



Report of the Joint Select Committee
on
Foreign Affairs
Fifth Session (2014/2015) Tenth Parliament

**Foreign Affairs issues:
Enlightening Members of Parliament and the public
on Initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Foreign
Affairs aimed at expanding the relations between
Trinidad and Tobago and Central and South America**



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Date Laid: H.o.R. _____

Senate: _____

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MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE



Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir
Chairman



Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Vice-Chairman



Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, MP
Member



Mr. Devant Maharaj
Member



Mr. Fazal Karim
Member



Mr. Surujrattan Rambachan, MP
Member



Mr. Nyleung Hypolite, MP
Member



Mrs. Venella Alleyne-Toppin, MP
Member



Mr. Avinash Singh
Member



Mr. Winston Dookeran, MP
Member

The Committee

Establishment and Mandate

1. On Friday November 07, 2014 the House of Representatives and December 09, 2014 the Senate, agreed to resolutions on the subject of the appointment of the Joint Standing Committees. The Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs was one of the appointed Committees.
2. Standing Order 105 of the House of Representatives gives the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs
“the duty of considering from time to time and reporting, whenever necessary, on-
 - a) International treaties and agreements entered into by the Government on behalf of the State; and
 - b) other matters relating to Foreign Affairs as may be referred to it by the House.”.

Powers

3. By Standing Order 111 of the House of Representatives, the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs is additionally empowered to:
 - (a) send for persons, papers and records;
 - (b) sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;
 - (c) adjourn from place to place;
 - (d) report from time to time;
 - (e) appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not otherwise readily available, or to elucidate of complexity within the Committee’s order of reference;
 - (f) communicate with any other Committee on matters of common interest; and
 - (g) meet concurrently with any other Committee for the purpose of deliberating, taking evidence or considering draft reports.

Chairmanship

4. In accordance with Standing Orders 97(3) of the House of Representatives and 71(3) of the Senate, the Committee at its first meeting held on Friday January 20, 2015, elected Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir as Chairman and Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie as Vice-Chairman.

Meetings

5. The Committee held three (3) meetings on the following dates, one of which was held in public:

January 20, 2015;

February 25, 2015; and

March 25, 2015.

6. The Minutes, Verbatim Notes and Attendance Record are attached at *Appendices I, II and III* respectively.

Work of the Committee

7. At its Second meeting held on February 25, 2015, the Committee agreed to undertake research in order to understand how Committees on Foreign Affairs of other Parliaments within the Commonwealth with similar mandate function.

8. At this meeting the Committee also agreed to meet in public with Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to obtain their views in relation to the benefits achieved, as well as the challenges faced so far, as a result of treaties and agreements entered into with States of the Central and South American region, and related matters. Additionally, this was seen as a means to enlighten Members of Parliament and the public on various Foreign Affairs issues.

9. The Committee subsequently met with the following officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 25, 2015.

10. The under-mentioned were the areas of focus:

(i) **What are the responsibilities included in the warrant of appointment of the Minister of Foreign Affairs?**

The warrant of appointment of the Minister of Foreign Affairs includes responsibility for external relations and the treaties. In the conduct of external relations in foreign policy, the Foreign Ministry is the focal point of contact between states, regional and international organizations with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. However, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs has responsibility for treaties, he does not exercise any oversight on the line Ministries which are responsible for the implementation of treaties entered into.

(ii) Language as a Barrier to Diplomacy

To some degree, language has been an impediment. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has received feedback that language has been an obstacle to the swift advancement of negotiations and obtaining a wider appreciation of the issues which should be pursued. However, this has not stopped Trinidad and Tobago in building its capacity to recruit business persons who are interested in moving into the region.

(iii) Attracting Trade and Business

The Partial Scope Agreements, for the last four years, with the countries of Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador, create a larger and more competitive market for domestic exporters. This is expected to redound to the benefit of the producers and consumers of Trinidad and Tobago.

(iv) Benefits of Investments

Due to its geographic proximity, Central America is a burgeoning area of interest for Trinidad and Tobago, and potential gains exist in a number of arenas. There are obvious economic benefits of trade and tourism and within the last few years, Trinidad and Tobago has seen an increase in flights from COPA Airlines, which is based in Panama. The Ministry intends to maintain and to maximize the potential for market penetration given their existing transport link.

(v) Interest from Local Investors in Latin America

Trinidad and Tobago businessmen are interested in investing in Latin American countries. Two weeks prior to the meeting held on March 25, 2015, the TTMA led a trade mission to Panama. It was indicated that this mission was very successful and hosted forty-five (45) businessmen and over twenty (20) exhibitors at an “Expo Comer”, which is an international trade exhibition. One business group from Trinidad and Tobago has an investment in the Dominican Republic in the business of glass bottles and other types of glass products.

Also, the Ministry indicated that investors intend to get involved in the growing agricultural industry within Central America to obtain the type of raw material needed within Trinidad and Tobago to fuel industrial development. The general philosophy of local businessmen is to secure a bilateral relationship with businesses within Latin America.

(vi) Remittances from Export into Cuba

The Exim Bank of Trinidad and Tobago has endeavored to facilitate the processing of payments to exporters trading with Cuba. Republic Bank has established a financial office to facilitate same in collaboration with Canadian company and the EximBank which facilitates payments to local exporters to Cuba. In the past, receiving payments proved to be a challenging task as they were received between six (6) months to one (1) year.

However this has been considerably reduced as exporters now receive payments within two (2) to three (3) months.

(vii) Advantages gained from the Diplomatic Academy

The Ministry reported that the Diplomatic Academy has been phenomenal in its outreach. The Academy has generated interest from countries such as Spain, Korea, Mexico and Argentina, which has translated into working arrangements in the formulation and the delivery of modules in moving forward. The Ministry indicated that the Academy is an important bridge which presents an opportunity to Trinidad and Tobago to build the nation's human resource capacity including; personnel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Service, other government agencies and civil society.

(viii) Bilateral Agreements with Brazil

Brazil is a very significant country in the southern hemisphere and a very important political partner for Trinidad and Tobago. One of the key areas of the bilateral relationship with Brazil has been agriculture development. There has also been a great deal of interest in the sale of liquefied natural gas to Brazil. In addition, several agreements were concluded between Trinidad and Tobago and Brazil in areas such as agriculture, energy, technical cooperation and food security.

