. These additional funds requested accounts for outstanding amounts owed for the increase in the contract sum of HVIP houses from 100,000 to 120,000; 30 houses under phase one of the programme and to undertake infrastructure development and HVIP house construction at Jacob Hill, Wallerfield. Development will accommodate 15 residential lots and houses, and it is also projecting that a total of 129 new HVIP houses can commence for this fiscal year with 51 new agreements signed by March 2021, and further units should be commenced by May 2021.

Madam Speaker, the Land Settlement Agency has requested a supplemental

funding of 19,213,000 for regeneration of squatter communities and these funds would be used for ongoing civil works, lead testing, engineering design, retentions owed for completed contracts, as well as payment for proposed road and waterworks required to be done prior to the granting of final approval. Madam Speaker, the land settlement has requested the supplemental funding of 17,670,000 for the government-aided self-help housing programme and this fund would be used for ongoing civil works, including additional repairs for paved roads, concrete drains, road repairs, et cetera.

Madam Speaker, the Land Settlement Agency has also requested a supplemental funding of 3,583,000 for the development of residential lots at Petrotrin and these funds would be to facilitate the payment and finalization of bidding documents, re-grading of residential lots and completion of sites.

Madam Speaker, I close by saying that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development remains committed to improving the physical and socioeconomic conditions of citizens through the public sector initiatives, particularly those in the low to lower middle-income groups, as articulated by the national development strategic *Vision 2030*.

Madam Speaker, it has not been easy for the Government to take the decision to shut down or temporarily close the construction sector which, of course, has impacted negatively on the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. We look forward to the reopening of the construction sector, when the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development will continue its mandate. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much for your recognition, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, let me begin by saying that I am grateful to join this debate and give a contribution in a time where things and

where this nation is in a critical state.

Madam Speaker, as I begin, I say that this Government continues to plunge this nation into what can be described as a virtual free-fall and a downward spiral of failure. And when I speak, Madam Speaker, of failures, I speak of failing financial initiatives; I speak of failing economic ideas, Madam Speaker; I speak of failing developmental strategies and failing social safety plans.

Today I will focus a bit on social safety plans. Madam Speaker, the exercise which was conducted on Monday, June 07, 2021, the Standing Finance Committee, an exercise where the Government basically hastily piloted and rushed through the supplementation and appropriation for fiscal 2021 rather, and the variation of appropriation for fiscal 2021, it was a clear manifestation, Madam Speaker, of the downward spiral of failure. Madam Speaker, that exercise was shrouded in semantics and lacked sound thought processes in the context of issues which are directly affecting us locally at this point in time.

Madam Speaker, for instance, let us have a look—and my colleague dealt with Children's Authority at length, but briefly I will touch on it, very, very briefly in about two lines. It was amazing to see the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister stress on 78 per cent of adults who would not report child abuse, and the Minister did not take the time to stress on the 35.8 increase in child abuse, which gives reason for the supplemental allocation under the Children's Authority.

But at that point in time, Madam Speaker, what we could have seen is that the Minister, at the Standing Finance Committee, came very unprepared, indicated that answers that the Minister should have had at the tip of her fingers did not have at that time, indicated that it would come to us in writing. At the start of this meeting it did not come to us in writing. When the Minister came to make her contribution today it was on a small Post-It, which could have been given on that

day. If you are running a business, Madam Speaker, there are things that you would need to know at the tip of your fingers, and these were things that the Minister should have known. Yet still, we did not get the information. But today you can see that what is basically happening in that Ministry, under the Office of the Prime Minister, is management by vaps.

Madam Speaker, I move now. I thank you for the opportunity to really raise those small issues. I move to social services. And at the Standing Finance Committee the question was asked of the initiatives undertaken with the—and if you would forgive me I have to refer to some figures here of the initiatives undertaken with the—original allocation of \$330 million. Madam Speaker, what we noticed is that you have no accounting for the \$330 million. And here the Minister of Social Development and Family Services comes to the House, comes to the committee for another \$40million. We are unaware of what the original sum of \$330 million was utilized for. Madam Speaker, at this time, if we are unaware of such, are we to really assume, in the absence of information, when it comes to the \$330 million, that this Government is throwing good money after bad money? We have to ask ourselves.

In addition to that, Madam Speaker, to the best of our knowledge, based on what transpired in that committee meeting, we have not dealt with pre-May 01, 2021. But the Government is now seeking to address post-May 01, 2021. And we have to ask ourselves and we have to ask the Government: What happened to pre-May 01, 2021? It was also a part of the financial year.

Madam Speaker, I want to refer to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services official Facebook page, where persons are commenting that their grants from 2020, which were approved, have not yet been paid. And the responses being given by the Ministry's official Facebook page is that we are awaiting

releases to pay these approved Income Support Grants. So, is it that this \$330million is going to be used to cover the cost for outstanding approved Income Support Grants?

