

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, April 22, 2022*

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 the hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy MP, Member for Tobago East; Mr. Dinesh Rambally MP, Member for Chaguanas West; Mr. David Lee MP, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre; and Mr. Rushton Paray MP, Member for Mayaro, who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**CONDOLENCES
(DR. JOSEPH LAQUIS)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members as you may be aware Dr. Joseph Laquis, former Member of Parliament, passed away on Thursday, April 21, 2022. Dr. Laquis served as the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin Central. I now invite hon. Members to pay their respective tributes to Dr. Laquis. I now call upon the Member for Diego Martin Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Communications and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon de Nobriga): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, today is the first time I have ever come to this booth to make a contribution in the House with a sense of reluctance, reluctance because in doing so it further cements the fact that this country, the constituency I represent, and the party of which I am a Member have all suffered a most profound loss.

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Madam Speaker, there can only be one first and Dr. Joseph Laquis will forever be noted as the first Member of Parliament for the constituency of Diego Martin Central. He served the people during the parliamentary term 1981 to 1986 as part of the PNM Government under then Prime Minister George Chambers, having won the seat in what some people described as a surprise victory at the time. I would have been too young, Madam Speaker, to know the political climate at the time, but to speak to anyone who had the pleasure to know or to work with Dr. Laquis would cast some doubt on the description of that victory.

I have been regaled with many a story of Dr. Laquis during his time as MP and then later on as the chairman for the PNM's Diego Martin Central constituency executive. And those stories continued yesterday, well into the evening, as tends to happen when people are trying to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. And through it all, Madam Speaker, the thread that bound those stories together was that of a man dedicated to serving his constituents, a man of integrity and a man who had a genuine love for service and for his fellow man. And that love was returned to him one hundredfold, not only because he massively impacted the constituency through infrastructure projects like, Powder Magazine Phase 1 and Phase 2, but more so because of the man that he was, straightforward, simple in the most, in the very best sense of that word and genuine. To hear the late MP for Diego Martin Central, Mr. Ken Valley, speak about how integral Dr. Laquis was in his own victory during 1990 by-elections simply through his endorsement and his presence on the campaign trail is a real testament to the love that emanated at that time for the constituents for him and a love that still emanates for Dr. Laquis today.

Madam Speaker, Dr. Laquis left the cut and thrust of representational politics and retired to Mayaro in the mid-90s, but he never lost his love for his party or for the people. I can remember calling him as a newly elected MP to get

Condolences (Dr. Joseph Laquis)
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from him as many nuggets of wisdom as I could possibly glean and while I jealously guard the advice he gave me that day in that deep distinctive voice that he had; while I jealously guard his words, as I was instructed to do, I left that conversation with no doubt as to the high bar that he had set for me as one of his successors.

Madam Speaker, and colleagues, Dr. Joe Laquis was undoubtedly an original. He will be missed but I have no doubt he will live on in the legacy of his works and the memories made in the constituency he served with love and distinction. On behalf of the Government, and in particular the citizens of Diego Martin Central, I offer my deepest condolences to his family, his friends and his loved ones. May he rest in everlasting peace.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we in the Opposition also join in paying tribute to the late Dr. Joseph Laquis. Dr. Laquis would have celebrated his 77th birthday next Friday and he made a tremendous contribution to the national life in Trinidad and Tobago. He was elected on a PNM ticket in 1981 as the Member of Parliament for the newly created constituency of Diego Martin Central, defeating the late Karl Hudson-Phillips of the ONR.

Dr. Laquis served in this Parliament until 1986 where he made many valuable contributions, including on the Municipal Corporations (Pensions) (Amdt.) Bill and on the Insurance Companies Claims Motion. He also had an amicable relationship with many of his Opposition colleagues in that Second Republican Parliament.

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Condolences (Dr. Joseph Laquis)
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Madam Speaker, I am also informed that he created an informal backbenchers association during his time in the Parliament. From all accounts, Dr. Joe Laquis contributed to the development of his constituency significantly and appeared to be well-liked by his constituents, both as a Member of Parliament and as a medical doctor.

After receiving his secondary education at St. Mary's College, Dr. Laquis went to study at McGill University in Canada and then proceeded to UWI, Mona where he graduated as a medical doctor. He distinguished himself as a medical practitioner in this country especially in looking after the less fortunate who required his services. Recognizing that he came from a privileged background, Dr. Laquis used his medical training and skills to treat many patients often at no charge, I am told. I am also told that this commendable habit continued even in Mayaro where he chose to live from 1995 when he was known as the Mayaro doctor, again, treating many patients at no charge, a measure of the man.

As a medical colleague he would have made all of us in the profession very proud. He also put his business skills to good use in the family business A.A. Laquis and Company, which is a long serving supplier of medical products in this country. His friends described him as a man who enjoyed meeting people and knew how to enjoy life. He has however been described by those close to him as a man who wanted to live a simple life. Whilst embracing his Syrian heritage he also reached across the many divides in this nation, especially to those in need, and as such would have earned the title of a "True Trini". Dr. Laquis leaves a legacy which his children Rachel, Mark and Stephen, themselves distinguished professionals in their own right, can be proud of. I am told that his grandchildren and great grandchildren often sought his wise counsel and referred to him as their hero.

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Condolences (Dr. Joseph Laquis)
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Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition and the Member of Parliament for Siparia, we on this side wish to place on record our esteemed thanks to this son of the soil for his sterling contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago. We offer our sincere condolences to his immediate family, his loved ones and his friends on his passing. May Almighty God comfort and strengthen them at this time and may his soul rest in peace. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I join with you in paying tribute to Dr. Joseph Laquis. Dr. Laquis served as a Member for Diego Martin Central during the Second Republican Parliament from 1981 to 1986. Dr. Laquis was a Member of the Standing Orders Committee, and also contributed to many debates including the Municipal Corporations (Pensions) (Amdt.) Bill, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Bill, the Breach of Privilege Complaint and Insurance Companies Claims Motions. Dr. Laquis also sponsored petitions for the Trinidad Christian Centre, the Amar Foundation and the Mennonite Church.

Professionally, he was a medical doctor and a businessman. Always a man of the people, Dr. Laquis used his training and experience as a physician, his business acumen and his political influence to improve and uplift the lives of not only his constituents in Diego Martin Central but to many other citizens in need. It is well known in his constituency that he would willingly render medical services and care to the hapless, the indigent, the elderly and the very regular patient. On becoming the elected Member of Parliament for Diego Martin Central, he fought tirelessly to develop and obtain funding to bring to fruition the Powder Magazine and Bagatelle housing developments, both of which were major achievements at the time of their establishment and which continue to provide affordable homes

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Condolences (Dr. Joseph Laquis)
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and sustainable communities for the residents up to today.

I therefore take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences to the Laquis family during this time of mourning and I pray that Almighty God grants them peace and consolation during this time of bereavement. I now ask that we stand and observe a minute of silence as a mark of respect.

The House of Representatives stood.

Madam Speaker: May his soul rest in peace. Hon.Members, an appropriate letter will be sent to convey our condolences to the family of the late Dr. Joseph Laquis.

PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Report on the Freedom of Information Act, Chap. 22:02 for the year 2014. [*The Minister of Communications and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon de Nobriga)*]
2. Annual Report on the Freedom of Information Act, Chap. 22:02 for the year 2015. [*Hon. S. de Nobriga*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for Financial Year 2020. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT

Social Services and Public Administration

Unemployment during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the State's Capacity to Provide Support

(Presentation)

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:

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Second Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic, Second Session (2021/2022), Twelfth Parliament.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are four questions for oral answer. We will be answering all four. There are 10 questions for written response, we will be answering eight questions and we are asking for a deferral of two weeks for questions 123 and 146. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Outstanding Wage Negotiations (Details of)

61. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Labour:

Will the Minister provide the following information:

- a. the number of outstanding wage negotiations in the Public Service, State Enterprises and Statutory Authorities for the bargaining period September 07, 2015 to present; and
- b. the list of recognised majority unions that are involved in these negotiations

Tourism Accommodation Relief Grants (Details of)

79. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Prime Minister:

Will the Minister provide, for the period June 2020 to December 2021, the number and the total value of Tourism Accommodation Relief Grants awarded to hoteliers in Tobago?

**Number of Gang/Arrests/Charges/Convictions
(Details of)**

145. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister provide the following, for the years September 2015 to February 2022:

- a) the total number of gangs per year;
- b) the total number of gang members per year;
- c) the total number of arrests made under the respective Anti-Gang Act per year;
- d) the total number of charges laid under the respective Anti-Gang Act per year; and
- e) the total number of convictions under the respective Anti-Gang Act per year?

**Number of High Court Trials Concluded
(Nature of Each Division)**

147. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Attorney General:

Will the Attorney General provide, for the period March 2020 to February 2022, the number of High Court trials that have been concluded and the nature of each matter in the following divisions:

- a) Civil Division;
- b) Family and Children Division; and
- c) Criminal Division?

**District (Summary) Courts
(Details of Criminal and Petty Civil Matters)**

148. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Attorney General:

With regard to the District (Summary) Courts for both criminal and petty civil matters for the period March 2020 to November 2021, will the Attorney General provide the following:

- a) the number of matters that have been concluded; and
- b) the nature of each matter?

Vide end of sitting for written answers.

**High Court Matters Filed Against the State
(Details of)**

149. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Attorney General:

Will the Attorney General, for the period September 2015 to February 2022:

- a) state the number of High Court matters filed against the State;
- b) as it pertains to the matters in which the State was unsuccessful;
 - i. state the total number;
 - ii. identify by case name, the attorneys-at-law who appeared in each matter;
 - iii. the damages awarded to the successful parties, where applicable; and

- iv. the legal costs awarded to the successful parties, where applicable?

Answer lodged in the Parliament Library.

**DNA Analysis/Ballistics Testing
(Details of)**

150. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

With regard to ballistics testing and DNA analysis at the Trinidad and Tobago Forensic Science Centre during the period September 2015 to February 2022, will the Minister provide the following:

- a) the total number of ballistic tests for which Certificates of Analysis are outstanding;
- b) the total number of DNA samples for which Certificates of Analysis are outstanding;
- c) the total number of Certificates of Analysis that were processed for each year; and
- d) the average time period between the submission of a sample for ballistics and DNA analysis to the completion of a certificate of analysis?

**Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions
(Details of Indictment Matters)**

151. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Attorney General:

With regard to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions during the period January 2017 to February 2022, will the Attorney General provide the following:

- a) the total number of indictments filed per year; and
- b) the nature of the matter on each of the indictments?

Vide end of sitting for written answers.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Trinidad and Tobago Fire Stations (Inoperable Fire Trucks and Equipment)

143. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) on behalf of Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister state how many of the fire stations servicing Trinidad and Tobago have inoperable fire trucks and equipment?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, according to information received from the Chief Fire Officer, of the 25 fire stations across Trinidad and Tobago, the Belmont, Movant and Tunapuna Fire Stations could be considered as having appliances that are not up to full and efficient operational standard. Notwithstanding this, Madam Speaker, standard operating procedures of the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service prescribe that in any situation where a fire station contains such equipment which may also occur unexpectedly, coverage plans take place, that is to say, that equipment at other fire stations in the surrounding areas are immediately brought to bear and utilized. In this regard, coverage plans for the three identified stations have been settled and are as follows:

- Belmont Fire Station, coverage is provided by headquarters north;
- Movant Police Station, coverage is provided by headquarters north and the San Juan Fire Station;
- Tunapuna Fire Station, coverage is provided by Arima and San Juan Fire Stations.

The need for repairs, Madam Speaker, maintenance and acquisition of new vehicles and equipment is an ongoing activity and in this regard the Ministry of National Security is in constant communication with the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service to bring resolution to this ongoing need. The Cabinet recently approved the expenditure of \$30 million for the purchase of more vehicles for the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service and the process for their acquisition is well underway.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thank you. Madam Speaker, is the hon. Minister aware that a few weeks ago, fire officer, Kelvin Hedley collapsed after his breathing apparatus malfunctioned during a fire in Arima?

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I cannot truthfully say that I am aware of the kinds of details that were just issued by the Member for Naparima.

Mr. Indarsingh: It is in the public domain.