(ix) Partial Scope Agreements – Benefits of the Panama Partial Scope Agreement

The Panama Partial Scope Agreement provides for the preferential access of some one hundred and seventy-five (175) products emanating from Trinidad and Tobago into the Panamanian market. The agreement also envisages progressive trade liberalization. After one year of operation, Trinidad and Tobago and Panama may enter into a comprehensive services agreement which will inevitably provide a market for Trinidad and Tobago's service providers with particular emphasis is on the creative industries. The Ministry views the creative industries as having considerable potential for economic diversification, thus reducing our dependence on the energy sector.

(x) Visa Abolition Agreements

Trinidad and Tobago has negotiated visa abolition agreements with almost all of South and Central America. At one time this facility was only possible for persons holding diplomatic passports. At present, the same is available to ordinary passport holders. Persons may enter Trinidad and Tobago and locals may enter into those Latin American countries without hindrance. This arrangement is salient to business relations, investment and tourism. At present, T&T nationals are required to have visas to enter Paraguay and Bolivia. The Ministry advised that there is an agreement regarding visa abolition, being finalized with Paraguay. Apart from those two countries there is no impediment to travel to South and Central America.

(xi) Role of the MoFA in Investment Agreements between Trinidad and Tobago and Latin American countries

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has responsibility for treaties, but does not exercise any oversight of the line Ministries which are responsible for the implementation of such treaties. The Ministry also has line responsibility for Law of the Sea matters and matters related to the CARICOM Single Market and Economy. Within the last two (2) decades there has been an increased focus on expanding and enhancing relations with Central America and South America. To this end, Trinidad and Tobago has established diplomatic relations. The countries in the hemisphere have enlarged their diplomatic presence and have entered into a number of bilateral agreements with the aim of enhancing cooperation, technical assistance and promoting trade and investment.

(xii) Maintenance of Foreign Exchange to facilitate Foreign Policy Commitments

Within recent times, the Governor of the Central Bank has assured the public that the bank would be providing adequate amounts of foreign exchange to meet their obligations.

(xiii) Role of the MoFA in Public Education on Foreign Affairs

The Ministry stated that public education is being addressed on a number of different fronts. It was indicated that persons may visit the Ministry's website at www.foreign.gov.tt to obtain any information needed in relation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On its website the Ministry publishes an online newspaper which carries the positions of Trinidad and Tobago, statements made by the Minister etc. The Ministry seeks to disseminate information as is possible, through its diplomatic missions.

The Communications Department of the Ministry, has utilized social media channels to capture that group of users. Additionally, within the last five (5) years, the Ministry has targeted school children through its competition entitled "Bridging Borders through Art" and an Essay Writing competition. The Ministry is of the view these are ways of building and demystifying the area of international relations and foreign affairs with positive implications for the future.

(xiv) Practicality of entering into agreements with Latin American and Caribbean Trading Blocs

Entering into an agreement with MERCOSUR or CARICOM jointly as opposed to entering into an agreement with singular countries is a concept that the Ministry believes to be best suited for future endeavours. The Ministry indicated that its intention was to initiate contact with the Latin American region through partial scope agreements. When the entities involved have established firm relations - in their bi-lateral relations after years of experience, then the possibility of full blown trade agreements between trading blocs will be feasible.

(xv) **Role of the MoFA in bolstering Trinidad's candidate to Secretary General of the Commonwealth**

Sen. the Hon. Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie is the candidate of Trinidad and Tobago for the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth at the elections expected to take place in Malta at the end of 2015. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working with Dr. Tewarie to craft a strategy.

11. Further information on the above-mentioned areas can be obtained from the Verbatim Notes attached at Appendix II.

Recommendations

12. The Committee humbly recommends:

- (i) that the initiatives pursued by the Government in relation to expanding into the Central American and Latin American market be continued; and
- (ii) that the public be informed on a continuing basis on initiatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and opportunities available to citizen for greater economic and social inter-relation with Latin America.

13. The Committee submits its Report for the Fifth Session (2014/2015), Tenth Parliament.

Sgd.
Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir
Chairman

Sgd.
Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Vice-Chairman

Sgd.
Mr. Nileung Hypolite
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Vernella Alleyne-Toppin, MP
Member

Sgd.
Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan, MP
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, MP
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Devant Maharaj
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Avinash Sing
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Fazal Karim
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Winston Dookeran
Member

APPENDIX I

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF THE THIRD MEETING OF THE HELD IN THE ARNOLD THOMASOS ROOM (WEST), LEVEL 6, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, IWFC, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, MARCH 25, 2015

Present were:

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir	Chairman
Mr. Devant Maharaj	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, MP	Member
Mr. Winston Dookeran, MP	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Ms. Jacqueline Phillip-Stoute	Secretary
Mr. Indar Sieunarine	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Parliamentary Intern

Absent were:

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Vice-Chairman (Excused)
Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan. MP	Member (Excused)
Mr. Fazal Karim	Member (Excused)
Mr. NiLeung Hypolite, MP	Member
Mrs. Vernella Alleyne-Toppin, MP	Member

COMMENCEMENT

- 1.1 The Chairman called the meeting to order at 10:13 a.m.
- 1.2 The Chairman indicated that Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie, Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan and Mr. Fazal Karim were excused from the meeting.

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

- 2.1 The Committee considered the Minutes of the 2nd Meeting held on February 25, 2015. The Chairman enquired whether there were any amendments and/or omissions.
- 2.2 The Minutes were amended in paragraph 4.2 by deleting the word “**influence**” and inserting the word “**determine**”.
- 2.3 The Minutes were confirmed by Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir and seconded by Mr. Devant Maharaj.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE SECOND (2nd) MEETING

3.1 **Item 5.4, Page 2:** The Chairman informed Members that the research on how other Commonwealth parliaments with similar committees on Foreign Affairs function was undertaken by the Secretariat. Copies were circulated.

CONSIDERATION OF MANDATE

4.1 Members' attention was drawn to Standing Order 105 of the House of Representatives which conveys the mandate of the Committee.

4.2 A discussion ensued, subsequent to which the Committee agreed that a legal opinion with respect to its mandate must be obtained and circulated to Members prior to the setting of another meeting.

DISCUSSIONS PRIOR TO PUBLIC MEETING

5.1 The Committee agreed that the objective of the public meeting with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) is to enlighten Members of Parliament and the public on various Foreign Affairs issues.

SUSPENSION/RESUMPTION

6.1 The meeting was suspended at 11:11 a.m.

6.2 The meeting was resumed at 11:16 a.m. (in public) in the J. Hamilton Maurice Room.

DISCUSSIONS WITH OFFICIALS OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (MoFA)

7.1 The Chairman welcomed officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and outlined the main areas of focus of the public meeting.