Madam Speaker, in addition to that, I know of MPs who have received notification that apart from what is being said on the Ministry's official Facebook page, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, when they enquire about outstanding Income Support Grants, that payments for approved Income Support Grants for 2020, they are still outstanding and they have been suspended. So hence the reason for us enquiring for information as to what was done with the \$330 million and the Ministry is now seeking \$40million more. Madam Speaker, are we to anticipate that the Government will let good sense prevail and pay out the outstanding income support and incoming Income Support Grants in a linear system or as they may say, first come, first received?

In addition to that, Madam Speaker, coming from the Minister of Social Development and Family Services during the Standing Finance Committee, the Minister indicated that the \$40 million supplemental variation being requested will not incur any administrative or operational cost because, obviously, the Minister stated that arrangements were made internally with existing staffing.

Madam Speaker, if we are to take the Minister's word for it, for five months, roughly—based on the contribution of the Minister of Finance here today as well—out of that \$40 million, \$8 million will be spent per month on Income Support Grants. This would mean that 8,000 applicants, as of June 1st, shall be in receipt of the Income Support Grants for the next five months.

Madam Speaker, I want to bring to the attention of the House what is happening in real life in Trinidad and Tobago. And I want to give an example. A couple visited my constituency office with two children. And I have some figures

here as well which I need to relate to. And those two children were aged, a girl 14 and a boy 10. And they were seeking registration for a food card of which, well obviously we do not have as MPs right now but it was advertised and clarification was given by the Minister of Finance.

And let me just say, Minister of Finance, this morning there was no commotion, it was a polite question or more so polite questions being asked about the food card relief to be provided to MPs' offices. And if I may say, the sophisticated website of the Ministry of Finance is clearly advertising that those persons requesting food cards to visit their MPs' offices. If the system is so sophisticated, all I am saying is very simple to put in brackets "(Not yet available)", Madam Speaker.

But Madam Speaker, I move on to the example of where this couple came to my office. As I said, they were seeking a food card. The male who is the father in the relationship is a construction worker. And the father went on to divulge into the daily operations of the family and the utilities amount to basically \$750 monthly, which includes WASA, T&TEC, Internet. They pay a rental of \$1,800 monthly, Madam Speaker. Pharmaceuticals for a child with asthma, about \$350. And, Madam Speaker, this family has to buy groceries. When we calculate the cheapest meal for this family, if we are to look at it, three meals per day for this family amounts to 90 meals in a 30-day period. Madam Speaker, the cheapest meal for a day for them is \$40; \$40 by three meals works up to \$120 daily, by 30 days, which works up to \$3,600 in food monthly.

Madam Speaker, I am getting to the point of, what is the future for people in this financial predicament? The sum of \$330million in original allocation, plus \$40 million, an overall of \$370 million to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. How many more families are like this out there, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, how does this allocation of \$370 million reach families like these who come from the construction sector?

Madam Speaker, in the Standing Finance Committee, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services indicated that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is still in talks with the Ministry of Finance and no final decisions have taken place just yet. Madam Speaker, when will these decisions take place? These people are out of jobs in a pandemic. They are lacking food and basic necessities needed for their daily lifestyle. So when will this decision be made, Madam Speaker? And these are very, very serious issues. How could you plan a lockdown for the construction sector and not include the construction sector in the relief operations of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker, I now move to the matter of religious bodies, if you would permit me. We would have—and I want to kindly note that we have no objection to organizations receiving assistance, as the Opposition Leader would have reiterated throughout her contribution today. Madam Speaker, the sum of money, \$10 million for religious bodies. Madam Speaker, as we would have asked in the Standing Finance Committee for a listing of the organizations and the amount per organization to be provided to us. I would have listened clearly to the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister who stated that organizations would have registered and cheques will be issued. Madam Speaker, we would have appreciated a timeline. We would have appreciated the— *[Interruption]* Madam Speaker, I continue with your direction. We would have appreciated a timeline, because these organizations are also awaiting these moneys to assist persons. But apart from that, Madam Speaker, we do hope that equity prevails and that there is no duplication when it comes to persons who would be on social support, et cetera. Because of the

fact that, Madam Speaker, in the letters we as MPs would have received from NAMDEVCO, it clearly states as MPs we are not to provide the support to persons who are on social support programmes. Hence the reason we do hope that, you know, duplication does not take place.

Madam Speaker, with these things being said, I rest my case and I note, Madam Speaker, that the inefficiencies of this Government are quite a lot and they themselves cannot see it and they are not willing to take advice. Madam Speaker, I thank you very much.

Dr. Rishad Seecheran (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join this debate. I would like to begin, Madam Speaker, by sending my condolences to all the families that have lost loved ones during this COVID-19 surge. At last count, we had roughly 10,000 persons that were COVID-19 in this country, with at least 600 deaths and 16 deaths in Tobago.