Hon. F. Hinds: However, Madam Speaker, I am able to tell this House that recently, very recently, within the last eightweeks or so, the fire service acquired, in fact just more than that, the fire service acquired parts and equipment to repair the very many breathing apparatus instruments that are within their domain for use in circumstances of firefighting and the repairs are all on the way.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Madam Speaker, hon. Minister, it is indeed unfortunate that you are—

Madam Speaker: Member, can you ask the question?

Mr. Charles: All right. Is the Minister aware according to Leo Ramkissoon, Fire Services Association President, I quote him:

“We have...little to no breathing apparatus...to fire officers at the 25 stations across Trinidad and Tobago...”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. Ameen: It is a question.

Madam Speaker: All right. So in terms of the question you originally asked and the response given I believe that has already been answered. Do you have another question? Member for Tabaquite.

**Airspace/Territorial Waters
(Government's Policy on Use of)**

144. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) on behalf of Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister indicate what is the Government's policy with regard to the use of airspace and territorial waters for transshipment and/or refuelling of vessels carrying military equipment and weapons to or from Venezuela?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thanks again, Madam Speaker. The Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard has no written policy or regulations that directly address the use of air space for transshipment and/or refueling of vessels carrying military equipment and weapons to or from Venezuela. This does not mean, Madam Speaker, that the activity is un-regulated. The Military Aviation Arm of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, that is to say, the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard, is guided by the Defence Act, Chap. 14:01, of the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago. Sections 58 to 61 of that Act outline offences associated with flying in our jurisdiction, in our space.

Further, the Civil Aviation Act, Chap. 49:03, provides the necessary permission for any aircraft registered outside of the jurisdiction to transition through Trinidad and Tobago's air space in accordance with regulations of air navigation. This Act grants authority to the Civil Aviation Authority to give effect to the Convention on International Civil Aviation. Article 3(c) of the Convention

states and I quote:

“No state aircraft of a contracting State shall fly over the territory of another State or land thereon without authorization by special agreement or otherwise, and in accordance with the terms thereof.”

In this regard, Madam Speaker, the authority as often as necessary, refers to the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard when a request is made by another state for military aircraft to transition through our space and in the absence of contracting directives these requests are usually met with agreement.

As regard to the use of territorial waters, the Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea which provides guidance as it relates to territorial waters. While a country’s territorial sea is regarded as its sovereign territory with all the laws which apply, Article 7 of this Convention accords the right of innocent passage to ships of all states through the territorial waters of coastal states, including Trinidad and Tobago. This therefore means that vessels travelling from or to Venezuela from any state and of any nationality are free to traverse our territorial waters to and from their ports of call. As an open country with goodwill and friendship to all, Madam Speaker, we uphold these internationally settled principles.

Article 19 of the said Convention explains that:

“Passage is innocent so long as it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal State.”

The article goes on to explain what actions of a foreign ship may be considered prejudicial given that the transshipment, that is, the handing over for transfer of such equipment from one vessel to another, this would not be interfering with the concept of innocent passage and therefore would not be considered prejudicial.

Refueling of vessels is referred to as bunkering. In order to do this within the

territorial waters of Trinidad and Tobago a specific licence must be issued by the order of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries as provided at Regulation 3(1)(h)(iv) of the Petroleum Regulations of the Petroleum Act, Chap. 62:01. In the absence of the grant of such an order, not only with the bunkering be illegal, but it would also not be in keeping with the concept of innocent passage and it would be in contravention of the said United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In short, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago follows scrupulously our domestic laws and the relevant international law as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. I thank you warmly, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Joint Border Protection Agency
(Update of)**

159. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister provide an update on the Joint Border Protection Agency?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Many thanks, Madam Speaker. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago utilizes a multiagency approach in respect of securing our borders. To this end an interagency group comprising members of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Customs and Excise Division of the Ministry of Finance currently work together in the conduct of border security operations around Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, can the Minister then confirm whether or not this Joint Border Protection Agency that is mentioned in the *Vision 2020* document is

in fact scrapped?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I do not know where that folly would have come from. I have made it clear that we are at the moment in this interagency platform dealing with our border security issues and I can assure you, Madam Speaker, and this House, that arrangements are underway to further concretize and formalize those in accordance with international best practices, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Can the Minister then confirm why no budget was allocated to the establishment of a Joint Border Protection Agency for the period 2018 to 2022?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Hinds: I do not have those figures in front of me but in any event whatever was just submitted by my friend on the other side is not prejudicial to the position of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in relation to the important issue of our border security which is a very high priority for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the highest priority for the Ministry of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: So, Madam Speaker, is the Minister then confirming that the Joint Border Protection Agency is in fact an agency under the Ministry of National Security?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Hinds: Well, I find that question was soft as it is—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Remarkably soft, Madam Speaker. I did say that this joint initiative engages the Ministry of National Security, all arms of it, and of course

the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force included and the Ministry of Finance's Customs and Excise Division. We work collaboratively as we must, Madam Speaker, to secure the borders of—for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Electronic Monitoring Bracelets
(Status of)**

160. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister state how many persons have been affixed with electronic monitoring bracelets, for the period April 28, 2021 to March 15, 2022?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, Madam Speaker. During the period April the 28th, 2021 and March the 15th, 2022, 36 persons were fitted with electronic monitoring devices, with an additional two persons being fitted on March the 17th and March the 21st, 2022, bringing the total to 38 persons. It should be noted, however, that the fitting of electronic monitoring devices is dependent on persons accessing bail.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much. Minister, can you indicate what is the total number of bracelets that we have currently in Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Young: It have enough for you all.

Hon. F. Hinds: I am unable to say with any certainty at this point but it is certainly more than 38. We have an adequate supply at this time but in anticipation of the bail circumstances as they flowed recently in our courts and in anticipation of the increases in domestic violence and similar kinds of issues within recent times, we

are in the process of obtaining even more.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, given the fact that the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of National Security in an affidavit that was published indicated that the Electronic Monitoring Unit is at an infant stage, can the Minister indicate whether or not additional resources will be given to this particular unit?

Madam Speaker: I would not allow that as a supplemental question. Your question is specifically with bracelets and not the unit.

Hon. F. Hinds: I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, having regard to the Permanent Secretary again of the Ministry of National Security indicating that there are currently no equipment for monitoring persons on bail for murder charges, can the Minister indicate whether or not this Government has procured such bracelets having regard to the Akili Charles judgment?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, if it is anything infantile I thought that question was.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So Member—

Hon. F. Hinds: Obligated, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I know you have a wide vocabulary. I will ask you to withdraw that word and—

Hon. F. Hinds: I withdraw that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: And try something—

Hon. F. Hinds: I thought I heard the word. I withdraw that, Madam Speaker. But,

Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker—

Mr. Indarsingh: *[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: Member, Member

2.00 p.m.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, the equipment that is used to outfit persons who are to be monitored—

Mr. Indarsingh: *[Interruption]*

Hon. F. Hinds:—is consistent from—

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, I am very interested in hearing the proceedings and I am sure you are too, so maybe you could cooperate with the process.

Mr. Indarsingh: I will cooperate.

Madam Speaker: Yes, thank you very much.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, the equipment that is used is the same equipment and it is not determined by the nature of the matter for which a person is to access his or her bail.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, at paragraph 11 of that affidavit, the Permanent Secretary indicated that there is no equipment for the safe and effective monitoring of accused persons at the level identified in the judgment which is for persons on murder charge. The bracelets will cost \$10,000. Can the Minister—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: I am really having difficulty in hearing the proceedings.

Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, the Permanent Secretary indicated that the bracelets cost \$10,000 each and there are currently no bracelets. Can the Minister indicate whether or not the Government is in possession of those particular bracelets as mentioned in the affidavit?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young: Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: Is there a Standing Order?

Mr. Young: Yeah, Standing Order 49, sub judice. It is obvious that the Member is reading from an affidavit that is a live matter before the court and the Member being a lawyer should not lead this House into that area.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: So Member, if this matter is sub judice, you know the rules, so it will not be allowed.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I just ask the Minister of National Security because these are—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption and crosstalk*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, Members of the Government cannot badger the Member from Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: And we cannot allow this to continue in this House.

Hon. Member: Unruly!

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: All right. Member, if you have another question, I will allow you to ask it. I remind you of Standing Order 49 of which we are all well familiar.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister indicate whether or not additional staff will be given to the Electronic Monitoring Unit in

order for the effective monitoring—

Madam Speaker: Okay, as I told you, the original question you asked was with respect to bracelets, the answers have been with respect to bracelets. I have already denied a question with respect to the unit, all right, as not arising as a supplemental question, okay. So I do not allow that question, it is out of order. Yes.

Mr. Hosein: Can the Minister then indicate whether or not there is adequate staffing for monitoring persons on the bracelets?

Madam Speaker: Not allowed. Just before we go on, in terms of question 146, that has been deferred for two weeks. Leader of the House.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you for that clarification, Ma'am, on question 146. Madam Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 126 and with your leave, there has been agreement to allow the Prime Minister to speak until the conclusion of his statement.

Status of Interception by the State

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have been authorized by the Cabinet to make the following statement. This statement concerns matters of national security which must always be handled carefully and responsibly. However, Madam Speaker, it has become necessary for me to address a disturbing false narrative that has at its genesis within the recent times where there has been a concerted and conscious effort to mislead not only the population of Trinidad and Tobago but also those in the international community who pay attention to the affairs of Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, these efforts to mislead have been led by the Leader of the Opposition and by those who should be more responsible and who definitely ought to know better.

Madam Speaker, I am referring to the recent allegations that have been

publicly made by the Member for Siparia that the State is using an interception tool known as Pegasus Spyware Solution, Pegasus, to illegally intercept communications and is engaged on widespread spying on citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I must at the outset, Madam Speaker, state that this is completely untrue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago want to assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago and all observers that the State does not possess nor has it ever possessed or used Pegasus spyware.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Contrary to the current misinformation campaign on this issue, there is no truth whatsoever in the allegation that the State, including the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the TTPS, and or the Strategic Services Agency, the SSA, or any other state agency for that matter, has any officer using Pegasus spyware. Madam Speaker, the SSA is the sole custodian of all interception of communication software and hardware procured by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago or any other state agency. This is a policy of the Government that I led and the Government that I lead since September 2015. As I will explain, Madam Speaker, my Government even resisted repeated attempts by a former Commissioner of Police to obtain, own and utilize intercept technology by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. It is this Government's policy that all such technology should reside within the control of the SSA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The SSA has provided an intercept suite to be used by the TTPS but the equipment is the sole responsibility of the SSA and remains under the SSA's strict jurisdiction. This is to ensure accountability and control by vetted officers engaged in crime-fighting and matters of national security. Madam

Speaker, the SSA uses its intercept technology to conduct legal intercepts. Legal intercepts are those done within the parameters of the Interception of Communications Act, Chap. 15:08, and amendments contained in the Interception of Communications (Amdt.) Act, 2020, collectively referred to as “the Act”.

Madam Speaker, as part of the process and legal procedure for approved intercept of communication, there must be a documented justification for the targeting of any device from which communication is intercepted. This documentation must justify the use of the State’s tools to intercept and creates a record of all intercepts conducted. It is important also to note, Madam Speaker, that the interception of communication is a digital transaction, similar to, for example, a banking transaction and therefore it is very easy to verify or disprove allegations of misuse and to determine who made the intercept.

Madam Speaker, it should be emphasized here for clarity that any and all acts of interception of telecommunications without invoking the provisions of the carefully crafted existing laws are acts of illegality with very serious consequences for any person who so engages. As I have said, Madam Speaker, the Pegasus Spyware Solution is not in use by the State in Trinidad and Tobago. Pegasus uses a methodology not covered by the Act and therefore, there has not been any authorization to procure that solution currently or in the past. I can also state categorically that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago took a conscious decision not to procure Pegasus due to its overreaching capacity for penetration, abuse and justifiable concerns about it, including the many internationally troubling reports surrounding its use which are less than favourable.