7.2 Introductions were exchanged.

7.3 At the request of the Committee, a brief statements was made by the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the statement the following were the areas of focus:

- (a) The warrant of appointment of the Minister of Foreign Affairs includes responsibility for external relations and the treaties. The Ministry is the focal point of contact between states, regional, international organizations and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. While the Minister has responsibility for treaties, he does not exercise any oversight of the line Ministries which are responsible for the implementation of those treaties. The Ministry is also responsible for "Law of the Sea" matters and matters related to the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME).

- (b) The Ministry, at a request of the Parliament, provided a list of treaties which Trinidad and Tobago has entered into with a number of countries within Central America and South America. It was indicated that in the past two (2) decades there has been an increased focus on expanding and enhancing relations with Central and South America.
- (c) The countries in the hemisphere have enlarged their diplomatic presence and have entered into a number of bilateral agreements with the aim of enhancing cooperation, technical assistance and promoting trade and investment in accordance with Trinidad and Tobago's development objectives. Additionally, Trinidad and Tobago has pursued membership in regional and hemispheric mechanisms with a view to promoting and protecting its various interests. Of the 17 countries in the Central and South America, a total of 11 have established resident missions in Port of Spain. Within Central America these include; Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Mexico. The South American nations include; Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, and interest has also been articulated by Honduras and Ecuador.
- (d) Trinidad has sought to enhance its diplomatic presence in Central America through the opening of an Embassy in Costa Rica in 2008. In October 2014, Cabinet gave approval for the establishment of a Diplomatic Mission in Panama City, Panama. Trinidad maintains embassies in both Brazil and Caracas, Venezuela. Benefits derived from the relationships with countries of this region are in the areas of trade, investment, tourism, bilateral cooperation and political sport.

7.4 Other areas touched on during the public meeting are as follows:

- (i) Language as a Barrier to Diplomacy;
- (ii) Attracting Trade and Business;
- (iii) Benefits of Investments;
- (iv) Interest from Local Investors in Latin America;
- (v) Advantages gained from the Diplomatic Academy;
- (vi) Bilateral Agreements with Brazil;
- (vii) Partial Scope Agreements – Benefits of the Panama Partial Scope Agreement;
- (viii) Visa Abolition Agreements;
- (ix) Role of the MoFA in Investment Agreements between Trinidad and Tobago and Latin American countries;
- (x) Maintenance of Foreign Exchange to facilitate Foreign Policy Commitments;
- (xi) Role of the MoFA in Public Education on Foreign Affairs;
- (xii) Practicality of entering into agreements with Latin American Trading Blocs; and
- (xiii) Role of the MoFA in bolstering Trinidad's candidate to Secretary General of the Commonwealth.

[See Verbatim Notes for further information on these areas]

ADJOURNMENT

8.1 The Chairman thanked Members and adjourned the meeting to April 29, 2015 at 10:00 a.m.

8.2 The adjournment was taken at 12:20 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Sgd.
Chairman

Sgd.
Secretary

April 09, 2015

APPENDIX II

VERBATIM NOTES

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRD MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, IN THE ARNOLD THOMASOS ROOM (EAST), SIXTH FLOOR, AND AT THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM (MEZZANINE FLOOR), TOWER D, INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, #1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 2015 AT 10.13 A.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir	Chairman
Mr. Devant Maharaj	Member
Mr. Winston Dookeran	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mrs. Jacqueline Phillip-Stoute	Secretary
Mr. Indar Sieunarine	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Johnson Greenidge	Parliamentary Intern

ABSENT

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Vice-Chairman [<i>Excused</i>]
Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Fazal Karim	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. NiLeung Hypolite	Member
Mrs. Vernella Alleyne-Toppin	Member

11.16 a.m.: *Meeting resumed.*

OFFICIALS OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Frances Seignoret	Acting Permanent Secretary
Ms. Marise Warner	Legal Affairs Officer

Amb. Mervyn Assam

Ambassador Extraordinary and
Plenipotentiary

Ms. Roanna Gopaul

Director, Americas Division

Mr. Chairman: Good morning to Members of the Joint Select Committee, good morning to members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, good morning to members of the listening public. Welcome. This is the very first public engagement of the Committee on the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs which was recently established by the Parliament and recently constituted.

I am Dhanayshar Mahabir, Chairman of this Committee, Independent Senator, and I will ask Members of the Committee to introduce themselves before I ask members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to introduce themselves. May I begin on my left with MP Gopee-Scoon?

[Members of the Committee introduce themselves]

Mr. Chairman: Now members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I will ask you to introduce yourselves.

[Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduce themselves]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This particular meeting is not an enquiry in the traditional sense. It is really our first meeting with the individuals of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who are aware, certainly much more than Members of the Committee and members of the population, with respect to the matters relating to the foreign policy of Trinidad and Tobago.

At our meeting, the Committee indicated that Trinidad and Tobago has been a long-standing member of Caricom, of course, English speaking Caribbean, but within recent times we have been increasing our exposure to the Spanish speaking countries in our hemisphere and the objective of this meeting is simply to inform members of the Committee, and of course by extension, members of the population,

on what really are some of the challenges that Trinidad and Tobago has experienced with respect to engaging this part of the hemisphere. What are some of our successes to date, what are some of the treaties that we have entered into and what kind of benefits have Trinidad and Tobago enjoyed as we increase our exposure to this particular region? Those are some of the areas of interest for us.

Before I move on to Members of the Committee itself, I will ask the members from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make a brief opening statement for the benefit of the Committee in the areas outlined to them as our area of interest. Thank you.

Miss Seignoret: Thank you, Chairman. Distinguished Chairman, hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs and other hon. members of the Joint Select Committee, staff of the Parliament, good morning. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is pleased to provide its views in relation to the benefits achieved, as well as the challenges experienced to date as a result of treaties and agreements entered into with States from Central America and the South American region.

By way of the introduction, we would like to simply refer to a little bit of the background on the role and function of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this particular matter. The warrant of appointment of the Minister of Foreign Affairs includes responsibility for external relations and the treaties. In the conduct of external relations in foreign policy, the Foreign Ministry is the focal point of contact between states, regional, international organizations and with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. However, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs has responsibility for treaties, he does not exercise any oversight of the line Ministries which are responsible for the implementation of the treaties. We also have line responsibility for Law of the Sea matters and matters related to the Caricom Single Market and Economy.

We have, at a request of the Parliament, provided a list of treaties pertaining to

which Trinidad and Tobago has entered with a number of countries, and we are focusing today on those entered into with Central America and South America. We would just like to go back to the country's Independence in 1962, where we sought at that time to establish diplomatic relations with a number of major global powers including some of the countries in this region, and within the last two decades there has been, as you have indicated a little while ago, Chair, an increased focus on expanding and enhancing relations with Central America and South America. To this end, Trinidad and Tobago has established diplomatic relations. The countries in the hemisphere has enlarged their diplomatic presence and has entered into a number of bilateral agreements with the aim of enhancing cooperation, technical assistance and promoting trade and investment in pursuit of Trinidad and Tobago's development objectives.