I would like to begin by offering a suggestion to the Minister of Health that instead of using the first letter of your last name, in which there is a lot of variance, what many other countries have done is they have used the day of the month in which you were born and that is much more equitable in terms of distribution. Because many persons, you know, their last name may begin with R, it may begin with S, or M or B, but very few persons' last name begin with Z or X or U, for example, Madam Speaker. I would like to also thank all the health care workers who continue to perform yeoman service to this country.

So today we are here to debate \$267 million to the Ministry of Health. The Minister of Health was not able to speak today, unfortunately. I would have liked to hear his comments on these allocations.

7.30 p.m.

But, Madam Speaker, I would like to begin with the COVAX facility for

\$34 million, which is an agreement between the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the GAVI Alliance. And, Madam Speaker, what I have seen is that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has relied greatly on the COVAX facility. It is almost as if we placed—meaning the Government—all their eggs in one basket. In fact, our initial allocation with COVAX was 20 per cent of the population. The Minister of Health actually requested, through the WHO, that this be increased to 33 per cent, Madam Speaker. And what we are seeing is this the COVAX facility has provided very little assistance to us in our fight against the coronavirus. And why do I say that? Why am I saying this?

Madam Speaker, after the events of the Easter weekend, which was roughly around April the 1st, we as a country had 5 per cent of our population with one dose, and 1 per cent with two doses meaning fully vaccinated. And after that we had a massive surge of cases, and this was in April of 2021. The COVAX facility has failed us, right. We entered COVAX since September of 2020 expecting vaccines. The Government has failed us. COVAX was initially supposed to give us 100,000 vaccines and we did not even get this in one tranche. We ended up getting this in three different tranches. We actually got one tranche on the 30th of March, I think it is, one on the 10th of May, and we are yet to receive the third tranche of the initial batch of vaccines that we ordered from COVAX.

So, Madam Speaker, what has COVAX—we have lost almost 600, or more than 600 citizens to COVID-19. More than 450 citizens have lost their lives to COVID-19 since the Easter weekend. As well, COVAX has only supplied us with the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine and I will come back to that later on in my discussion.

Madam Speaker, in December 2020 I had put out a statement and what I said in this statement was that many countries around the world were actually very

hesitant about COVAX and what was happening in COVAX, and many countries were pulling out of the COVAX initiative and seeking their own private deals with the vaccine manufactures. Low-income countries such as Malaysia, Peru and Bangladesh actually made separate orders with vaccine manufacturers in 2020 in addition to being in the COVAX facility. And you can research this, and I have the references. I will actually speak about what the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs had said about you could not order vaccines in 2020. That is not true.

Madam Speaker, we are in the sixth month of 2021 and we still have not received our full allocation from COVAX. Why did we not deal directly with the manufacturers? In fact, what the Minister of Health said today is that they engaged with Sinopharm since the 1st of September, 2020, and entered into non-disclosure agreement with Sinopharm on the 16th of March, 2021. Now, the curious thing about this Madam Speaker, is the Sinopharm vaccine did not get WHO approval which is a prerequisite here in Trinidad and Tobago until the 7th of May, 2021. So, we were basically engaging with a manufacturer before the vaccine had WHO approval; and I have no problem with that. And that is my point. My point is why did we not do this with Pfizer? Why did we not do this with Moderna?—some of the more established manufactures around the world.

Madam Speaker, why did we have to wait for the WHO to give an approval to Pfizer before we started to engage in constructive talks with that manufacturer? In fact, the UK approved the Pfizer vaccine on the 2nd of December, 2020. The United States approved it on the 11th of December, and Canada on the 14th of December.

Pfizer was approved by the WHO on the 31st of December. If we had made a pre-order with Pfizer contingent on Pfizer getting WHO approval, we would have had Pfizer vaccines in this country today. And with what the Minister of Energy

and Energy Affairs said earlier, but in a different debate, vaccines were able to be procedure procured in 2020. And if you allow me to read this, Pfizer's Chief Executive Officer in Bloomberg:

“...said that low- and middle-income countries had opted not to order the company's Covid-19 shot...”

In 2020 when they were available for pre-purchase. He went onto say, I:

“...reached out to all nations asking them to place orders so we could allocate doses for them...I became personally concerned...and I reached out to many heads of middle/low-income countries by letter, phone and even text to urge them to reserve doses because the supply was limited.”

So, Madam Speaker, what I am asking the Minister of Health, did the Pfizer CEO, who one of his agents approached the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to purchase for Trinidad to purchase COVID-19 vaccines in 2020? And if so, why was this not accepted with a contingency of delivery upon WHO approval? That is all that we needed to do and many other countries around the world did that.

In fact, a little bit off the topic, but we saw where Anthony Sabga said—of ANSA McAL—that the Government asked him to purchase Pfizer vaccines on the 17th of February, 2021. And the deal was for 351,000 vaccines for US 8.4 million, and what they intended to do is purchase the vaccines and distribute it through the Government to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and what they were asking for was some sort of tax relief.