Madam Speaker, as every parliamentarian should be aware in this House, one of the safeguards and tenets of accountability expressly provided for in the Act is that there are reports produced annually by the SSA that are required to be laid

in Parliament by the Minister of National Security. I hasten to add, Madam Speaker, that it is useful to advise that when perusing these reports, you should note that the number of intercepts do not reflect a direct correlation to the number of persons or devices being intercepted. Very often, persons engaged in criminal activity have more than one device and change devices frequently, thus leading to an increase in the number of devices that are intercepted with respect to any one person. Also, Madam Speaker, authorized intercepts are only granted for a limited period of time and if an extension is required, a judicial officer must grant such an order or extension and this too leads to the number of intercepts recorded.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I take the time to make this point as the Opposition Leader, a former Prime Minister, and subsequently a person who chaired the National Security Council, has also used these numbers in reports which have been duly laid in Parliament to present the numbers of intercepts conducted to create an impression that due to the large number of intercepts, there is something untoward taking place. This is simply not so. This is irresponsibility and political mischief intended to frighten and anger the population once they can be mentally corralled into believing that their Government is abusing its authority and is illegally prying into the lives of ordinary law-abiding citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, it is also important to note that the Act makes it clear that there are only three persons who can authorize interception of communications. These are the Chief of Defence Staff for the Defence Force, the Commissioner of Police and the Director of the SSA. Parliament, in enacting legislation, made sure that law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear with respect to these authorized intercepts as these efforts and authorized intercepts are only

targeting criminality and those engaging in that realm. Madam Speaker, the intelligence produced from the interception is packaged and passed to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for follow-up where necessary. This information produced from interception is used to find victims of kidnappings, prevent murders, disrupt terrorist plots and lead to the seizure of drugs, guns and other contraband.

I take the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to highlight that the SSA is an intelligence agency and it engages in a far wider scope of activities than just intercepting communication. The SSA plays a critical role in the fight against criminal activity in Trinidad and Tobago. It gathers and analyses intelligence which is gathered in a number of ways not limited to the use of technology to intercept communications. The expenditure on the SSA cannot be linked solely to interception or arrest which is yet another frequent false statement advanced by the Opposition Members, all of whom have parliamentary oversight of these state operations and must certainly know better.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the population should be reminded that this is not the first time that false allegations regarding the intercepting of communications have been made by the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: In 2010, the Strategic Services Agency, the SSA, the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago, SAUTT, and the Security Intelligence Agency, SIA, were accused by the then Prime Minister, the Member of Siparia, on spying on law-abiding citizens including herself. The motives for such accusations were eventually revealed and these serious accusations were never shown to be factual or even pursued once they served the unseemly purpose for which they

were made.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Unfortunately, these false accusations had several adverse repercussions for the country, the intelligence agencies and the staff and even went on to cost taxpayers millions of dollars in damages which were paid to wrongfully terminated officers. Now in 2022, the same individual who is now Opposition Leader has ventilated similar unsubstantiated allegations, not in Parliament where there is provision for oversight, but on political platforms from which people are being woefully misled. These allegations are again directed at the law enforcement and intelligence services.

In response to these recent allegations, it must be first stated that the SSA only does legal interception of communication. Unlike 2010, however Madam Speaker, this activity, as well as other functions of the SSA, are governed by the SSA amended Act 2016 and the Interception of Communications Act, 2010, and its 2020 amendments. Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, and the SSA strictly adhere to the Act when carrying out any intercept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Interception of communication is used solely in the interest of national security for the prevention and detection of serious crime for the purpose of safeguarding the social and economic well-being of the State and for the purpose of giving effect to the provision of international mutual assistance agreement. The recent repeated allegations by the Leader of the Opposition and Members of the Opposition that Pegasus spyware is being used to spy on local journalists, magistrates, judges and parliamentarians by the Government, the SSA and or the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service are completely false.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As I have stated, Madam Speaker, no law enforcement or private entity in Trinidad and Tobago is known to be in possession of Pegasus nor are there records to indicate its purchase by any local entity. This having been made here by me, this statement, as Chairman of the National Security Council, the Opposition Leader or her subordinates in this House must make available to the citizenry the basis on which these unsettling allegations are being published locally and internationally to the detriment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Opposition has made allegations suggesting that the TTPS was spying on law-abiding citizens. These allegations were later published by the traditional media and on social media platforms. I responded to these allegations confirming that the interception of communication is done but I made it abundantly clear that it is done within the parameters of the law and is aimed at those engaged in criminal activity. Notwithstanding this, the Opposition Leader persists with her claims, even advertising that she has documentary evidence of such wrongdoing by this Government. In this situation and under these circumstances, the Opposition Leader, Member of Parliament for Siparia, is duty bound to bring it here for treatment by this honourable House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, it is to be noted that the former Commissioner of Police indicated that under his tenure the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service did not purchase Pegasus or any other spyware directly from Israel. This former Commissioner of Police confirmed the procurement of an interception of communication solution under his tenure from 2018 to 2021. The procurement of this intercept device by the former Commissioner of Police was not authorized

by the National Security Council for use by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Commissioner of Police was immediately instructed to provide the hardware and software to the SSA which he did.

Accordingly, the former Commissioner of Police recently revealed that whilst the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service did procure intercept technology under his tenure, it did not use it while he was Commissioner of Police and that was the extent of his statement. Madam Speaker, the interception technology equipment procured by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in 2020/2021 was never used by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to conduct intercept data in motion. The SSA maintained control of servers prior to receiving the physical devices from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and all reviews show no interception of communication activity by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Accordingly, Madam Speaker, I reject the false narratives that the State is using Pegasus, that TTPS is conducting interception of communications outside of the suite provided and controlled by the SSA under the laws of Trinidad and Tobago, and that there are any individuals being targeted by law enforcement for intercept who are not under suspicion of being involved in serious criminal activity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The ill effects of these false narratives about intercept should not be underestimated and are very irresponsible as they undermine the fight against crime—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and the trust that we should have in those charged with the responsibility of the State's legal intercept resources.

I trust, Madam Speaker, that this statement will serve to dismiss the irresponsible false allegations of those who see benefit in their damaging actions and statements. It is hoped that it will be understood and accepted by the right and civic-minded citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I have provided this information and the assurances given as the Chairman of the National Security Council and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that I lead a government that respects the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to advise the national population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 24(4), I want to ask the Prime Minister as the Head of the National Security Council if he can confirm if the Commissioner of Police has authorized officers attached to the Audio Visual Unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to engage in the recording of political opponents as was done on the Couva/Preysal Interchange on the 19th of April?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, there is a Minister of National Security, and if the Member is interested in asking that question rather than confuse what I have done here today, file a question to the Minister of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Nobody on this side before the court—

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member—no, no.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]—question to the Minister of National Security—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption and crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: No, no. You know, I think we are beginning to forget the Standing Orders, okay and a lot of us are really very seasoned. Member for Couva South you are acting as the Whip so I hold you to a higher standard. All right. So that you know when I am on my legs, I expect that you respect that. That is just too basic. Let us get on with the business of today. Member for Couva North. Member, you are reminded that you have 45 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: One minute. Minister of National Security and Member for Naparima, I realize that you all do have a certain sort of synergy and I hope that it will not be used to disturb the important business that we are about to embark upon. Member for Couva North.

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY CRISIS
(GOVERNMENT'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF)**

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (*Couva North*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the Government's neglect of the agricultural and fisheries sectors has created a food and nutrition security crisis;

And whereas the Government continues to ignore the plight of farmers and fisher folk relating to praedial larceny and piracy;

And whereas the Government has failed to establish an appropriate strategy to address this food and nutrition security crisis and runaway food prices;

And whereas the global supply chain challenges pose a serious threat to food and nutrition security;

And whereas the Government has failed to reduce barriers and bureaucratic red tape to facilitate greater efficiencies in the agricultural and fisheries sectors;

And whereas this food and nutrition security crisis will lead to increased poverty, unemployment and widespread starvation:

Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to acknowledge the food and nutrition security crisis and to take immediate measures to prevent food insufficiency and starvation in the nation, particularly for poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Madam Speaker, as I begin my presentation, I would like to use this opportunity to recognize the farmers and fishermen of our country, the members and executive of the agricultural society of Trinidad and Tobago and the various agriculture, farming and fishing associations, our market vendors, food vendors, the NGOs, religious institutions, sports clubs, businesses and individuals who came forward during the pandemic lockdown to donate food items to underprivileged families, the supermarket association, its executive, members and workers, the staff at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and all other agencies, those who contributed to the food and nutrition security of all our citizens.

Madam Speaker, today I stand here and I salute all mentioned. For it is through their dedication to duty and purpose that nourishment reaches the tables of families across our nation.

2.30 p.m.

Similarly, as I salute my colleagues on this side, an exemplary leadership provided by the Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, as seen in the beautiful pictures of her home garden, for recognizing the importance of agriculture, food and nutrition security to all the

citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and affording me, Madam Speaker, this opportunity to present this critical Motion on this very special day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, in piloting this Motion, I will present the various areas of Government's failure to execute their responsibility to the agriculture and fisheries sector and how they have turned a deaf ear to the recommendations, warning, and even the cries of our citizens.

Madam Speaker, this Motion analyzes the Government on a number of wide-ranging issues relating to their failure to provide any sustainable and developmental plans for the agriculture and fisheries sector, which has resultantly led to the food and nutrition security crisis that we are facing here in Trinidad and Tobago. The Government's seven-year neglect of these sectors and the many persons involved, Madam Speaker, has caused ripple effect throughout the country, which has already started to manifest into poverty, unemployment and starvation.

Madam Speaker, according to the United Nations Committee on World Food Security, which defines food security to mean that:

“...all people, at all times, have a physical”—social—“and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their”—food preferences and—“dietary needs...for an active and healthy life.”

We must ask ourselves, Madam Speaker, especially those on the other side: Does all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, seven days a week, 52 weeks for the year, have a physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their food preference and dietary needs for an active and healthy life? And if the answer is no, Madam Speaker, then we must acknowledge that we are facing a food security crisis here in Trinidad and Tobago and we must take immediate measures to prevent this, to prevent food insufficiency and starvation in

our nation, particularly for the poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups who are being affected the most.

Madam Speaker, there are families out there who do not know where their next meal is going to come from; families who were once dependent on the food box programme which has been shut down by this Government while failing to establish any appropriate strategy to address the food and nutrition security crisis that these families now face. Madam Speaker, according to the hon. Minister of Finance in his fiscal 2022 budget presentation, and I quote:

“By the end of September 2021, we delivered food packages for 136,000 families through the 41 Members of Parliament, and 49,000 families through the 138 Local Government Councillors and 12 Tobago Assemblymen.”

Madam Speaker, while the Minister boasted of how many food packages were distributed, he totally failed to acknowledge, understand, and appreciate that these families were genuinely at risk, at risk of being unemployed, Madam Speaker, at risk of becoming victims to increased poverty and widespread starvation. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance failed to understand that these families were dependent on these relief items. They are genuinely needy families, Madam Speaker. The NAMDEVCO food box programme, despite being mismanaged, was a vital part of many households during the lockdown.

Madam Speaker, on January the 7th, earlier this year, my constituency office in Couva North received a telephone call from staff at NAMDEVCO informing of the temporary closure of the NAMDEVCO food box programme. The food box programme was never a planned initiative of this Government, but one that became a necessity due to the sheer incompetence and mismanagement of the economy by this Government over the past seven years, with more than 100,000 persons losing their jobs, crashing our economy before COVID, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: In light of the continued escalation of unemployment and food prices, the food box programme provided much needed relief to some of our most vulnerable in society. Madam Speaker, the discontinuation of the food box programme was a total betrayal by the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, former Minister Clarence Rambharat, and this is based on a statement which he made that was reported in the national media on August02, 2021, entitled:

“Food box Initiative to Continue After Pandemic”

In that article, former Minister Rambharat went on record to state, and I quote:

““Part of that...”

—as he was referring to the food box programme—

“...will be a permanent feature which is under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. The clients of that ministry will have the option of getting a locally grown food package as part of the benefits that they are going to receive.’

‘That should kick in at the end of the October.’”

And this is October2021, end quote. This is at the end of October 2021, former Minister Rambharat stated. We are now in April 2022, Madam Speaker, and where is this permanent fixture that the Minister spoke about? Another broken promise by this PNM Government, Madam Speaker, another promise that never materialized, and that is really the true meaning of what the PNM represents, promises that never materialize.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Instead of the programme continuing from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to the Ministry of Social Development and Family

Services, the programme has now been shut down, resulting in those families who were dependents of this programme, they have now become victims of PNM broken promises and the food and security crisis our country is facing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, had issued several calls on this Government to reinstate the food box programme for these families. However, this Government continues to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear on the cries of our citizens who continue to suffer on a daily basis, Madam Speaker

Madam Speaker, it is very disheartening to see the lack of compassion that is being displayed by this Government. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents faced a challenge of having to provide for their concern who were at home from school and as a result, these families would have heavily relied upon social support and the social assistance provided.