Additionally, Trinidad and Tobago has pursued membership in regional and hemispheric mechanisms with a view to promoting and protecting this country's varied interests. It should be noted at the outset, that Trinidad and Tobago's interest in Central and South America has not been unilateral, and there has been an even greater demonstration of such engagement from countries in the region. So much so, that of the 17 countries in the Central and South America a total of 11 have established resident missions in Port of Spain from Central America, these include Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Mexico which straddles Mesoamerica. From South America these include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, and interest has also been articulated by Honduras and Ecuador.

This country in turn has sought to enhance its diplomatic presence in Central America through the opening of an Embassy in Costa Rica within recent years in 2008, and in October last year Cabinet gave approval for the establishment of a Diplomatic Mission in Panama City, Panama. We have long had an Embassy in

Brazil and in Caracas, Venezuela, from which there is accreditation to the Mercosur countries, the Southern Cone countries and the Andean countries.

In terms of some of the benefits that derived from Trinidad and Tobago relationships with the countries in this particular region, those benefits are in the areas of trade, investment, tourism, bilateral cooperation and political sport.

11.25a.m.

Ms. Signoret: The Partial Scope Agreements, included for the last four years, with the countries of Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador, create a larger and more competitive market for domestic exporters and that is expected to redound to the benefit of producers and the consumers, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Greater market access in the market demand opportunities are also expected to result in the entry of new domestic firms thereby creating employment. And in respect of the Panama Partial Scope Trade Agreement, apart from the preferential treatment in goods, the agreement also envisages future progressive trade liberalization and services and this will inevitably provide a market for Trinidad and Tobago's service providers and suppliers in industries, particularly the emphasis on the creative industries. We see that is a particular area of much potential. It is also in Trinidad and Tobago's interest to diversify its trading partners, thereby reducing our dependency on a sole destination of source.

In respect of bilateral corporation, even though the balance of trade provides a most tangible measure or indicator of these bilateral trade agreements, this is not the only benefit that might occur and I would say that there are about 17 countries in the region that we are looking at. About 10 or 11 of them, we do have a positive balance, a favourable balance of trade with those countries.

In respect of the other agreements, those agreements are energy-related, technical cooperation, security air services, cultural agreements, for example, that Trinidad and Tobago has concluded. Those would be on the list that was provided.

The intangibles such as political, sport, and collaboration, should not be discounted. While our country shares many similarities with the small economies of Central America. Even though they are not small island developing states as those in our region, they do experience similar issues such as climate change and security-related matters, vulnerability is another way that we find a common ground, in terms of moving forward in collaboration in the wider hemispheric level.

In addition, many of the countries in this region belong to the same regional hemispheric and international organization, such as the Association of Caribbean States, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Organization of American States, the Specific Alliance and the United Nations.

Just to say, in respect of the Specific Alliance that is actually just four core countries, but with a number of different observers from a variety of different regions. Within 2014, we sought membership as an observer in this convergence process, which we see as having much potential for Trinidad and Tobago, particularly with an emphasis for us on the business council aspect of the Specific Alliance. The work being done by that group on small and medium-sized enterprises and financial and investment integration.

Chair, just to say as well that, in terms of other types of support, we have realized that our partners in this region have been sharing similar matters of interest and, therefore, we have been able to garner support for different candidacies that are of particular importance to Trinidad and Tobago, at least which is our current candidacy to host the Secretariat of the Arms Trade Treaty. In December of last year, we were able to secure the support of the group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC), which was welcomed by the CELAC Summit in January.

I will end at this point. We do propose to go through with you. We would be guided by you on the different agreements and speak to them as we move forward.

Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, very much, Madam Permanent Secretary, for that very comprehensive overview of our relationships with the Spanish-speaking countries.

An obvious question, before I move on to you next presenter from your panel, which arises for us is simply this: How much of an impediment has language been for us penetrating Central and South America?

Ms. Signoret: To some degree, it has been an impediment. There has been feedback the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has received as language being an obstacle to moving faster in concluding negotiations and having a wider appreciation of the issues to be followed upon. But that has not stopped Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago has been building capacity, in terms of reaching out, in terms of having those interested business persons moving into the region. While it may not be very many, it has not stopped Trinidad and Tobago from looking at the potential that is on our doorstep and from working steadfastly to create a bridge, to create that linkage with the countries of Latin America. On the other hand, the countries of Latin America are finding more and more that Trinidad and Tobago is a hub.

Earlier on I mentioned that there were a number of countries that have established embassies in Port of Spain. That is also significant. It means that there is an opportunity for greater engagement for pursuing investment possibilities and other types of benefits that would be of mutual interest to both the country that is establishing a mission here and, of course, our own country.

So while it may be an issue, I think that is one of the elements that we as a nation can continue to work towards, in that Spanish is the first foreign language of Trinidad and Tobago and that remains an important element for us as a people, as a country in moving forward into that region.

Mr. Chairman: Before I pass it on to members of the committee who may wish

to pose their own questions to the PS, you did mention Spanish but I am also considering Portuguese. Brazil, of course, very huge. Is it that in Brazil as we engage and trade with them, that there are a number of English speakers there so that our limitation in, say, the Portuguese language, may not be such a great impediment?

Ms. Signoret: There are limitations, but for trade, for interested groups, I believe that there are really no barriers.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Members of the committee are there anyone wishing to pose a question to the Permanent Secretary, based upon her presentation?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Sure. One understands that, particularly from the interest of business persons who are continually looking at expanding their markets into Central America and into South America. That being so, do we measure, have we measured, the value of our establishing these diplomatic missions in Brazil, or instance, Costa Rica and Venezuela? Although I can understand the limitations of doing business in Venezuela. Have we measured the gains of establishing these missions there? Have we really been able to facilitate the expansion of markets for the private sector in Trinidad and from the Ministries perspective, not certainly from policy perspective, what else can be done to facilitate business people in the expansion of markets in these areas?

Ms. Signoret: I would like to ask Ambassador Assam to deal with this, thank you.

Ambassador Assam: Thank you, Permanent Secretary, Mr. Chair, members of the committee. Trinidad and Tobago has been benefiting substantially from its diplomatic relations with all of the countries in Central America and South America, particularly in the area of trade.