Madam Speaker, we have lost over 450 lives since the Easter weekend. We are currently in a state of emergency. Jobs, we have lost many jobs, many businesses are closed, and the Government has to dip into our financial reserves to bail out many citizens of this country. If we had given ANSA McAL the opportunity to purchase those 350,000 vaccines for us, we would not be in this

position today. How many taxes can we collect right now in this situation that we are in? Many companies are not operating.

Madam Speaker, but that is not the only issue. The Pfizer vaccine is also certified by the FDA for children from the ages of 12 to 17 and what that allows is it allows you to vaccinate that specific group of citizens within your country and it adds to herd immunity. It also allows these children of secondary school age to go back to school safely and confident that they are vaccinated. There is no other vaccine currently in the world that is authorized for children from the ages of 12 to 17 years of age.

Madam Speaker, another issue I would like to bring up is the fact that we currently have, or, it is our aim to vaccinate at least 100,000 citizens with the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. And we got this vaccine from the COVAX facility. We will be getting more apparently this month or next month, as well as we got some of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine from India, as well as other sources from or Caricom neighbours, thankfully.

But our Attorney General has indicated that 2022 will be the mother of all carnivals. The issue I have with that is that we actually vaccinated most of our vulnerable persons over 60 with co-morbidities with the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. The South African variant of the coronavirus does not react to the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. In fact, in a study by the New England Journal of Medicine it has an efficacy of 10.4 per cent for mild to moderate disease. And what that means is that if the South African variant were to enter Trinidad and Tobago, let us say because we had the mother of all carnivals, 100,000 of our citizens here in Trinidad and Tobago could possibly get the coronavirus. They may not die, but they would become infected. And what would happen—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 48(1) please, please, please.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East, I have tried to give you a lot of breadth. While it is in the Standing Finance Committee there is talk about AstraZeneca and COVAX and so, it is almost as if your contribution, as important as it may be for our general health, is taking on the context about vaccine, a vaccine debate which this is not it. So, I will ask you to try and tie in what you are saying there into what you know is in the Standing Finance Report to make it relevant. Yes.

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, moving on, Madam Speaker. I would basically like to say that the COVAX facility has failed us, and we should look for different vaccines other than the AstraZeneca vaccine from COVAX so that we can mix the population with different vaccines that may be more efficacious against the South African variant.

Madam Speaker, moving on. I would like to also speak about the Ministry of Health and their purchase to pay PAHO for pharmaceuticals supplies of the Abbott rapid testing kits. And in this transaction, which is line Item 39, the Minister of Health has indicated that we will be purchasing 24,000 Abbott rapid testing kits from PAHO for \$584,000. And this is an initiative, Madam Speaker, that is welcomed. This is an initiative between WHO and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation whereby they are trying to have these low costing testing kits available to low and middle-income countries for less than US \$5.

Madam Speaker, with these kits you get response in 15 to 30 minutes, and they are very advantageous in that you get results in a decentralized form. So you do not have to actually go to a facility to have the test done to get the result that you need. The test is actually reliable, and it is portable, it is fast and it is cheap.

Madam Speaker, my issue with this is, why have we not bought more of these kits? This is a very important issue right now during our pandemic surge.

Madam Speaker, this test is not the normal PCR test where you actually use a long swab and it goes back into your nasopharynx. This is actually an intranasal swab. So, it is very minimally invasive, and you can actually do it on kids from two years and up. And Madam Speaker, it can be done on patients with or without symptoms and it should remain an essential part of our short and long-term strategy in dealing with the coronavirus.

Madam Speaker, my issue with this is why has the Minister of Health not opened this facility to private companies in Trinidad and Tobago? Madam Speaker, in the United States you can buy this antigen test over the counter for US \$23. It is available in all major pharmaceutical chains in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The company Abbott makes roughly 50 million test kits per month. In fact, the United States Department of Health and Human Services purchased the first 150 million test kits from Abbott and distributed it to schools and universities in the United States of America. So you can be in the United States, you can have your child in school, and if there is a kid that has any COVID-like symptoms the test can be done on that child and you get a result in 15 minutes and you know if to keep that child within the school system or take them out.

Madam Speaker, what is the Ministry of Health planning to do with these antigen kits? Is he going to distribute them to our school system? Right, our children need to get back to school. We do not have in any Pfizer vaccines currently at the moment. They are not vaccinated.

Madam Speaker, this test is important for two reasons. It warns the individual person, be it may that they are symptomatic or asymptomatic, in order to protect their families, as well as it provides for surveillance in terms of public health tracing and testing. It is even more important currently as we have the proliferation of the South African variant here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, this test was authorized by the FDA in the United States on the 15th of December and since then there have been over 19 test kits that have been authorized by if FDA, such as the Ellume COVID-19 home test, and the COVID-19 test by Pixel. Madam Speaker, all these tests do not require a prescription. It is easy and convenient for persons to conduct at home, in the security of their own home to get a COVID-19 test result. And by authorizing this test for pharmacies here in Trinidad and Tobago, persons can buy a COVID-19 test for as little as TT \$300 and would be able to test themselves.