It is very troubling, that on December 30, 2021, an internal memo from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was circulated entitled "Suspension of Food Support Programme". It also advised that all new applicants were to be placed on hold pending further instruction. Madam Speaker, my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas East did not accept this lightly, and upon receiving a copy of that memo, the hon. Member for Chaguanas East immediately responded and represented the citizens who were clients of that food support programme, resulting in the Ministry immediately changing its tune.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And what happened is that they offered a temporary food card in the interim, while they said they are revising the whole programme, but the temporary solution was the result of the Member for Chaguanas East's action

calling them out, Madam Speaker. It was devastating that this Government's New Year's gift to vulnerable families came in the form of attempting to remove food from the mouths of our nation's children. While the Minister's justification for this inconsiderate action was that the programme had been misused by some recipients, it must be stated that the majority of these families had to suffer despite genuinely needing the support. Madam Speaker, this is the atrocious—that deserving recipients, this is deserving recipients being punished as a result of the Minister's inability to monitor and manage that food support programme, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I vividly remember the shocking scene in June of 2021, as police officers had to shut down a food hamper drive at South Park plaza, which left women in tears. It left mothers in tears, Madam Speaker. Thousands of citizens were lined up in the hot sun for hours, desperately awaiting a food hamper. Once again, the incompetence of the Minister was in full display, as the Minister was clueless and underestimated the amount of citizens who were facing severe turmoil. Madam Speaker, it is with a very heavy heart that I quote the preposterous explanation given by the Minister when she stated, and I quote:

“There are some people in need and some in greed.”

Madam Speaker, repeating those mere words make me feel sick. How can a human being be so inconsiderate or so uncompassionate, referring to our citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—who do not know where their next meal is going to come from as “some in need and some in greed”.

Madam Speaker, this heartlessness is not foreign to the PNM, as we have seen across multiple Ministries the inability of those in charge to understand the struggles and hardship faced by citizens across Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, as food prices continue to soar, one has to question the statement by the

hon. Minister of Finance in his budget presentation of fiscal 2022, and I quote:

“...we expect that food prices will subside to its pre-pandemic ranges in 2022 once the transitory disturbances work their way through food prices.”

Madam Speaker, I cannot help but wonder how the hon. Minister of Finance came to that conclusion. On what basis does he predict that food prices will subside, when every time our citizens walk into the grocery, the prices—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, 48(10), the oligarch comment from the Member for Naparima, I take offence to it.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so I will just ask you Member to withdraw that word and find another word.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I withdraw.

Mr. Deyalsingh: No, it was the Member for Naparima calling the Minister of Finance an oligarch.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member, again it is true you are not on your legs but any Member could raise what is unparliamentary language. Okay? So please, be careful in your conversations and let us try and uphold the traditions, you know. Very often you talk about your seniority, let us set the right example. Okay? Continue, Member.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I was making reference to the statement made by the hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, 48(1). I have looked at the preamble to this Motion very carefully. There is no reference to finance, the national budget, the Minister of Finance or any fiscal measure. It is not here and this Member's speech is replete with references to finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member, I know you are talking about runaway food prices, okay, but I uphold the point made by the Minister of Finance. Your Motion here is really dealing with food and nutrition, security crisis. Okay, so that while you do talk about runaway food prices, you do not speak about fiscal measures. All right? So I uphold the objection.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your guidance. And, Madam Speaker, while I will attempt to speak of the Government's failure to establish the appropriate strategy to address the food and nutrition security crisis and runaway food prices, for this Government to be able to put the appropriate strategies in place, Madam Speaker, first and foremost they need to step out of that state of denial that they find themselves in.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And when the Minister can come to this House and predict that in 2022, in his budget presentation, that food prices would—

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, 48(1). I am reading the Motion. It is irrelevant.

Madam Speaker: In addition to which I have already ruled on that. Okay? So let us move on.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Move on.

Madam Speaker: All right, please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I am guided accordingly. And moving on, Madam Speaker, this Motion examines the Government's failure to establish the appropriate strategy as indicated to deal with the runaway food prices. Yesterday, Madam Speaker, I read an article in the *Guardian* media, titled:

Supermarket sees increase

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I respectfully rise on 48(10). It is perhaps why my honourable friend is getting in trouble in repeating irrelevance as well.

Madam Speaker: So Member, as you all know, this is a debate, and while you may refer to your notes, remember it is a debate and we try not to read. So that be mindful of that and let us conduct with a debate. All right? Please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker, I am guided accordingly. Madam Speaker, I was making reference to an article in yesterday's *Guardian* media titled: Supermarkets see increase in shoplifting.

And the President of the Supermarkets Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Rajiv Diptee, he stated that:

“The increase in food prices coupled with the escalating cost in the standard of living that are being blamed for a significant rise in shoplifting at supermarkets across...”—Trinidad and Tobago.

And, Madam Speaker, it is very disheartening to read that parents are slipping baby formula in this time, under their clothing. And I remember, under the leadership of one of the most compassionate leader that Trinidad and Tobago has ever had, the hon. Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, during the People's Partnership Government, where the former Prime Minister introduced a baby grant.

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

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member I will give you a little leeway. Let us see where we are going with this. Remember, this is nothing about crime or anything like that, based on what you have here, save and except praedial larceny and piracy. Okay?

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. And basically this baby grant was designed to assist underprivileged family to provide adequate nutrition and nutritional security for their infants.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: When now, Madam Speaker, under this uncaring PNM administration, babies have to go to sleep hungry. Mothers cannot afford to purchase baby formula. And it is reported in the *Guardian* media where there has been an increase in shoplifting of baby formula because of what is happening in society today, the hardships that our citizens are facing.

However, moving on, Madam Speaker, I focused on the agricultural parcels of land—

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

Mr. Hinds: 48(1).

Mr. Indarsingh: I heard the Minister of National Security referring to my colleague as a scoundrel—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh:—and I call upon him to withdraw that remark immediately.

Madam Speaker: All right. So, again, I will ask all Members. Minister of National Security, from your response, I take it that you are a stranger to this. I am warning all Members while we go forward, if we desist from this crosstalk we will not find ourselves in the difficulties that are being complained of. And I also would ask Members to remember that we refrain from all of these personal reflections.

Right? There is a difference between banter and insulting language and unparliamentary language. Let us proceed. We are wasting the precious time of the Member for Couva North.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, moving on I make reference to the outstanding two-acre parcel of agricultural land that is being owed to our former Caroni (1975) Limited workers. This PNM Government closed down Caroni (1975) Limited. Nineteen years later, under this PNM Government, our former Caroni (1975) Limited workers continue to suffer to

receive their two-acre agricultural parcel, Madam Speaker. This agricultural parcel could have been utilized to add value to our nation's food security and nutritional security, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, what we have seen in the past under the again compassionate leadership of Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, around 5,000 agricultural plots and 2,000 residential lots were distributed. However, Madam Speaker, instead of providing the assistance to these farmers that would have made it easier to utilize their agricultural land to contribute towards our nation's food security, what we see coming from this administration, from the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, once again, is a threat to our farmers to either use it or lose it. The former Minister was threatening owners, former Caroni (1975) Limited workers, who received these two-acre parcels out of the work, the blood, sweat and tears that they—

Mr. Scotland: Madam Speaker, I rise under Standing Order 48(5). The hon. Member is imputing improper motives on the part of the former hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*] Wrong Standing Order.

Mr. Scotland: No, it is not.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: I am going to warn all Members once more. If it is that Members find it difficult to comply with the Standing Orders, rather than I invoke my powers under the Standing Orders, I will ask Members to practise their own self-discipline measures. They can take a “lil” walk, get control of themselves, and come back and comply with the decorum this House requires. Okay? So, Member for Couva North, please proceed. Member for Port of Spain South, overruled.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker,

moving on. These farmers, these former Caroni (1975) Limited workers, some who would not have been able to utilize this two-acre parcel, it is because of many different challenges they face in the agricultural sector. Some being flooding, some being agricultural access roads where some of the agriculture access roads to these two-acre parcels are impassible. But a major issue affecting most of these farmers, Madam Speaker, is the issue of praedial larceny. Some would have cultivated, spent all their savings into cultivating and fell victim to praedial larceny, Madam Speaker. And this issue of praedial larceny places a serious threat to our food security and nutrition security, Madam Speaker, because it causes now farmers to hold back in putting out, having to depend on the State to provide that safety and that security for our farmers, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, like farmers and fishermen, the Praedial Larceny Squad is going through some serious challenges themselves, which has a direct impact on the agricultural sector and the production and food security our country sees. They are faced with understaffing, being underfunded, and working on short-term contract.

Madam Speaker, as you would recall last year during our Standing Finance Committee, I raised the issue in which the members of the Praedial Larceny Squad are unable to carry out their duties efficiently and effectively due to being on short-term contracts, not having proper functioning vehicles in which good Samaritans, like our friends from down in Naparima, had to donate batteries and tyres to these vehicles so that they would be able to carry out their jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, now due to the neglect of the Praedial Larceny Squad, we are seeing the effects in which there has been an increase in farmers' crops being stolen.

In last June, last year, when we were under the state of emergency, it was reported in the national media that:

“Thieves Raid Bon Air farmers...”

—and that happened during the curfew. I recall visiting the farmer in Aranguuez and his wife who were victims of praedial larceny where bandits came. They robbed them. The farmer was assaulted. The dog was chopped. They came the following night and they continued, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issue of praedial larceny is a real one affecting everyone in this country. Even the Prime Minister himself indicated that he was a victim of praedial larceny, where I think his peacock was stolen or something like that, Madam. How unfortunate, Madam Speaker. But praedial larceny is something affecting all the farmers in this country and it is about time that this Government do something to assist the agriculture sector where this matter is concerned.

Madam Speaker, when this Motion speaks about Government to take measure to prevent good insufficiency and starvation, it speaks volumes of areas that are under local government. And I see my colleague, the Member for San Fernando West, anxiously taking notes and I am happy for that. Because, Madam Speaker, in the constituency of Couva North our constituents have to face many issues, which our farmers also have to face, of poor water supply, pothole-ridden and impassible agricultural access roads, flooding, unmaintained watercourses, impassible bridges and many more issues under this PNM Government.

Madam Speaker, the bridge right in the Randy Carter Road in Felicity that the hon. Senator will be very familiar with because he conducted a site visit, Sen. the Hon. Avinash Singh conducted a site visit to this bridge and to this location and he saw the poor condition of the roadway that was being eroded. We got a commitment that he will attempt, a few months ago, to assist us and the farmers of

that area. However, Madam Speaker, to date that roadway has completely eroded, isolating the farmers from being able to access their agricultural produce. And I will tell him to talk to his colleague, the former—

Madam Speaker: Not “him”.

Mr. R. Ratiram: The hon. Minister.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Minister or the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture. Please, we can do better than that.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are many more issues that I would like to touch on relating to these matters of agriculture and how it is that this Government can act in the best interest of our farming and agriculture community

3.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, however, as we focus on our national food security I want to make reference to the launch of a national food security campaign that took place way back in 2011. Madam Speaker, since July 20, 2011, the then Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, launched a national food campaign—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—to provide and promote food security in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, from the beginning of the People’s Partnership tenure, the hon. Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, demonstrated the commitment to the revitalization of the agriculture sector. We acknowledge that in order to move our country forward in order to achieve sustainable future, we must develop the agriculture sector. We understood food security was important and we understood where we were at and we mapped out how we were going to attain our end goal. We desired and still desire the best for the citizens of Trinidad and

Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we introduced revised incentives and insisted that the Agricultural Development Bank return to its proper mandate of financing entrepreneurship in agriculture all within the aim of obtaining food security. In the last budget put forward by the People's Partnership, we continued to make proposals—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I rise again on Standing Order 44(10). This is a debate not a speech.