In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there resides a cadre of Foreign Service Officers who are quite fluent in many languages: French, Spanish, Portuguese,

German and others. So that we do not have a serious disadvantage, in terms of our association with some of these countries.

In addition to which, a lot of these countries do speak English. In my experience of being the lead negotiator in several of the agreements in Cuba, Panama, Guatemala, El Salvador, I have found that a lot of them speak English, not perfectly but they do speak English. And, of course, we have the benefit of simultaneous translation at these negotiations, so we do not have a problem.

Also, I have discovered that quite a few members of the private sector have in fact started to become proficient in the Spanish language, because it is of great benefit to them to be able to speak to their counterparts in the counterparts' language. So that is happening at this point in time.

If you look at the balance of trade, as the Permanent Secretary alluded to in her presentation, you will see that we enjoy a favourable balance of trade with most of the countries in South and Central America. Perhaps, the only country that we do not have a favourable balance with is the Dominican Republic and we are trying to, obviously, change that pattern as soon as it is feasible, because we have a few challenges with the Dominican Republic, in terms of convening the Joint Council to iron out some of the challenges there.

The other one is Costa Rica. We do have some challenges there in respect of, again convening the Joint Council to see how we can iron out some of the problems. Costa Rica is particularly difficult, in that they want manufacturers/exporters to register every type of package differently. In other words, let me give you an example. KC Confectionary, if they have three ounce, six ounce, nine ounce, 12 ounce, 16 ounce packages, each one has to be registered separately and that is very costly. Sacha cosmetics is another one, irrespective of it being the same product, once it is in a package or a different bottle or whatever it is, they have to be registered separately.

Of course, there is a law in the Dominican Republic, which is quite oppressive, that once you appoint an agent, you almost appoint an agent for life. I think it is called Law 173. And if you had to break that relationship with that particular agent or distributor, the penalties are very, very onerous and, therefore, we have to be very careful when we are going there, in terms of selecting people who would, obviously be able to develop a relationship that would not end up in any kind of fracture. But by and large, we have been able to do very well.

In September last year we are able to review the whole agreement between Cuba and Caricom we were able to get, from Cuba, 196—in addition to what we had already negotiated—additional products into their market preferentially and all Cuba asked for was 49 and, therefore, that is a very great advantage of doing business with Cuba and we have, as you know, the trade facilitation office. But more importantly or, perhaps, recently and equally important, is the presence of the exportTT Organization, which assists manufacturers, exporters in not only facilitating but penetrating markets in South and Central America. So we have been doing quite well and language is not real any insurmountable barrier, because, as I said, they speak English to some extent and we are learning the language. We have capacity in the Ministry and the private sector is also learning the language equally.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much Ambassador Assam. But there is a question that MP Scoon raised, with respect to assessing the cost and benefits of the diplomatic missions of having a separate mission in each of these countries. Have you done that assessment and is there merit to simply having say Central America one mission that would service a number of countries in the interim, as opposed to having a separate mission in each of those?

Ms. Seignoret: As it currently stands, Central America we have one mission currently. We are in the process of acting on the mandate of the Cabinet so that we would have a second mission which would be in Panama. So the first mission exist

in San Jose, Costa Rica. There are only two. Central America is a burgeoning area of interest for Trinidad and Tobago and there are gains, we believe from number of different points of view, not just from the economic, the trade, the tourism. Within the last few years, Trinidad and Tobago has seen an increase in flights from COPA Airlines, which operates out of Panama as its base. It means that there is a greater connection to Central America, which we want to maintain and to maximize any potential from.

Next, we are also very cognizant of the expansion of the Panama Canal and the great interest that exists and many opportunities that exist for the export of our goods and services.

Ambassador Assam: With your permission, Permanent Secretary. On the initiative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, we are pursuing what we call a concept called Inter-airline Connectivity. We had a meeting and the Permanent Secretary was there, two years ago with myself and the Minister, in the Dominican Republic and we just had a meeting about a month ago, with a delegation from Colombia, where we are trying to get Avianca, COPA, Caribbean Airlines to come together and develop some kind of connectivity that would redound to the benefit of our three countries, in terms of investment flows, tourism and business.

But one of the things that the establishment of these missions also bring to Trinidad and Tobago is investment flows. We have started to see investment flows from El Salvador. Perhaps, a lot of people may not know that Courts, the whole chain of Courts Stores in Trinidad and Tobago, they are owned by a company in El Salvador and they have just also bought the Valpark Plaza and they are going to be developing that into a modern plaza, similar to what you would have in any metropolitan country.

They are also going to be developing a store in Freeport, a headquarters in Freeport and a warehouse in Freeport and they are going to be also expanding that

megastore on the highway. There was a fire a few years ago and it had to be truncated. They are going to be redeveloping that shop and they intend to get involved in more investments in Trinidad and Tobago.

Guatemala has started to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. The whole PepsiCo beverages company is in collaboration with the owners of Blue Waters and they are doing all kinds of things, in terms of, and they intend to expand even further. There is also on the cards a refinery a palm oil refinery between a Guatemala businessman and a local businessman, which we hope would be coming on stream before long. So there are signs of benefits in respect of investment but we also hope that we will have a set of—because of the inter-airline connectivity—policies where we have what we call a tri-destination tourism policy where we would get tourist flowing into Trinidad and Tobago.

We have signed the Tourism Cooperation Agreements with El Salvador, with Guatemala and we are about to sign one this coming weekend with Cuba, which is a very important tourism designation, and we should be able to piggyback on the Cuba tourism business where they have about over two million tourist per year that we can have come into Trinidad and Tobago for a few days, once we develop the airline capacity, and COPA has been doing a good job with two flights in and out of Trinidad daily. So I think these are some of the benefits.

In addition to the intangible benefits whereby we can develop the relationship between Trinidad and Tobago and Central America, getting closer with what we call Seeker. Seeker is the equivalent of Caricom and we have been developing these relationships. I think the Minister of Foreign Affairs has been doing a good job, in terms of getting closer to Central America to very frequent interaction with the foreign Ministers of those countries.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much Ambassador Assam. Before I ask other members of the committee, there is one thing that I wish to raise with you and that

is in relation to something you said in relation to the DR before, that they do have some peculiarities, some idiosyncrasies, with respect to their laws concerning agencies and appointed and so on. What I wanted to ask was this: are we seeing much interest from investors within Trinidad and Tobago investing in these countries as they are showing interest in Trinidad and are there certain cultural problems such as the one you have identified, certain norms there, with which we may not be familiar, that you would be able to indicate to local investors to be mindful of as they penetrate this particular region?