Now, no one is saying this will replace the PCR test. The PCR test is the gold standard and what we are saying is that if persons have access to this test kit and they find out that they are positive from the test kit they can then go for a PCR test after. So, Madam Speaker, my issue is, why we are not allowing the Abbott test kits in Trinidad and Tobago? Why are we not allowing our drugstores and our private enterprises to bring down this test kit? Every effort must be made to flatten the curve.

We had a couple days of lower numbers and today we jumped right back up again. You know, so we need every tool that we could get in our toolbox in our arsenal to fight COVID-19. And it boggles the mind, this is on over the counter test kit, why are we not using it in Trinidad and Tobago for private use? Why is it only for the Government and the public institutions to use?

Madam Speaker, the test is very accurate. The BinaxNOW test is 84 per cent accurate in terms of sensitivity. So, I hereby make a call to the Minister of Health to make these test kits available for private enterprise for importation and for sale in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, moving on I would like to move on to the Ambulance Services which is under Head 009/01. And in this section the regional health

authorities are requesting \$37 million to pay the Global Medical Response of Trinidad and Tobago for the National Emergency Ambulance Service. And, Madam Speaker, what we have seen is that our ambulance service, it is under severe strain and I would not say it has collapsed, but it is about to collapse.

We actually had a case on the 1st of June where a baby was born on the roadside in Trinidad and Tobago. The resident from Otaheite called the ambulance and they were not able to get an ambulance to respond to them, Madam Speaker, and in an attempt to get to San Fernando General Hospital the couple had to pull aside at the side of the road and the baby was actually delivered on the side of the road in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, this is a severe indictment on the Ministry of Health, and what it says is that our medical infrastructure has perhaps collapsed. What if the mother had died in this situation? What if the child had died? And Madam Speaker, with these few interventions I would like to conclude now. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Joseph.

The Minister of Health (The Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I would like the opportunity to reply to my colleague because I know this is not a vaccine debate, but I have to reply to my colleague about the efforts being made by the Government to procure vaccines.

What is curious is that the hon. Member is now calling for different types of vaccines. It was not long ago when the Member for Oropouche East made his infamous statement about being guinea pigs and why we are bringing in so many types of vaccines into the country. And that is why we say the UNC has never been an ally in the fight against COVID-19. Your own Member said, why are we bringing so many types of vaccines? But he is not a vaccine person. You are a

good dentist with some medical training, and you are spot on. So there is a total disconnect between yourself and Oropouche East.

My friend asked, what are we doing about Pfizer? We started bilateral talks, Madam Speaker, with Pfizer on December 22, 2020. That is seven months ago. We had a follow-up meeting with Pfizer on March 9th, a follow-up meeting on April 29, 2021, and in that meeting a head of terms agreement is being prepared by Pfizer and will take approximately three months to complete. What is a head of terms agreement? It signifies a serious intent of both parties to eventually sign a purchase agreement and a contract. So, we have been vigorously pursuing Pfizer since December 22, 2020.

In addition, Madam Speaker, we signed again a non-disclosure agreement with Pfizer on January 19, 2021. So we have been pursuing Pfizer aggressively. AstraZeneca bilateral talks. I would not call the gentleman's name. Supply bilaterally, may be possible in the second half of 2021.

My colleague asked about Moderna, what are we doing? A meeting was held on January 14, 2021. At that time—and things will change—a minimum order of two million doses is possible. We had to buy a minimum of two million. We followed up on February 24th to enquire if there were any changes and we are waiting for feedback. Sanofi; we have been pursuing Sanofi. Sinopharm, I gave the history of that. Johnson&Johnson, bilateral meetings held on March 11, '21. At that time Johnson&Johnson said clearly to us they are not entering into bilateral agreements with any countries that are in COVAX. That is the state of play with the vaccine global supply across the world. African Medical Supplies Platform, well the hon. Prime Minister has spoken about that, and we look forward to that.

So, it is not right to say we have not been aggressively pursuing bilateral talks. We have been, but these are the fact that I put on the table. My friend also

made the statement about the rapid antigen tests and why we are not using it. No matter how often we have said it, we are using rapid antigen test in Trinidad and Tobago. We brought in over 200,000 and they are being used. That came in from PAHO, okay? So, I hope that answers that particular question.

Dr. Seecheran: Minister, I would just like to ask, why is it restricted? Why can private enterprise not bring it in?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Well, I was coming to that. We are working with the private sector to bring in rapid antigen tests which have a high degree of certification for both specificity and sensitivity. The last thing you want is a rapid test made by a fly-by-night distributor, brought in in a suitcase trade that gives you false negatives. I am sure you could agree with that. And I see you nodding your head in agreement.

Dr. Seecheran: Yeah, but—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So, we are aggressively working with that. I only have 20 minutes; I have given way once. But we have to guard against false negative tests. So Abbott rapid tests, 24,000 with swabs and media will be imported. So, Madam Speaker, I hope that it clarifies again, how aggressively we have been working bilaterally with COVAX, with African Medical Supplies Council.