Madam Speaker: Okay so, Member, you know, just do not be so tied to your notes. You continue.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Madam Speaker, and Madam Speaker, in wrapping up I want to say that there were so many different things and I want to make reference to some of the solutions and some of what has worked that this Government can take a page and once implemented will definitely benefit our country, our citizens and free us from the food and nutrition crisis that we are facing in today's society.

Madam Speaker, during that time of the People's Partnership what we saw is a 50 per cent increase in the fines for the praedial larceny. It was proposed to subject the cost of establishing and refurbishing approved facilities for agro processing, it was approved—a rebate of 50 per cent and what we saw was the construction of several agro processing facilities. Some of it has not been put into use even after seven years that this Government has come into office.

Madam Speaker, the People's Partnership administration proposed a refund of 40 per cent of the cost of hazard analysis and critical control points for agro processors and proposed an allocation of 75 million to the Agricultural Development Bank. The ADB was well financed and funded during the five years

of the People's Partnership and accessing loan facility was not like pulling teeth. Now what we see happening from since this Government "come into office" is zero or little allocation, one allocation given in the budget, revised during the course of the year, and when we see the actual figure the following year for three out of the seven years we saw the actual figure was zero for the Agricultural Development Bank.

Madam Speaker, we recognize that since we gained independence and the PNM Government was elected, agriculture has been on the back bench and after examining the trend, the People's Partnership administration recognized that agriculture production was only averaging a mere 5 per cent GDP in the year preceding the tenure of 2010 and energy was approximately 40 per cent. So what took place at that point in time is that significant investment went into the agriculture sector and we needed to reduce the dependency on the import food bill that the country has been faced with. We recognize the importance of increasing agricultural contribution to GDP.

Madam Speaker, when we go to the year in review 2020 the information provided by the Ministry of Finance and we look at the agriculture and forestry and fishing contribution to GDP in Trinidad and Tobago in TT million dollars: in 2015 it is \$1.468 million; 2016, \$1.361 million; 2017, 1.468; 2018, 1.327; 2019, 1.283 and 2020, 1.278.6. These are the figures from the Ministry of Finance and what we have seen happening up to 2020, Madam Speaker, is a significant decline in the contribution of agriculture to GDP of our country.

Madam Speaker, it really pains me to see what is happening in our country today under this administration. This Government has neglected the agricultural and fisheries sectors and has created a food and nutrition security crisis in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, if we look at the budget allocation of agriculture

from 2010—2020 we would observe that during the tenure of the People's Partnership more money was allocated to this very important sector during the tenure compared to that of the PNM administration. From 2010—2015 the People's Partnership Government allocated a maximum of \$1.9 billion to agriculture and that was in 2011 and 2012 and a minimum of \$1.3 billion and that was in 2014—2015. But Madam Speaker, when the PNM Government took office in 2015, it was clear that they did not hold agriculture in high regards and only a mere \$831million was allocated to this sector.

Madam Speaker, I really do not think that my colleagues on the other side really understand what is required to make food security a reality in this country. The allocation of money to agriculture yet still we are doing poorly as it relates to some of the pillars of food security, the allocation that is given to agricultural sector it is not being utilized or properly utilized by those on the other side. Just last year a 500 million stimulus package was given to the sector and only 72 million was utilized. Most of that was not utilized and when the Minister reported back to the House what was said is that the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was coming up with plans and strategies for an entire year. Again, a 300 million stimulus package has been put in place to the sector and almost half the fiscal term has already been expended and we have not seen any meaningful result of this stimulus package.

Madam Speaker, as we move on, those on the other side would stand confidently and boast that our country is doing much better than others and that we should be glad that we still have food available to all despite the global supply chain challenges but we still have a high food import bill. In 2019, we had a food import bill of \$5.6 billion and as expected when the pandemic sprung upon us in 2020, food importing countries like ours became more vulnerable to global shocks.

We still have low level of domestic production and a major cause of this issue is because this Government has given very little support to the farming community and to those in the fishing industry.

Madam Speaker, this Government implemented interest free loans to micro, small and medium enterprise but did not see it fit to extend this facility to farmers and fishermen. Additionally, farmers face great difficulty in accessing this agricultural loan at the ADB and I recall when the Ministry of Finance was questioned about the issues, in true PNM style he decided to pass the blame and suggest that farmers were responsible for their own demise.

Madam Speaker, I would pass some of my contribution research on to my colleagues who will continue from where I would have left off. However, Madam Speaker, today I am calling on the Government to acknowledge that there is a food and nutrition security crisis in Trinidad and Tobago. I am calling on the Government to take immediate measures to prevent food insufficiency and starvation in the nation, particularly for the poor marginalized and vulnerable group. Madam Speaker, the Government must protect and secure the future of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. If they cannot do so, then they must do the honourable and tender their resignation.

In concluding, I want to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to my staff and my friends who have all contributed with the research put together for this Motion and who go beyond the call of duty to serve the constituents of Couva North and the citizens of our country. And as I save the best for last, Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity, today being the special day that it is, to thank the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for the inspiration she has given to us in the UNC to continue the feed a family programme where we prepare lunches and distribute meals to

underprivileged families. Just last year during the early part of the lockdown we prepared over 22,000 meals and distributed and we recommenced this programme just this weekend for the Easter once again. Our leader has proven to be the most compassionate and caring leader that we have ever seen here in Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and on this special day I take this opportunity to wish her a happy, happy, happy birthday and pray that God continue to shower his choicest blessings upon her.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And in closing, Madam Speaker, I thank you once again for affording me this opportunity to move this Motion and I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: This Motion requires a seconder.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, I wish to second this Motion and I reserve the right to speak.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, the Motion being seconded, I shall now propose the question for debate.

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Kazim Hosein): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And I thank you for the opportunity to speak in this honourable House in response to the Motion for the Member for Couva North. Madam Speaker, I want to—before I move on, I want to

thank the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for his contribution that he made—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—that he made in the Ministry and I intend to, together with my two colleagues to carry on where he left off. I also want to thank the Prime Minister for giving me the opportunity to serve in this Ministry along with my two colleagues and I intend to get the job done as I am accustomed doing.

Madam Speaker, the allegation of neglect of the agriculture and fisheries sector by this Government led by a former Minister of Agriculture cannot be supported. I note carefully the comments made by the Member for Couva North on the local fisheries sector. I want to start with fisheries. Madam Speaker, I would get into the details later, but for now, let me give the Member for Couva North the reminder. In 2020, it was the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, who in 2020 laid in this House for the first time in the country's history, the Fisheries Management Bill.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Madam Speaker, for the first time in 104 years, a Bill was laid to replace the existing fisheries Act. It did not happen by vaps. Madam Speaker, after several attempts, this Bill represents our best efforts to date. It has been endorsed by our international and regional partners. It takes into consideration the views expressed by local stakeholders. And that Bill, Madam Speaker, as the Member for Couva North knows, is being reviewed in great detail by a Joint Select Committee of both Houses. It will change the way we do business.

Madam Speaker, this process spanned for almost three decades, with legislative review exercises being undertaken in five major periods: 1992—1997,

2004—2007, 2010—2012, 2013—2015 and 2017 to present, with five draft Bills been developed in 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015 and the 2020 Bill laid in this House.

Madam Speaker, it is a landmark achievement for a long-term preservation of our marine resources on our coastal communities, including the one represented by the Member for Couva North.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

It is a clear signal that this Government is moving in the right direction. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion must fail for many other reasons. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Motion must fail because the Member for Couva North cannot ignore the work done by the Government to confront the potential impact of the COVID-19 and a series of other global challenges, which threatens our ability to feed ourselves.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I want to remind the Member for Couva North that as much as the Member campaigned against the policy decision of the Government to provide locally grown and produced food to families across the country in the face of COVID-19 lockdowns, that project was highly successful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Members would recall that in the mid-year review of 2021, \$57,310,000 was approved and allocated by the Minister of Finance for this programme. By September 2021, there was an increase in the number of market boxes from the projected 125,000.

Mr. Ratiram: Standing Order 44(10), Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, again, honourable Members, as has been previously stated, it is a debate, but I think a little precedent has already been set in with regard to the mover of the Motion so, again, kindly proceed.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In order to provide boxes to various non-governmental organizations and faith based organizations, these organizations include: Pan Trinbago, the National Carnival Bands Association, the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association, Coterie Social Workers of Trinidad and Tobago Incorporated, Islamic Fadaa'il Services Trust, Shivaji Jayanti Hindu Organization, New Jerusalem Church of Christ, St. James Pentecostal Church, Rio Claro Employment Group, O2N Foundation, the UWI Students Guild, Single Mothers Association of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in May and June 2021, NAMDEVCO also received donations of local chickens from the Arawak and Fine Choice Meats Limited, which was distributed to over 19,630 families in May and June of 2021—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—where 139 local government representatives in Trinidad and 12 Assemblymen in Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the months of July to September 2021, NAMDEVCO purchased local chickens from local processors and combined with this plea, packaged and frozen provision veggie packages for distribution to 29,445 families—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—where the same 139 local government representatives in Trinidad and 12 Assemblymen in Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government did not need a Motion in this House to take immediate measures to prevent food insufficiency and starvation in the nation, particularly for poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups. Through NAMDEVCO, a total of 139,906 market boxes were delivered over the period 2021 May to September 2021 and additionally, 49,075 chicken and frozen provision packages to 49,075 families in May to September 2021 period.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: These market boxes were valued at \$573.10 and contained high quality local produce including eggs, frozen chickens sourced from farms registered with NAMDEVCO's Farms Certification and Monitoring Programme. I want to remind all where these produce came from—these produce—where did the local chicken come from? Where did the peeled and frozen provision come from? Where did the eggs come from? Where did the milk come from? Mr. Deputy Speaker, it came from our local farmers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: This Government did not ignore the plight of the farmers. They were declared to be an essential service. Municipal and farmers market remained open. All persons working in food production were allowed to work even during the curfew periods. Hundreds of farmers found a guaranteed market in the NAMDEVCO food box.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, millions of pounds of produce came from our local farmers from the constituency of Couva North, from Toco, from Sangre Grande, Brasso Seco, Talparo, Plum Mitan, Biche, Cuche, Bristol, Cunupia, Caroni, Couva, Barrackpore, Moruga, Caura, Pasea, Orange Grove, Wallerfield, Carlsen Field, Macoya, Penal, Siparia, Fyzabad, Point Fortin, La Brea, Paramin and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me use September 2021 as an example. For that month, NAMDEVCO purchased 1.3 million pounds of local produce.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Let me repeat that. In September 2021, NAMDEVCO purchased 1.3 million local produce from 212 farmers spread across 59 geographic

areas in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 200 pounds of cassava—218 pounds of cassava—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—136 pounds of dasheen, 109 pounds of plantain, 144 pounds of squash and that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was in September 2021 alone. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we bought dasheen bush, bodi, ochro, tomatoes, corn, bhaji, sweet potato, sweet pepper, pineapple, watermelon, pawpaw, cucumbers and breadfruit. Healthy, locally grown produce, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein:—delivered to thousands and thousands of families across our country with dignity and respect at a time when many could not work or earn a living and many needed the help. What in that information suggests any form of neglect for our citizens, for our farmers and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for our well-being of our nation? Where is the neglect?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion also alleges that the Government has failed to establish an appropriate strategy to address this food and nutrition security crisis and runaway food prices. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government worked on building agriculture and food security in Trinidad and Tobago, and did not start in September 2015 and did not start with the COVID-19. This country's strong and vibrant poultry sector, the dairy subsector, livestock production and the more common fruits, vegetables and tree crops were built around our PNM policy relating to state land, subsidies and incentives, taxation, duty free, internal and export marketing, research and trade supporting dating back to 1956.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I referred to the 212 farmers, for example, who sold NAMDEVCO 1.3 million pounds of local produce in September 2021, I did