Ambassador Assam: Yes, Trinidad and Tobago businessmen are interested in investing in these countries. In fact, I was speaking to Mr. Lok Jack two weeks ago when we were Panama, because the TTMA led a trade mission to Panama two weeks ago. It was very successful as a matter of fact, extremely successful that trade mission that the TTMA led. There were about 45 businessmen and they had about 20-odd exhibitors in this Expo Comer, which is an international trade exhibition. And I believe one of the groups in Trinidad and Tobago has an investment in the Dominican Republic in the glass business, the making of bottles and other types of glass products.

Also, there is this intention to get involved in the agricultural business of Central America because they have a very strong agricultural industry and they could provide a lot of raw material for businesses in Trinidad and Tobago. So I think there is this desire to get involved to invest in that, to obtain the kind of raw material that we need in Trinidad and Tobago to fuel our industrial development. There is this desire on the part of our own businessmen to have a two-way flow, inward investment and also outward investment on the part of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Assam. Any questions?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Yes, just Cuba. We talked about Cuba. Is it getting any easier for business people who have started export into Cuba? Is it getting any easier,

in terms of remittances of earnings and profits back to Trinidad?

Ambassador Assam: There certainly is. As a matter of fact our own Exim Bank has been doing an excellent job, in terms of facilitating that process of payments. Republic Bank has also established a financial office to facilitate that, and there is a collaboration between a company in Canada, I forget the name now, with the EximBank, that facilitates payments of our exporters to Cuba. It used to be a pretty challenging task a few years ago, but that has been considerably reduced, to the extent that exporters are being paid pretty well on time. It used to take, sometimes, six months, a year to get payments. Now it has gone down to two to three months.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Two to three months?

Ambassador Assam: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Sen. Maharaj.

Mr. Maharaj: Thank you very much Chair. Ambassador Assam, can you share with us a little bit about the Diplomatic Academy and has the academy been instrumental in our penetration in South America?

Ambassador Assam: Thank you for directing the question to me, Minister, but I would prefer to leave that to the Permanent Secretary who is much more au fait with the working of the Diplomatic Academy than myself. So, is it possible for me to? Okay, thank you.

Ms. Signoret: Thank you very much, Minister. The Diplomatic Academy has been phenomenal, in terms of its outreach, not only has there been interest and interest translated into working arrangements between the academy and others, that interest expands to the countries of the southern cone. It also involves countries in Asia, Europe where there have been set expressions of cooperation in the formulation and the delivery of modules.

We are speaking about places like Spain, Korea, Mexico, Argentina, where there has been that level of interest, and others in moving forward. It is an important

bridge. We have an opportunity, through the Diplomatic Academy, not just to build the capacity in Trinidad and Tobago, and not just persons/personnel who are part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the foreign service. But this expands to civil society, to other areas of government because in this 21st Century. Everyone has some degree of window to the outside world and the need to build skills and negotiation and awareness. That certainly will be redound to the collective benefit of all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Maharaj.

Mr. Maharaj: Very early in this administration there was a mission to Brazil. I do not know if you recall that. Could you share with us the impact of that mission to date?

Ms. Seignoret: Brazil is a very significant country in this hemisphere, also growth that has been extremely positive in the last, in general, 10 years. Brazil is also politically a very important partner for Trinidad and Tobago.

One of the key areas of the bilateral relationship with Brazil has been in the area of agriculture and agriculture development. There have also been a great deal of interest in the sale of liquefied natural gas to Brazil. You would see that there have been several agreements concluded between Trinidad and Tobago and Brazil. There is one on energy. While it has been slow in being implemented, we understand from our colleagues at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs that every effort is being made to maximize even more the opportunity of doing business with Brazil and we currently export around 14.2 per cent or thereabouts, of our LNG to Brazil. There is also collaboration with Brazil on the double taxation agreement that was concluded and entered into force in 2011. A little challenge there though is that we are not getting, as of this date, the type of information and exchange of information. It is slow from that particular arrangement.

Technical cooperation, there is a technical cooperation agreement with Brazil,

and there was a visit by the Embrapa, if I am not mistaken, I think that is correct. The Brazilian Agricultural Research Cooperation in 2011 visited to conduct training workshops particularly dealing with phytosanitary conditions of the coconut trees and measures to control pests that affect the coconut industry. That speaks directly to one of the five priorities of the country's medium-term policy framework, in terms of agriculture and food security. So, yes, Minister Maharaj, I think that visit by the hon. Prime Minister earlier in this administration's tenure certainly yielded considerable benefits.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Madam Permanent Secretary. One more Minister.

Mr. Maharaj: We just concluded in the Senate the Panama Partial Scope Agreement. What do you envisage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be the benefits for Trinidad and Tobago coming out of that?

Mr. Maharaj: Well, as you know, Chairman and Minister, there is provision for preferential access of about 175 products emanating from Trinidad and Tobago into the Panamanian market, either immediate non-tariff access or a window or horizon from between five and 10 years, and there is also some seasonable items.

But one of the things that the agreement provides for is that after one year of operation we can have a full-blown services agreement, which is going to be very important for Trinidad and Tobago's thrust.

Mr. Maharaj: What do you mean by services agreement, a full-blown service agreement?

Ambassador Assam: So we can have our people, through MRAs, which is the agreements that you arrive at, to go to Panama and be financial consultants, architects, developers, builders, cultural people—all of these are services—tourism services. We are able to sell our professional services to Panama in such an agreement. As I said, it is going to be very important, in terms of the diversification

thrust that this country is attempting to pursue, so that we can reduce our dependence on the energy sector.

As a matter of fact, when I was talking about investment, I forgot to mention that we are, at this point in time, one of the big players in the paving of a lot of the streets and construction areas in Panama through the process of not hot mix, but cold mix. We are doing cold mix paving. A Trinidadian company is doing cold mix paving right now in Panama and doing very, very well.

Also NP is going to be establishing a bunkering facility. So that as the Panama Canal extension comes on stream we will benefit from that bunkering facility. And they are also doing a survey at this point in time to see how they can establish NP service stations in Panama. So this is another aspect of the investment that it is going to be taking place in Panama in the near future. But services and investment will obviously play a very important part as of a sequel to this Partial Scope Trade Agreement, where we have, as I said, about 175 products that we can immediately export to Panama and they have about 192 that they can export to Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Chairman: Ambassador, just to elaborate on your point on services. You mentioned earlier that there is a great deal of opportunity waiting to be tapped, with respect to increasing visitor arrivals to Trinidad from this particular region, is it that there is no requirement from these countries to visit us? Is it that we do have visa requirements from nationals of those countries and our nationals visiting those countries?