Madam Speaker, there is one issue in the Standing Finance Committee which I notice my colleagues opposite studiously, studiously, avoided and this has not been mentioned before and for good reason. Under heading 04/011/10, UDeCOTT, TT \$46.9million Port of Spain General Hospital Central Block, and 04/01 again, US \$8.3 million Port of Spain General Hospital Central Block.

Let us wonder why the Opposition refuses to question what is happening at Central Block. Why? Because when money was flowing in this country the Kamla Persad-Bissessar regime refused to address the issue of Central Block. It was a risk

to life and limb. It is this Government, led by the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, that recognized the danger to life and limb and gave the go ahead to build a brand new 13 storey, 540 state of the art, Central Block in Port of Spain. But my colleagues opposite will not touch that line Item. And for good reason because they ought to hang their heads in shame in not attending to the issue of Central Block.

So where are we with that? The design is about 97 per cent completed. Key services, surgical services, radiology, laboratories, pharmacy, treatment rooms, psychiatry unit, paediatric wards, adolescent wards, adult wards, haematology and a Cath lab; and a Cath lab.

How are we progressing with that project? Long overdue, long, long overdue. When the UNC was running record budget deficits with price of oil north of \$100—because they spoke about budget deficits today. When the UNC was running budget deficits with oil prices north of \$100, why was not Central Block attended to? Why? Was that not a dereliction of duty on the part of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, MP, SC? But we took it on, we took it on.

Madam Speaker, the Central Block, all subterranean work has been finished, 397 piles driven, all steel tied, and ground slab almost completed. So, the foundation is about 100 per cent completed. The overall completion rate at this time now is about 23 per cent. The contractor was just about to start, I believe, steel erection when we had to shut down construction, but the cranes are on site, everything is on site, and once construction reopens Central Block aboveground will start to rise.

The approved budget for it is \$1,269,494,283.02 VAT inclusive. That is the project, but no questioning on Monday on this line Item, absolutely none. No mention of it today by the shadow Minister of Health. None. They studiously avoided any reference to this line Item because it is a blot, a stain on this country.

When you had the money, you could have built this cash. You could have built this cash.

So, Madam Speaker, those are some of the initiatives that we have undertaken to purchase vaccines bilaterally with COVAX and through the African Medical Supplies Platform. And I have accounted for the loan facility to build Central Block.

Another item which my colleagues studiously avoided was the CDAP IT system. This country before this administration had so many problems and complaints with people accessing CDAP drugs. It took this Government, this Government, to fix CDAP, to fix it once and for all. You realize you hardly hear any complaints about CDAP again, you hardly hear, because it has been fixed. Who are the beneficiaries of CDAP? Madam Speaker, 125,427 persons get CDAP spread amongst 238 pharmacies and all are using the health card.

What did we need the money for, the \$12 million?

8.00 p.m.

1. To pay for Internet services, \$942,000 roughly.
2. Third party costs payable to Infotech for hosting the software, \$4.9 million.
3. Administrative costs payable to Infotech for management and helpdesk assistance, \$5 million; and
4. NIPDEC management fees 3 per cent of total costs, \$1 million.

When you add that up, you get \$12,057,751.75 VAT exclusive but not one question was asked in the Standing Finance Committee about CDAP because it was fixed, it was fixed. And not only that, a lot of drugs which used to be chronically out of stock, even in the time of COVID we have managed to keep the drug supply open. And at this point, Madam Speaker, I would like to recognize

publicly, a young lady, a young pharmacist, the chief pharmacist called Anesa Siboo who has been doing yeoman's service as a public officer to keep drug supplies open, PPE, vaccines everything. She is a public officer of the highest, highest calibre and today she needs to be recognized. You would not see her at the press conferences, she is not that type of person. But there are so many people working behind the scenes, both at the Ministry and the RHAs to keep the health system in this country working.

Madam Speaker, as I close, I would like to join with my colleague to thank once again, every single health care worker of all categories, all categories, they are too numerous to mention. But they have been the angels of Trinidad and Tobago for the past year and a half. And we should salute them and a final word, Madam Speaker, as I close, the continuing narrative of the Opposition, especially the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to draw the public servants at the Ministry of Health into the political wrangling is to be deplored. The constant attacks on Dr. Roshan Parasram, Dr. Avery Hinds, and more recently, Dr. Maryam Richards, by the Member for Siparia is regretted. These are public officers who do not sleep much, working to keep this country afloat 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And the continued attacks by the Member for Siparia on those three public officers is something that should be deplored, and is regrettable and today I stand with them. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, I will not be very long, Madam Speaker, in view of the hour, we are getting close to curfew time I can see.