not say that almost every one of those farmers produces fruit crops on lands made available to them by PNM policy dating and back to the 1950s and 60s.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, take Kenton Clifton for example. He is a husband and a father and a young dairy farmer in Turure in East Trinidad. Kenton is a son of the deceased dairy farmer Kelvin Clifton, one of the pioneers of the dairy farming in Trinidad and Tobago. When Nestlé came to this country in 1914, the Swiss multinational set up on Marine Square in Port of Spain. An important importer, produce manufactured in Switzerland, from there the company moved to Picton Road, Laventille, then to the current site in Valsayn. From its plant in Valsayn, Nestlé worked with the Government in 1962. The company began purchasing local cow's milk from 275 farmers, which they bottled in glass bottles for local sales. Kelvin Clifton was one of those farmers in 1962 and 60 years later, his son Kenton, is still a supplier to Nestlé.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.30 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as challenging as it may be for our local dairy farmers, it was a visit to Switzerland by the then Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, that led to the creation of livestock farms on 20-acre parcels in Wallerfield, Carlsen Field and other parts of this country. As a Government, we understand the challenges but we have never stopped working with Nestlé, the dairy farmers, young upcoming farmers and the families still involved in dairy farming. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 60 years later on our shelves, proudly displaying our national flag, locally produced cow milk remains available for sale to our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: That milk finds its way to families across the country via the NAMDEVCO Food Box Programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I spoke about those 212 farmers, just as an example, I did not say to my friend from Couva South that in June 2021, 270 farmers sold to NAMDEVCO 1.1 million pounds of produce and they were paid close to \$8 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I did not say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in July 2021, 269 farmers from across this country, sold to NAMDEVCO 1.3 million pounds of produce and were paid almost \$9 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did not say that the majority of farmers were producing fruit crops from land projects in Toco, Sangre Grande, Brasso Seco, Talparo, Plum Mitan, Biche, Cuche, Bristol, Cunupia, Caroni, Couva, Barrackpore, Moruga, Pasea, Caura, Orange Grove, Wallerfield, Carlsen Field, Macoya, Penal, Siparia, Fyzabad, Point Fortin, La Brea, Paramin and Tobago, all established by the PNM Government state land policy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: This was no “vaps”, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is the result of strategy, consultation, hard work with all our local and regional partners.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in previous budget statements, the Minister of Finance has outlined the strategy of the Government for dealing with agriculture. In particular, the 2020/2021 statement, the Minister of Finance made the point that this country develops its oil and gas sector, as well as its manufacturing sector and as our international trading arrangements developed along the lines of the free market system, the contribution of the agriculture to national gross domestic product declined despite constant investment by the State.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a proportion of the gross domestic product, the contribution of agriculture has been insignificant, accounting for approximately 1 per cent or less over the past decade. Even with the numerous generation incentives and availability of cheap state land for production, investors and farmers have been unable to overcome consistently the structural impediments inherited in the agricultural sector. The number one reason has been a decade-old challenge in the renewal of state land leases and an almost impossibility to grant new leases.

The Government policies are focused on expanding our domestic food supply. We decided to make agriculture, in all its facets, a tax-free industry. We have provided the confidence which is required for investors and farmers to invest in their time, energy and their own personal finances to the development of the sector by making the sector much more attractive, especially for the young people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we established a \$500 million agriculture stimulus package in 2021, which is in addition to the normal budgetary allocation to the agricultural sector. This represented a 70 per cent increase over 2019 to 2020 allocation for agriculture. The funding is to support the rapid expansion in production and marketing of selected high demand commodities with short production cycles such as vegetables, legumes, roots, tubers, greens, fruits and small livestock. Adequate quality seeds will be secured. The use of alternative feed stock will be encouraged and land issue will be addressed with a view of accelerating land tenure and access to idle state lands. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me now address the issue of state land administration and the management and growth of investor confidence including our farmers who are our most important investor.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, subject to the Cabinet oversight, the administration and management of all state lands fall under the Commissioner of State Lands. Under

the State Lands Act, Chap. 57:01, and the Land Acquisition Act, Chap. 58:01, the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago, the Commissioner of State Lands is charged with the responsibility for management of all lands of state throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including the issuing of licence, rights of way, special permission, leases and agreements, the service of eviction notices for squatters as well as advisory termination notice to tenants in breach.

The Commissioner of State Lands is also responsible for the issue of state grants, the acquisition of privately owned land for public use, the monitoring of all reclamation activities along the seabed, the monitoring of all land reclamation activities, existing tenancies and leases and the collection of revenue from such tenants. Most importantly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Commissioner of State Lands is empowered to invoice for and ensure the payment of rents falling within which the land should be retaken by the State and reallocated. I say right away, Mr. Deputy Speaker that rent collection is a broken system in the State. Millions and millions of revenue have been lost for non-collection, non-payment, failure to renew leases, failure to grant leases and failure to review rents and leases provided.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a significant part of the Land Management Division's work relates to the grant of lease of state lands for agriculture and other uses and renewal, transfer of other forms of administration of these leases which are vital to the development and administration of the country's agriculture and other sectors. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is well known, that there are long delays in grants and renewal of leases, transfer of lands, removal of regularization of occupants on state lands, issuing of licence for land reclamation and mining activities and the acquisition of lands for the public purposes by the State. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the end result is, there is a significant number of squatters, agricultural, residential and commercial on state lands and in relation to state lands reserved for agriculture and

a complete breakdown in the prospect of succession planning among families in farming.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at periodical intervals, various political administrations have introduced temporary arrangements to facilitate access to loans and agricultural incentives by agricultural squatters and leases with expiry leases. Mr. Deputy Speaker, these interventions—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 44(10), please. **Mr.**

Deputy Speaker: “Yuh sure? Yuh sure that is the Standing Order?”

Mr. Ratiram: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, overruled.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, notwithstanding various Cabinet decisions aimed at improving the process for distribution, administration and management of state lands—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand again on 44(10), please. The presenter is reading. The Member is reading directly for the longest while. I have been looking at him. I have been paying attention.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, you yourself, Member for Couva North, set the precedent for this particular debate. We know it is a debate, Members—to all hon. Members, we know it is a debate. Right? And, again, Member, you raised a Standing Order, so I am responding. Okay? Overruled. Kindly proceed.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 44(10), and I seek your clarification or guidance here. Did the hon. Minister have leave from you or the Speaker to read the majority of his speech?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled. Kindly proceed.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: In 2000, work started on a lease management system, a workflow management system that would enable the Commissioner of State Lands

to effectively manage leases. The project aimed to computerize land records and, at that time, 30,000 paper files developed a lease management system that would enable the Commissioner of State Lands to manage leases effectively. This project was not completed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2008 and 2009, it was agreed that agricultural state lands be transferred to the Estate Management and Business Development Company and the EMBD undertaking the management of these lands in accordance with the public policy objectives of the Government. Ineffect, this decision halted all work being performed at the time of the LMD. Mr. Deputy Speaker, EMBD never fully assumed this responsibility. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2009, it was agreed that the Chief State Solicitor would prepare for execution land leases of approximately 17,000 parcels of state land in respect to tenures having expired or invalid an estimated 9,000 parcels of land occupied by person with no tenure documents.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fulfilment of obligations under an Industrial Court Consent Order, an agreement made between the All Trinidad Sugar and General Workers' Trade Union, and Caroni (1975) Limited, the leases were to be provided for residential lots and two-acre agricultural plots to Caroni (1975) Limited. Employees who accepted this company voluntary separation of employment package, VSEP, qualified for their allocation of such residential lots and/or agriculture plots. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the VSEP offer, the subsequent vesting of all lands of Caroni (1975) Limited in the State and the requirement for the Commissioner of State Lands to now handle approximately 16,101 Caroni VSEP land files placed a further administrative burden on the Land Management Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that process continues almost 20 years after, and we have, in addition to the following, a lack of continuity due to frequent changes in

employees: Permanent Secretaries and Ministers, regular changes in leadership within the Ministries responsible for state land; lack of inter-agency cooperation; the unwillingness of state agencies to formally delegate authority, survey and mapping; Commissioner of State Lands, Town and Country Planning Division, Valuations Division, Registrar General and the Chief State Solicitor; the requirement that each and every parcel to be allocated and supported by individual Cabinet approval among other challenges.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I provide all of these details for the purpose of this Motion because the Government makes no apologies for making the grant of state lands and leases and the renewal of expired leases a priority in expansion of our local food supply. Thousands of files have been addressed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, at the same, the digital transformation project at the Ministry is underway, not just for the Ministry but for all agencies involved in state land ownership, management, administration of approvals.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government's position going forward is that there needs to be proper administration and management of state land and the proposed identification of an IT-based single point management of authority for the management and administration of state land using the existing human resources and the infrastructure at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the other agencies of the State. This will enable the State to better manage its agricultural estates and other leases and collect the rent due.

In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries estimated that approximately \$500 million is currently uncollected on account of incompetent transactions already approved by Cabinet, but not yet consummated by a lease: leases where rentals are not being collected, leases where rent reviews. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the work of the steering committee established to identify and execute the

process required to build a stronger system of state land management is underway. Interim report of the steering committee, a critical component of the committee's work, was the inventory exercise involving all land owned by the State directly or via state enterprises, state agencies. Statutory boards are also vital.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me touch on two very specific issues connected with this country's state land. First, I want to say that recently four persons have been charged with fraud matters relating to state land, three of whom worked with the Land Management Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Charges include: Uttering a forged document to represent the State, misbehaviour in public office, alleged use of employment for the State to facilitate possible corrupt activities within the Office of the Commissioner of State Lands.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, with all due respect, 48(1). I am failing to see the relevance of what the Minister is providing here in relation to this Motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Member, right, I know you just started the point, so tie it in quickly with regard to the Motion that we are debating please. Right? Tie it in quickly.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: Thank you very much. Secondly, I want to say that the Government is also paying close attention to registered land surveyors and, in particular, the function of the Land Survey Board of Trinidad and Tobago, a division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me address also the issue of taxation and making the business of agriculture tax free. This is critical to boosting the confidence of investors, including our traditional investors who have farmed for decades and now new entrants into the sector. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to advise that a consultant has been submitted for a comprehensive report that is engaging the attention of the Government.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1), please. Which aspect of the Motion the Minister is making reference to?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Agricultural tax for lands. Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. K. Hosein: I am responding to the Motion, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have agricultural incentives: the exemption from all duties and taxes, inputs into the agricultural sector, including approved chemicals, pest control, approved vehicles, approved fishing vessels and equipment, agro-processing tax relief. All approved agro-processing operations, tax free with effect from the second quarter of 2017. There is also a proposal to remove all taxes on duties on all inputs and resources for farmers registered for agricultural purposes and making agriculture in these facets, including local agricultural products, a tax-free industry as stated in 2019/2020 budget.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in making agriculture more attractive to investors, the Government has emphasized that linkages along food value and distribution chains must be strengthened by making locally produced food more attractive within the economy. Mr. Deputy Speaker, to date, several food producers, much of them young people, have received grants for the following: Invest in modern farming technology or other efficiency upgrades on their farms to resist the effects of changing weather patterns, reduce labour reliance; introduce more efficient use of water; reduce cost of production or improve health and safety as well as food safety; improve their breeding stock; pursue value added initiatives; access research and development support and develop products.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I head towards the end, I want to summarize some of the key accomplishments of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for 2015 to date. First, I must return to the Fisheries Management Bill and I want to complete what I said in my opening, by saying the Bill now before the joint select

committee will achieve the following: Strengthen and incorporate fisheries management and international obligations and create border responsibilities jurisdiction and powers in relation to fisheries management by the State. It creates a legal basis for compliance by stakeholders, establishes a legal framework for the State to fulfil the obligation as a flag port coastal and market state in accordance with existing international framework.

Other notable achievements of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries: completed and commissioned new head office building in Chaguanas; relocated the headquarters of the Praedial Larceny Squad from St. Joseph to Beetham Gardens to El Carmen; constructed in some cases, upgrade buildings in Brechin Castle, Couva, Mongillo, Cunupia and other parts of the country; invested more than \$10 million in upgrade of the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries IT systems; established new framework for oversights of state agencies responsible for agriculture, including the Agriculture Development Bank, NAMDEVCO and the Cocoa Development Company.

In closing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I firmly refute the claims made by the Member of Parliament for Couva North, stating that the Government has neglected the agriculture and fisheries sector. The aforementioned provides clear evidence that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and by extension, this Government remain committed to achieving food security and nutrition. We will continue to work with our colleagues across the various Ministries, state agencies and at the Caricom level in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now recognize the Member for Chaguanas East—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—and colleagues here on in, it is 30 minutes per individual.