Ambassador Assam: You are quite right Chairman, we were able to have visa abolition agreements with almost all of South and Central America. At one time it was only for red passports, diplomatic passports. It is now for any ordinary passports. You can have people enter into Trinidad and Tobago and we can enter into their respective countries without let or hindrance. That is a very important

thing, in terms of doing business, in terms of investment and in terms of tourism. Very, very important.

Mr. Chairman: Subsequent to Mr. Maharaj's question I would like the question as to whether there are any countries in Central and South America in which there are visa restrictions for residents of Trinidad and Tobago. Before I go there I would go back to Mr. Maharaj.

Mr. Maharaj: I would like to follow up Ambassador Assam. What role has the Ministry of Foreign Affairs played in facilitating these trade arrangements? For example, you cited NP establishing service stations possibly or some sort of arrangement with Panama. After having made the contact, does the Ministry step away or do you continue to have a facilitating role to ensure that it reaches its completion?

Ambassador Assam: Well there are a number of agencies that would be responsible for the continuing, oversight and facilitation of these various initiatives. First and foremost you have exporTT and you have invesTT. They are two very important institutions that would be involved in these types of initiatives. Then you have the about-to-be established embassy in Panama, which will, obviously, have a role in assisting and facilitating any would-be Trinidad and Tobago investor in Panama. I hope that an investment and trade attaché would be part of that embassy personnel so that they can continue the work because Panama is really a burgeoning economy.

I remember going to Panama maybe 15/20 years ago and Panama City was really a very dilapidated city. If you go to Panama today, I am sure most of you must have gone, Panama today is probably more modern than New York or any of these other Metropolis around the world. And the economy—in fact when I was there two weeks ago, I was surprised they economy—has had a GDP growth for the last three years in excess of 5 per cent. So the economy is really on the move. It is place to

be and their financial sector is fantastic. Their tourism sector, which they have linked to health—so they have health tourism and so on. It is a good economic model to be looking at, in terms of Trinidad and Tobago's diversification thrust. I do not know if I have answered you.

Mr. Chairman: Yes you have. Thank you very much Ambassador. Before we go on to MP Scoon, to answer the question that I posed, is there any country in Central and South America for which we have a treaty and there is a visa requirement for Trinidad and Tobago's nationals, any country for which we have a treaty and there is still a visa requirement?

Ambassador Assam: Not a treaty, for which we have diplomatic relations.

Ms. Signoret: As of now, we are required to have visas to enter Paraguay and Bolivia. There is an agreement that is on the cusp of being finalized with Paraguay. So that should be something that is imminent. Beyond those two countries, I do not believe that there is any other such impediment.

Mr. Chairman: Chairman thank you very much PS. I will pass over to MP Paula Gopee-Scoon.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you and I welcome your comments on Panama and the kind of activity that we can see coming out of there. That would certainly be a benefit to our people in Trinidad and Tobago, and I know that the establishment of the mission would be a policy decision by the Government. Has the mission rationalized really, do we need at this time? Can we afford to have missions, both in Costa Rica and in Panama? Should we keep both going, or are we getting benefits from the mission in Costa Rica as well? Is there a cost factor involved and certainly a staff consideration as well? I know that you have serious staff shortages in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ms. Signoret: Member of Parliament, we have been looking at both and at this point in time, we believe that it is imperative to retain mission in San Jose, Costa

Rica, as well as open the mission in Panama, but keeping both with a reasonable structure. So that we will start small. We will assess the impact in the next eight months and at that stage we would be in a better position to determine whether there should or should not be. But certainly in this stage there is benefit. There is perhaps, more to lose if we were to withdraw one from the other.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Is our Ambassador to Costa Rica also accredited to Panama? I cannot remember.

Ms. Signoret: When there was no mission in Panama City, yes the head of mission in Costa Rica was accredited to Panama. That is no longer the case.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: So you have already established the mission into Panama?

Ms. Signoret: We have a chargé who is currently working to put the mission into place.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: I see.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Permanent Secretary. While I await questions from other members of the panel there is one thing I would like to pose. Maybe fairer to pose to the Ministry of Trade. But the question is this: We were told earlier that there is range of goods available for us to import from the region, both Central and South America and I was simply wondering whether in fact the labelling requirements of Trinidad and Tobago and other legal requirements will pose a significant trade barrier to exporters from that region penetrating our domestic market?

Ambassador Assam: In the agreements that we have with the various countries that we have negotiated with recently, there is provision for proper labelling, in order to export into Trinidad and Tobago. They must meet certain standards, in accordance with the Bureau of Standards. This is why at all these negotiating sessions we have the Bureau of Standards. I should tell you. We have a very interesting team that negotiates on behalf of Trinidad and Tobago which I assembled

when I came to the Ministry in 2010.

First and foremost we have members of the TTMA, the Chamber of Commerce, the AmCham, the American Chamber, the TTCSI and where needed, the energy chamber. So we have all of these in the private sector. We also have from the public sector, the Ministry of Health, Food and Drug. We have the Bureau of Standards. We have the Ministry of Trade and Industry. We have the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we have the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Energy.

So we have a good thing. Depending in which kind of agreement we are negotiating, we have a team. So we have developed, I would say, some expertise in negotiating agreements. And therefore, when we negotiate these agreements, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, labelling, packaging and all of these things are part of the agreement. So they cannot export into Trinidad and Tobago a product that does not meet the standards or the requirements of Food and Drugs, of Bureau of Standards, et cetera, et cetera.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Any questions from the members of the committee?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Final.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, final and then Sen. Avinash Singh.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Oh, no please.

Mr. A. Singh: Chair, we can all agree that Treaties and Trade Agreements lead to some benefits. One of the main benefits, in my understanding, is, of course, economic prosperity for all the partner countries. But in facilitating these agreements one of the main inputs is the availability of foreign exchange and currency. So my simple question is: how have the availability of foreign exchange in currency impacted in our ability to maintain efficient and effective business relationships with our international partners, through you, Chair?

Ambassador Assam: Chair, to Sen. Singh. There have been some challenges from time to time. It is well known. It is published in the newspapers. You get a lot of criticisms from the Chamber and from the TTMA that some of their members are not in a position to honour some of their commitments like paying their Bills on time and so on. This has happened. But I think, by and large there has not been a serious or insurmountable problem.

Within recent times, I think the Governor of the Central Bank has assured the public and more particularly the business community that he would be providing or his organization would be providing adequate amounts of foreign exchange to meet their commitments, to the extent of where I read recently there has been a surplus injected into this system, when the last tranche was sold to the various financial institutions. So I think that problem has more or less been addressed. I do not know whether it would recur, but as of now, I think the situation is pretty well under control.