One could be forgiven, Madam Speaker, listening to the contributions of honourable Members opposite, that we were not dealing with the supplementation of the appropriation for fiscal year 2021 and the report of the Standing Finance Committee on that. So I would simply bring the House back to the matter, that what we are about today is to confirm and adopt the report of the Standing Finance Committee of this House. And I want to make another point while I am on that. I think there is a misunderstanding by Members opposite, I noticed it in the Standing Finance Committee itself when it broke into disarray at the end. The Standing Orders of the Parliament were changed several years ago, in fact, when there was another person in the Chair. And prior to that, for many, many years, for 40 or 50 years, actually, the Standing Finance Committee or Finance Committee, as it was called then, was chaired by the Minister of Finance. But we did a—as a Parliament, we did a complete overhaul of our Standing Orders and we have now come to the position, it actually began in 2014, I believe, where the Speaker presides over the Standing Finance Committee. And therefore, it is entirely incorrect and wrong of Members opposite to complain about the Government with respect to that particular committee meeting. That was a meeting of the Parliament.

So in that meeting of the Parliament, we looked at a supplementation of a number of Heads of Expenditure and I will just go through them quickly.

Election and Boundaries Commission: 4.196 million.

Office of the Prime Minister: 16.52 million.

Tobago House of Assembly: 80 million.

Ministry of Finance: 115.769 million.

Ministry of National Security: 725.608 million—I am rounding off.

Office of the Attorney General: 118.96 million.

Ministry of Health: 267.11 million.

Ministry of Public Administration: 24.8 million.

Ministry of Public Utilities: 944.577 million.

Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government: 142.216 million.

Ministry of Works and Transport: 294.426 million.

Ministry of Housing and Urban Development: 90.96 million.

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service: 57.72 million; and

The Ministry of Planning and Development: 44.728.

As we have gone through this debate, with respect to the adoption of the Report of the Standing Finance Committee, there has been precious little mention of many of the matters that are involved in this supplementation of the appropriation that were on the agenda of the Standing Finance Committee.

And I will give an example, for example, we are dealing with a pension plan at the Chaguaramas Development Authority, where for some time, the pension arrangements at the Chaguaramas Development Authority required supplementary funding. And I am very happy to be associated with this Standing Finance Committee where we can now resolve that and give a substantial sum to the Chaguaramas Development Authority so that it can make necessary pension payments. That is just an example of one of the things that we are doing in this matter for the service of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago and none of that was raised. Instead, it was just bacchanal and “kangkatang”.

And let me deal now with the supplementation for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service that we are asking this Parliament to approve in the Report of \$57 million. And Madam Speaker, hypothetically, I was thinking the other day, not today, that only in Trinidad and Tobago would a person who is of interest to the police, whose name is on a search warrant, would seek to pretend to lobby on

behalf of the police; only in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] I was thinking that the other day, amazing country.

But let me go now to the Member for Oropouche East. And I listened to what the Member for Oropouche East was saying and I came to the conclusion that the Member is encouraging financial illiteracy in Trinidad and Tobago. And I came to that conclusion because with respect to the arrangements that are mentioned in the Report of the Standing Finance Committee, whereby, an appropriation is being recommended for a debt service payment, for a loan of \$200 million for the Trinidad and Tobago Police for Goods and Services, the Member for Oropouche East repeatedly and falsely alleged that because the first instalment payment on that loan—listen, Madam Speaker, I respectfully ask you to listen carefully. The Member indicated that because the first instalment payment on that loan is in October, there will be no money disbursed on the loan before then. That is an absurdity. If we were to accept that, then if someone went for a car loan, he or she would not be able to receive the money until he has made all the payments on the car loan, similarly with a mortgage loan, and I want to repeat that I am very disappointed that a senior Member of this Parliament would seek to mislead the public in this way, just because we are appropriating money for an instalment payment on a loan, that instalment payment will be made in October, that has nothing to do with the disbursements of the proceeds of the loan. And I want to state categorically—and the Member knows that but he went on, and on, and on, and saying the debt service is in October so, no money for the police.

I want to state categorically, the Ministry of Finance has procured this loan, a special account has been established for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and \$198 million has been deposited into that account. And during the tirade of the Member for Oropouche East, I sought some clarification from the police. And they

were able to confirm to me that they have in fact submitted the first request for a drawdown under that \$200 million loan facility. And that first request is of the order of \$37 million. And they have submitted the necessary supporting documentation to NIPDEC which is the executing agency for that matter. And I have asked my public servants to fast track the disbursement of that first tranche of \$37 million for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. [*Desk thumping*] So the contribution of the Member for Oropouche East was a fiction.

I was also very disappointed that the Member sought to describe another appropriation in this report of 57 million for the police that is in addition to the 200, as peanuts. If \$57 million is peanuts for the hon. Member, it certainly is not peanuts for the majority of people in Trinidad and Tobago. So let me put the facts onto the record. We are seeking a supplementary appropriation of 57 million for Goods and Services for the Police Service. The original allocation for Goods and Services for the Police Service in 2021, 335 million. And with the \$200 million loan, it means the police will have available to them \$592 million for Goods and Services in 2021. That is a significant sum of money. And by no stretch of the imagination can it be described as nothing, which is what we heard from the hon. Member for Oropouche East.