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to this debate. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I begin by commending my colleague and Member for Couva North for bringing forward this Motion which is in line—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the reality of what citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are facing today as we sit in this honourable House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion speaks directly to the cries of the hungry and the struggling in our nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in responding to the speaker before, the new Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, you know, I want to respond but the Minister—it was very difficult to follow the Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in listening to the Minister, the Minister basically, to sum up his contribution, supported all the points made by my colleague for Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And I found it even strange that the Minister took credit for a People's Partnership project—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—as it relates to the head office in Chaguanas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the now Ministry

of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries building. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what the Minister—in the Minister's contribution, the Minister failed to inform this House and to state what he is doing to deal with the food and nutrition security crisis in Trinidad and Tobago.

And we heard the Minister speak of the NAMDEVCO—he spent a lot of time—the Minister spent a lot of time on the NAMDEVCO food boxes and the benefits to citizens and farmers and we acknowledged that, hence the reason the Member for Couva North would have stated—the Leader of the Opposition would have made several calls to reinstate the Food Box Programme, the NAMDEVCO Food Box Programme. But what the Minister failed to do here today is to tell us in this House and to tell the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago what is next for them after this NAMDEVCO Food Box Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

The Minister failed to tell us as MPs. Persons coming to our offices crying out in terms of hunger, challenges faced within the household, how do we answer to them as to what is next, Mr. Deputy Speaker? We are no longer in 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in 2022 and the Minister failed to tell us what he is going to do for citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—facing challenges in 2022. Of course, you had to bring NAMDEVCO food boxes because you were faced with a situation based on your Government's lockdown measures where citizens became jobless and had to stay at home.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in listening to the Minister's response I

can tell you that I almost forgot who was in charge. So I will continue with my contribution and address matters based on what the Minister would have raised here today as I go along.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, food and nutrition are fundamentals by which any nation or country are judged and the Government would have the country at large believe that the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and other external global influences are the cause of our food crisis.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I say today that this is further from the truth and it is a mere deflection to cover up the total and abject neglect of the food and agricultural sector in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, historically and currently the PNM has always disregarded the agricultural sector and lived in a bubble; not COVID-19 but in the false bubble that we always have the benefits of energy and energy reserves. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in looking at the contents outlined in this Motion, I want to look a little as it relates to the agricultural sector and food security. And as I look at this particular area I say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM administration over the years has always boasted about their interest to develop the agricultural sector, however, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fundamentals of land security—and I refer to some farmers in my very own constituency as it relates to the Soogrim Street farmers who fear for their livelihoods—who fear rather that their livelihoods may be in jeopardy as it relates to land security, the fundamentals of available state lands. And we heard the Minister today admitting to the failures of his government and the last Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—not necessarily coming here to blame the Commissioner of State Lands—the fundamentals of flooding, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I recall clearly writing for the farmers within my very own constituency, the Jerningham farmers; writing the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries who responded to me to say that an officer visited and the pictures that I forwarded to him had a little water. The officer visited, never contacted any of the farmers so he has not found any evidence of destruction of crops. These farmers—we asked on behalf of the farmers to do a visit with us to the area; to date no visit. I am hoping and praying that at least this new Minister will visit those farmers who are pleading for de-silting works more than two years now in that particular area.

They are helping themselves a lot, conducting a lot of fundraisers to help themselves, but they are in need of support and assistance and I will continue to write for them. Fundamentals, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to food crop insurance, as it relates to praedial larceny, storage facilities and the myriad of problems associated with the sector remain unresolved and unattended to. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I stick to this point of agriculture and food security, I distinctly remember some years ago growing up, you know, always looking at these budget presentations, the PNM Government was in their glee, spreading the gospel of mega farms about 15 years ago which should have been in full production. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to refer to an article up to recently, a *Guardian* article on May02, 2020, where it is headlined, the “Need to revisit mega-farms for food security”. And Joe Pires would have stated that:

“The late...”

As he contributed to this particular report it is stated in this article:

“The late Prime Minister Patrick Manning would likely be rolling in his grave if he found out what has happened to his 2020 vision for agriculture.

In 2007, Manning proposed the idea of mega-farms, devoting \$100 million to establish nine farms.”

What has happened to this idea of mega farms? As I relate to that particular article up to 2020 where it is being requested, the “Need to revisit mega-farms for food security”.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that being said, I have a few questions about mega farms. What has become of these mega farms? Are they still in operation? What crops are being cultivated? Are they operating at full capacity? What are the benefits of these farms relative to lower food prices? Has the Government reviewed their operations and what is the proposed future of these farms if they are not at full capacity? Have these farms resulted in greater quantity and quality of products? And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I expected to hear some of this from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries here today. This brings me to my next question: Will the new Minister review this initiative and determine whether this is a success or failure?—because I want to refer to another article, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Since 2017—since 2017—it is reported here in Loop News based on the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure where it was said that:

“Plans for the development of mega farms across the country have been shelved due to”—the—“challenges where funding is concerned.”

Mega farms which the PNM preached will contribute to food security.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they preached it, it did not happen. It cannot happen now because of funding, but if we look at the Member for Siparia, as Prime Minister of this country—and I take this opportunity to commend the Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—who in 2015, under PSIP, had a plan to develop a total system for

the management of farms in this country and this was a part of an approval for 33 projects under the Ministry of Food Production. That is what you call service to people within the Ministry of Agriculture.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in looking at the PNM's idea of mega farms and their treatment towards mega farms, this brings us to their usual approach to agriculture which is underscored by the recent convulsions that resulted in the readjustment of ministerial portfolios. In other words, the Cabinet reshuffle.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the former agricultural Minister resigned and cited family reasons in the public domain but we must never forget that this individual lost two elections yet the Prime Minister reposed confidence—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1).

Mr. Charles: What? But that is relevant.

Mr. Deyalsingh: About losing elections. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Can I rule now, please? Again, so, Member, I am going to give you a little leeway but let us—do not bring the actual individual. Let us keep it to the Ministry and their relevant functions.

Ms. V. Mohit: Sure. Sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thanks a lot, and of course I will tie that up very quickly. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, lo and behold, less than a month after this very individual is earmarked for a plump position. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to close this point we see here where land management takes precedence over food security by this Government. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on I want to deal with food prices as outlined within the content of this particular Motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, every day my constituency office is bombarded by

constituents complaining and at times crying as they are unable to cope and manage their resources whilst food prices—and I mean basic food prices continue to reach astronomical proportions. And I looked at, you know, some prices related to supermarkets under the Ministry of Trade and Industry and based on those prices I want to just put forward a little scenario, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and have us imagine a few items which I am going to list.

Let us imagine a five-pound chicken retails at \$75; a 10 kg flour at \$80; a 2 kg rice at \$28; a dozen eggs at \$22; a 3.8 litre of oil at \$98; a litre of milk, \$17; one pound of beans, \$13. Mr. Deputy Speaker, therefore, based on these prices I am asking us to imagine a simple meal consisting of rice, chicken, red beans and some salad, which is a nutritionally balanced meal for a family of five would cost at least \$100, bearing in mind this is just one meal. Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a conservative food expenditure for this same family of five would be in the vicinity of \$160 per day, providing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you have to get bread to go with your eggs and in most cases persons will repeat the same meal of rice, chicken, red beans in the evening.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government would have you believe that people are enjoying the finer niceties of life but let me repeat, it is time for them to start to walk through the groceries and food markets and appreciate what the poor and vulnerable experience daily in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the figures that I have quoted must be viewed against the backdrop that the increase in fuel cost has not been factored in, and if you look at the People's Partnership administration prices in terms of fuel versus 2017 to 2022, whilst there has been an increase in fuel prices there has been no increase as it relates—not much increases as it relates to the social security network. Therefore, in about one month it will be no surprise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if these very prices of goods increase by approximately 25

per cent since transportation is an integral business expenditure.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me not hasten to add that I will not be an ostrich and bury my head in the sand since there are some impending global factors which will further drive up food prices. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to refer to a Legal Notice, the Customs Act Order, 2022, where it states that—as it relates to:

“Milk and cream, concentrated or containing added sugar or other sweetening matter.”—

—the rate of duty in terms of condensed milk—the rate of duty is that of 30 per cent, and this is the Common External Tariff Order, 2022.

To increase milk at this time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a brutal attack on the poor and vulnerable. Mr. Deputy Speaker, soon, based on what we are seeing, you know, mothers may have to go back to the old fashion way of feeding babies with flour and water. Many of us—I had that when I was small, and what we are seeing happening, mothers will have to revert to such a mechanism to feed their babies. But then again with the impending wheat crisis looming you may not even be able to buy flour. And you would have heard my colleague referred to the article on shoplifting growing in Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—so when you cannot afford what will happen? When mothers cannot afford what is going to happen?

It is not that we are condoning it; it is not that we are supporting it, but it is the reality of what is happening in this country. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, given the above, a caring responsible government would have anticipated such developments, both domestically and internationally, and made effective contingency plans which we all know is a hallmark of good management and

governance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in about a month's time those basics meals, which I outlined to you, for the day could cost householders approximately \$200. And of course, you know, if we had to take this by the month it would cost a vulnerable household about \$6,000 to feed themselves and purchase foodstuff. How does this Government expect people to survive, Mr. Deputy Speaker? And we must keep a close eye on what is going on in Sri Lanka. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on I want to look at the contents outlined in this Motion as it relates to vulnerable groups and the poor and have a look at the social safety net.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, pensions and social grants need to be addressed and brought into reality in the context of the current scenario. The Government must address social services and include those falling below the social safety net. This Motion deals with food and nutrition and given what was articulated earlier in my contribution, the children reporting back to the physical classroom, how are the less fortunate in society to provide a nutritionally balanced meal for their children on a daily basis? Nutrition, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is an important element of a child's development and plays a pivotal role in their educational intake. Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how is a hungry child or a nutritionally deficient child expected to assimilate academic material? In other words, how do we expect a hungry child to absorb classroom knowledge?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the question begs, has the Government undertaken surveys or studies to expand the school feeding programme? What about the increased number of students who now require lunches at school arising out of the increased unemployment factor? And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quickly refer

to an article; a *Guardian* article, December 25, 2021, where mothers are seen on the street holding signs, “Help Needed Foodstuff”; headline, “Hard times force women to beg on”—the—“nation’s streets”. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that being said, I hope that the Government recognizes that a vibrant agricultural sector would have mitigated the fallout in the current circumstances.

There are burning issues which this woeful and incompetent Government fails to address but instead likes to “bouff” the population as though they are a bunch of complainers and making a fuss for everything. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not repeat in terms of what my colleague would have mentioned as it relates to utterances and of course the reviews in the food support system. I will move along and I want to touch a little as it relates to the vulnerable.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government without any sound rationale disbanded the NAMDEVCO food boxes which brought relief to a smaller number totalling to about 200 families; 200 boxes per week for constituencies. When enquires were made as to why it was disbanded in February 2022—I think to be precise, somewhere around the 18th, the Leader of Government Business indicated that a new initiative was in the pipeline to replace this particular programme, yet, Mr. Deputy Speaker, almost three months after nothing has been implemented. So in other words, the vulnerable are being told to starve until we come up with a new initiative. That is what the vulnerable in this country are being told, “Starve until we come up with another initiative”.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, a resolution of the Motion states inter alia:

“Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to acknowledge the food and nutrition security crisis and to take immediate measures to prevent food insufficiency and starvation in the nation, particularly for poor,

marginalized and vulnerable groups.”