12.10 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Amb. Assam. MP Gopee-Scoon.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Yeah, final question and a very broad one. Dissemination of information and public affairs, that is internally in Trinidad and Tobago and then to the rest of the world through our missions abroad. Are you satisfied or is the Ministry satisfied that it has been able to achieve much in this area? It is my view, and I always found it challenging, when in the Ministry, how do we continue to inform—you have such a wide area, how do we continue to inform the public in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world through our missions? I still feel that we have not maximized the opportunity to impart information about what the Ministry does and what is available on both sides of the coin then.

Ms. Signoret: Yes, MP Gopee-Scoon, that continues to be an area that we are focusing our attention on. I would say that it is being addressed on a number of

different fronts. We do have a website that is available to all and when the daily media opt not to carry a release, please let it be known that it will be on our website. If there is any information anyone wishes to know about the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, please, we do invite you to visit the website at www.foreign.gov.tt.

Additionally, the communications team, they have also been reaching out through the social media channels to capture that group of persons, and we also have, within the last five years or so, sought to target the secondary school children—in fact, school children, in general, through an odd competition Bridging Borders through Art and also an essay writing competition. And those we have found really have opened the eyes of that generation of persons, young people who are our future.

They have been interested in the topic that we have set. Last year, it was climate change, I believe, and what they have produced has really been remarkable. The art competition, the winner of the art competition, that piece of work actually goes to the United Nations. We make an offer to the United Nations Secretary General and for the last four or so years, the winning student has their piece portrayed at the UN. We believe that is one way of building and demystifying the area of international relations and foreign affairs. Through our missions, we do seek to disseminate information as is possible.

But I think we are speaking to a particular constituency, if you would like, those who are interested in the area will always find the information. The challenge would probably be to reach out to those who still ask questions and are not too clear about some of the work that is being done, and so the information must be available. As I said, we do, from the national perspective, put everything on our website including an online newspaper which carries the positions of Trinidad and Tobago, statements that the hon. Minister may have made, they are all there. We would really wish to—

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Madam Permanent Secretary. We are running out of time. This discussion is getting more and more interesting as we

progress but Minister Maharaj has a question and I have one closing question. I will pose mine before he poses his. And that is, earlier on in the discussion, you did indicate that there is a trading bloc in South America, Mercosur; there is also a trading bloc in Central America and we are a part of the Caricom. And for the benefit of Committee Members, I simply would like to get your technical position on us entering into an agreement bilaterally, say with Panama, as opposed to entering an agreement—Trinidad and Tobago entering into an agreement—with the entire Central American economic zone. How feasible is it, either legally or practically, for us to enter into an agreement with Mercosur as opposed to entering into an agreement with Brazil only? Thank you very much.

Amb. Assam: If I got your question correctly, Chairman, you are saying if we can enter into an agreement with Central America. Is that what you are saying?

Mr. Chairman: With the entire economic union which exists in Central America.

Amb. Assam: Well, I think it is something that is being looked at. What we wanted to do was to cut our teeth with the various Central American countries first to give the exporters, manufacturers, an opportunity to cut their teeth. And then eventually, we would like to have a full blown—because these are partial scope agreements. Eventually we would like to have a full-blown agreement with Caricom and Central America. This is intended.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. That is all I needed to know.

Amb. Assam: At this point in time, I may tell you that Brazil and Guyana and Suriname have a partial scope and St. Kitts piggybacked on it. We are looking to see if we can piggyback on it also because we had entered into a partial scope with Brazil many years ago but Caricom did not look favourably upon it and it never went into force. So we are looking at that also.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Amb. Assam. This is most edifying, but

I will now pass on for the final question to Minister Devant Maharaj.

Mr. Maharaj: Madam Permanent Secretary, Trinidad and Tobago has a candidate for the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, what plans do the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have to campaign and lobby for our success at that competition?

Ms. Signoret: Minister Maharaj, we are very excited about the candidate. The candidate is eminently qualified and we are working together with him to—
[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Who is it?

Ms. Signoret: Sen. The Hon. Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie is our candidate. He is the candidate of Trinidad and Tobago for the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth at elections expected to take place in Malta at the end of this year.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working with Minister Tewarie to craft that strategy. We have had some discussions to date and he will be meeting with some of the representatives of the Commonwealth countries next week. I think on 02 and/or 03 of April. The number of different countries as he is going to be passing through London on his way back from official business in Korea. That is one element that we have in the very near future that we are collaborating with the Minister on.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Just related—

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. We are over time—is it burning?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, fine.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Whether he has the support of Caricom?

Ms. Signoret: As of now, I believe the last discussion and decision on that matter was postponed to July 2015 when the Caricom Heads of Government will make a determination at that stage. So, as of now, there is no Caricom candidate.

The Heads of Government will take that decision or will review the matter in July at their regular conference of Heads.

Amb. Assam: But to add to that, there are three candidates, Member Gopee-Scoon, as you know, so no one knows who the favourite is. There is one from Antigua, there is one from Dominica and one from Trinidad and Tobago. So nobody knows who is going to be endorsed by Caricom.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Amb. Assam. Thank you very much, Madam Permanent Secretary. We are now four minutes over the time I indicated to Committee Members we would terminate. But this discussion has been most fruitful, this has been beneficial. This is the first time we are really bringing to the public domain matters of foreign policy and I think that today's session has been very informative. I wish to thank you and members of your team for making the time to avail yourselves for our benefit and for giving us the kind of expertise. I am sure that there would be other issues that we have to raise. We have not really touched upon the agreements and the treaties that we asked you to comment upon. This, of course, was just a preliminary hearing. We will have an interest in some of the technicalities of some of the agreements and so I am sure you will be invited back sooner rather than later.

But, again, on behalf of all Committee Members, I would like to thank you for your presence and for sharing the valuable information that you have shared with us and with the wider public. So it is now 12.20 p.m. and this meeting has now been adjourned. Thank you very much.

12.20 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

APPENDIX III

MEMBERS' ATTENDANCE

Name	1 st Meeting 20/01/2015	2 nd Meeting 25/02/2015	3 rd Meeting 25/03/2015
Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir	✓	✓	✓
Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	✓	✓	Excused
Mr. NiLeung Hypolite, MP	✓	✓	x
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, MP	✓	x	✓
Mrs. Vernella Alleyne-Toppin, MP	✓	✓	x
Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan, MP	✓	✓	Excused
Mr. Devant Maharaj	✓	x	✓
Mr. Fazal Karim	✓	✓	Excused
Mr. Avinash Singh	✓	✓	✓
Mr. Winston Dookeran, MP	✓	x	✓