The other matter I would like to correct is the question of the proposed loan from the Government of the Republic of China which was also mentioned by the Member for Oropouche East. One of the things I put in context as we seek to appropriate this money, as we seek to supplement the appropriation for 2021, I made general statements about how we would seek to finance the budget deficit and so on and the fact that we have no intention of approaching the International Monetary Fund. And it was in that context, I raised the issue of statements made about a loan that we are in the final stages of procuring from the Government of

the Republic of China. And I was very clear that we were being asked whether there were any structural adjustment conditionalities. Let me repeat, we were being asked whether there were any structural adjustment conditionalities such as retrenchment, devaluation, and removal of subsidies associated with that loan from China. And I said then, and I say now, there are no such conditionalities associated with that loan from China, none. All the Chinese Development Bank has requested is that 15 per cent of the proceeds be used to purchase goods and services from China and that is standard practice.

When you get a loan from a sovereign country, it is standard that there is an export arrangement where the particular country would export its goods and services as part of the arrangement and that is all it is. There is no requirement for policy adjustment or structural adjustment that will be associated with financing from the International Monetary Fund and the hon. Member knows that. Let me move on now.

I also heard a comment from Member for Chaguanas that the Standing Finance Committee was rushed. Madam Speaker, I was in that meeting, that meeting went on for over seven hours, seven hours with repeat—with tedious repetition from Members opposite, asking the same question over and over and over again. Seven hours in a meeting is not a rushed meeting and I do not want to draw you into this debate, Madam Speaker, but I want to compliment you for your patience. [*Desk thumping*] I also want to refute an untruth put into the record by the Member for Oropouche East and also the Member for Siparia.

During the debate today, I sought clarification from the Parliament staff as to whether the answers to the questions that had been raised by Members opposite during the Standing Finance Committee had been circulated. And I got confirmation that the answers were posted on the Rotunda. And they were posted

long before the Member for Oropouche East got up to speak and make his untruthful claim that they had not received responses in any form or fashion in any place, anywhere, anytime. But Madam Speaker, this is what we have to go through. We on this side, we have to listen to a litany of untruths, coming from Members on the other side. And I want to speak about the statement I made as Minister of Finance, we were required to respond to questions posed to the Ministry of Finance. So that when I was talking about the problem we had in the Ministry of Finance, that was only with respect to the questions posed to the Ministry of Finance, it was not to all of the other accounting officers because I have seen the letter from the Parliament, asking the various accounting officers in all the Ministries to provide the necessary answers to the questions posed in the Standing Finance Committee. And when I was able to leave this podium and go and present our answers to the Clerk, I was told that we were in fact, the last Ministry to do so which meant that everybody else had provided answers to the questions posed in the Standing Finance Committee. So I thought I would put that on the record to debunk the untruths that have been stated in this Parliament.

With respect to all of the other matters, Madam Speaker, I would also like to debunk statements made by I believe it is Caroni East, I am not so sure with these new MPs on that side, it is taking a little while to understand which constituency they represent but I believe it was Caroni East and also Oropouche East. I want to make it clear that so far, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has already received approximately 250,000 vaccines already, in terms of Sinopharm and AstraZeneca. Approximately 250,000 vaccines have already been received. And therefore, when a Member like the Member for Oropouche East says that we have no vaccines, absolute hyperbole, exaggeration, untruth. We have already received 250,000 vaccines and between June, July, August and so on, we have another

1,300,000 vaccines to receive, all paid for already, either in full or in terms of the required down payment at the various point in time. And I also want to make the point that I saw when I heard all of this talk here today about no vaccines and no vaccination taking place, I saw a report on the vaccination of persons from the manufacturing sector at the Divali Nagar site where over 4,000 persons were vaccinated in one day and I want to compliment the Ministry of Health for that performance. [*Desk thumping*]

So having said all of that, Madam Speaker, it is entirely unfortunate that Members opposite did not concentrate and focus on the matter before the House which is the adoption of the Report of the Standing Finance Committee of this House for the First Session, Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021. And since they had nothing to say, I beg to move, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this House adopt the Report of the Standing Finance Committee of the House of Representatives for the First Session (2020/2021), Twelfth Parliament on the consideration of proposals for the Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation for the fiscal year 2021.

**FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTATION AND VARIATION OF
APPROPRIATION) (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2021**

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And since the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) (Financial Year 2021) Bill, 2021, is a formality, I beg to move:

That a Bill to supplement and vary the Appropriation of the Sum the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation (Financial Year 2021) Act, 2020, be now read a second time.

And as I said, Madam Speaker, this is a formality, we have already discussed and debated all of the Heads of Expenditure associated with this Bill and therefore, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, usually there is no debate on this Bill and I have been advised that no Member shall be joining the debate. So I will therefore now put the question.

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.

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday the 16th day of June at 1.30 pm, at which time, Madam Speaker, we will do the Firearms (Amdt.) Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.25 p.m.