However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of course we are always willing to offer some suggestions on areas where the Government must urgently address to avoid catastrophic measures in Trinidad and Tobago as far as the contents are in this Motion—in this Motion are concerned. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we call on the Government to immediately regularize security of land tenure and encourage those persons to utilize state lands for food production.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Incentivize the agricultural community. And of course the Minister mentioned on taxation; for someone myself who came from dairy farming, who grew into dairy farming, this is significant as it relates to taxation, VAT-related items, subsidies to help farmers as it will help with succession planning which the Minister referred to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we call on the Government to immediately in tandem with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to create a sustainable relationship as it relates to infrastructure, marketing facilities and even street vending through some controlled measures. We call on the Government to immediately review the vulnerability listing and revamp the operation of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; allow for resources to reach more recipients rather than the funds being consumed in operational costs as we have stated before.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: We call on the Government to revise the School Feeding Programme by expanding this programme to cater for more students who are in urgent need of the programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: We call on the Government to ensure market opportunities and facilities are constructed to ease vagaries experienced by farmers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Furthermore, align the School Feeding Programme to the agricultural initiatives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Somehow or the other that would have slipped through the door. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we call on the Government to immediately retract the increases in fuel prices—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—since this singular measure has created a debilitating effect on the entire population and more so compounded the struggles of the poor, the physically challenged, the vulnerable and employed of this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that being said, I thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: I recognize the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and you have 30 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The

Hon. Nigel de Freitas): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make what is my maiden contribution in this august House—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas:—in response to a Motion moved by the Member for Couva North. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I took a look at the Motion before us and I read it several times and I said to myself, “Let me give the Member for Couva North the

benefit of the doubt and hear him out when he makes his movement of this Motion today”, and he confirmed to me what I always thought when I read the Motion, and that this Motion is nothing short of a fairy tale. That is what it is. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in his response properly treated with all of the arguments put forward by the Member for Couva North. He brought numbers; he brought his comments in relation to initiatives and programmes and what has been done for the last seven years in terms of the development of the agriculture sector. The Member for Chaguanas East responded by saying that she could not follow the Minister. Well, the reason you could not follow the Minister is because you are living in Wonderland.

Hon. Members: “Oooh.” [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: That is why. We are living in the real world and if it is that you are trying to support a fairy tale of a Motion brought here today, you would not be able to follow what the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was saying.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me begin by responding to the Member for Couva North and the two main arguments that he put forward. He spent quite a bit of time not really speaking to the Motion that is before us but he spent quite a bit of time talking about the food box programme and also went on to speak to the situation regarding the two-acre agricultural plots for Caroni lands. Now, I do not know the Member for Couva North very well—he is in this Chamber, I am in the other Chamber—but what I have come to understand just by doing a little bit of research is that this Member for Couva North—when we were dealing with the food box programme which was started to treat with an issue that the global community was treating with by way of the COVID-19 pandemic to sort of alleviate stresses that would have come to bear in relation to measures that had to be taken that other

countries were taking to protect citizens from the COVID-19 virus. But lo and behold, whilst we were doing this to protect our citizens, what was the Member for Couva North saying about that programme? Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I draw your attention to an article on Loop News, Friday, April 22, 2021, where the Member for Couva North was, and I quote, indicating that:

“The MP said there was no real value for money as the value of each food box is only around \$238 based on NAMDEVCO’s retail prices, while Finance Minister Colm Imbert said the cost is \$581.”

And he went on to make other statements and to chastise this very same food box programme that he is coming here today now to basically state why have we not continued the food box programme, why have we not started it back as it came to an end. So which is it? You are either chastising the food box programme which was utilized—

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1), this Motion is about the policies of agriculture, not the Member for Couva North. [*Crosstalk*] Not the Member for Couva North. [*Crosstalk*] Are you the Speaker, Port of Spain North?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: What I would say to the Member for Barataria/San Juan, who I know very well from being in the other House, this argument and line that I am taking is very relevant because I am responding to the majority of the presentation of the Member for Couva North in his Motion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: So if I am not being relevant, it is because he was not relevant in his own Motion.

He spoke about the food box programme for no shorter than 15 minutes and what I am trying to say is that in one light in the public domain you are chastising the very same food box programme that this Government brought forward to help the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and then coming not a year later to speak and say that this food box programme needs to be continued, so which is it? Can you take somebody like that seriously? That is why I am calling this Motion a “fairy tale Motion”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will go on again to show the kind of flip-flopping that is taking place in relation to Members opposite when they try to chastise the Government by way of these types of Motions. The Member went on to speak and predominantly chastise the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in relation to comments made to the Caroni (1975) lands in the two-acre agricultural parcels. And he went on to chastise the former Minister to say that the statement was, “Use it or lose it”. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would say that context is something that you need to put forward when it is you are trying to explain something. So let me give you the context right now in relation to that statement and why it was said. Again, publicly stated in the public domain, titled, “Warning from Agriculture Minister: Use land for intended purpose”, that could be found on the website, news.gov.tt, and I quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“Persons attempting to use agricultural parcels for commercial purposes ‘may be called upon’ by the Commissioner of Valuations, ‘to pay multi-million dollar premiums’ to the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago.

This was the caution issued to the public by the Minister of Agriculture,

Land and Fisheries, Senator the Honourable Clarence Rambharat, at a lease distribution ceremony held for VSEP workers of Caroni (1975) Limited on Friday 26th January, 2018.

His statements served as ‘a warning’ to those whom he identified as ‘dabbling in the sale of agricultural land’. The ceremony which took place on the compound of the Ministry’s corporate headquarters in Chaguanas, witnessed the disbursement of some four hundred and twenty-four (424) leases; 226 of which were residential (inclusive of variations giving rise to the removal of restrictive clauses) with the remaining 198 leases for two (2)-acre agricultural plots.

Minister Rambharat during his feature address emphasized that he has always taken a personal interest “in ensuring that what is to be done on [agricultural] land is the only thing done on the land”—he—“said that both the Commissioner of Valuations and the Commissioner of State Lands, have become increasingly vigilant and intolerant of land misuses since they ‘have a responsibility to the taxpayers and citizens of this country to stand in defence of lands which have been freely distributed for the purpose of growing food on them.’”

4.30 p.m.

What was the purpose of moving this Motion? To talk about agricultural productivity and agricultural production. What was the context that the former Minister was talking about? That if it is you take agricultural state lands and convert them to commercial use, what happens to the agricultural production that you yourself, Member for Couva North, have been calling for?

Whilst you sit here to chastise this Government on an issue that spans years across governments, in relation to Caroni (1975) lands, the question that I have to

ask Members opposite is: What was the policy that was used under the former PP Government in relation to agricultural Caroni lands? Was there an allowance to have the change of use from agriculture to commercial use? But you stand here today to chastise us, saying that we are not doing anything for agriculture. Well, that is completely wrong because you did not care about agricultural productivity. You did not care about agriculture at that particular point in time, if it is you were allowing those very same two-parcel acres of land to be used for commercial.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Those lands are gone. They can produce nothing in relation to feeding people in Trinidad and Tobago. But here, in the context of what the former Minister was indicating, whilst trying to ensure that we get through that problem which spanned over several governments, by ensuring those leases are given out, you come to take it out of context to say that he said, “use it or lose it”. Well, that was the context, because there was a focus on agricultural productivity when he sat in that chair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Let me speak to and respond to the comments made by the Member for Couva North in moving this Motion as it relates to the 500 million stimulus package, now 300million. The Minister did indicate that you have to come up with programmes to be able to use that. Agriculture is something that is not a get-rich-quick scheme, and should never be considered that. The mere fact that this Government understands the importance of agriculture going forward, because agriculture is something that people tend to turn to and look for on hard times, but the mere fact that we understood the importance of agriculture and the development of that sector sustainably, to allocate on top of the budgetary allocation the \$500 million, and then subsequently \$300million, it means that you

have to come up with the kinds of programmes that would see that sector develop well into the future.

It is not something that you could just say, let us spend the money, spend the money, spend the money or throw the money at it, and then expect a return on investment. That cannot happen. But we are committed to developing that sector and to ensuring that that money is available for use by those in that sector. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in response to this Motion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, spoke to several programmes that are currently taking place. The Agricultural Incentive Programme, where we gave out 30 packages just two Mondays ago, that is available to farmers to aid them in the development of their crops.

When I sat, and still sit, on the Joint Select Committee for Land and Physical Infrastructure, when we did an enquiry into the modernization of the agricultural sector, one of the things that came out very glaringly at that particular point in time in that enquiry was the average age of farmers in this country. And I indicated in that public forum that if we are not careful, what is going to happen is you are going to end up with a glut because those farmers are aging out, they are getting older, and farming as it is right now in Trinidad and Tobago is a labour intensive activity, so that we needed to start to get young people into the agricultural sector.

Well, up comes the Minister of Youth Development and National Service with a YAHP programme, Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, that speaks to training young people between the ages of 18 to 35 to get into the agricultural sector, subsequent to which, when that training is done, they would have the land there ready for them to be able to add to the productivity in the agricultural sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: That is how you treat with a pervasive issue like

that. That is how you close that gap. That is how you ensure that there is food security well into the future, by ensuring people between the ages of 18 to 35 get into this sector and do not see it as backbreaking work, or do not see it as a hobby, or do not see it as something on the side. But they could actually see it as a career where they can make money and advance themselves financially in life. Those are the types of programmes that are needed.

So, when the Member for Chaguanas East comes to tell me that under the PP there was a plan to do something with 33 farms, did you do it? No, you did not do it, but you are coming now to say that you had a plan. Well, keep the plan, we will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: You have no plan.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: When you had it to do, you did not do it. And do not tell me that you cared about agriculture, you did not, or fisheries, because in that same Motion moved here today, how much time did you spend on the fisheries sector? None, zero. The second paragraph in this Motion speaks to piracy and the fisheries sector, I heard nothing, and I am listening for that too because I come from the fisheries sector. You said nothing, absolutely nothing in relation to the fisherfolk in this country.

That fisheries Bill from 1916, that is 106 years old, that is now being taken up by a joint select committee of this Parliament to bring it to fruition, is going to change that sector completely. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spoke to it somewhat. Although we cannot go into it too deeply, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because of that Standing Order that prevents us from speaking about Bills that are in front of the Joint Select Committee, what I can say is that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries was absolutely correct in terms of that Bill

being able to allow us to fully utilize the marine resources around Trinidad and Tobago, to allow us to develop an aquaculture sector, to allow the stakeholders in the fisheries sector to have access to international markets because we have met international obligations and that they have raised the standards as stakeholders in that industry. That is how you treat with food security. Because if it is you are trying to use a 1916 Bill to develop a fisheries sector further, you are going to run into problems. That particular Bill needed modernizing, and for as long as I have been in the fisheries sector, there have been calls upon calls upon calls to modernize—

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, one second. Members, one second. Again, Members—Member for Naparima—

Mr. Charles: Yes, Sir?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All of a sudden you are down on your desk, but I heard you, eh. I heard you.

Mr. Young: That is because he trying to get an invite to the party.

Ms. Ameen: “Yuh” not hearing Port of Spain North?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for St. Augustine!

Hon. Members: What!

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leave the Chamber for five minutes for me, please.

Ms. Ameen: “Well, I leaving here man!”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As a matter of fact, leave for the rest of the day.

Ms. Ameen: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Charles: I think I leaving too.

Ms. Ameen: This is totally not fair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please leave in silence, Members—for St. Augustine, and if

you are leaving too, Naparima, please leave in silence.

Ms. Ameen: Well, I am leaving. “What yuh want, to put meh out a second time, Mr. Speaker?”

Hon. Members: “Oooh”!

Ms. Ameen: “All yuh does only have one side of de bed”.

Hon. Member: What an example.

Ms. Ameen: You are totally unfair. “Yuh doh hear when Port of Spain North/West making noise”.

[Members Ameen and Charles exit the Chamber]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Chief Whip, Chief Whip, I hope you heard your Member for St. Augustine. Right? And—

Mr. Indarsingh: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Hold on. And make note of it.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is unfortunate that that is the type of attitude that we have to contend with.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, I will prefer if you not talk about my ruling. Kindly proceed with your debate.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Will do, will do, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, I continue.

As I indicated, in order to develop a fisheries sector, so that it can contribute to food security and nutritional security in Trinidad and Tobago, the very first thing that needed to happen, the very first thing that had to be imperative was to upgrade that fisheries Bill. Just to give you an example of what can occur. With an upgraded and modernized fisheries Bill, you can move from a predominantly artisanal type of fishing activity taking place to a more commercial type of fishing. That is just an example of what can take place. So to stand here and say that

nothing is being done in relation to food security, again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I repeat, it is a fairy tale, not to be taken seriously.

The Member for Couva North in his opening contribution commended the Member for Siparia on her commitment to agriculture, speaking to pictures being posted on social media in her home garden. My response to that is I would see your pictures in a home garden and I will trump you, a Prime Minister who is a registered farmer in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: I may not be an authority in agriculture, but if I had to choose between the two, I will choose the registered farmer—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas:—somebody who actually got their hands dirty and can produce crops. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas East in her contribution, as well as the Member for Couva North, touched upon land management a bit. Well, I am the newly minted Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries with responsibility for land.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: So let me take a few minutes to respond properly. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries touched on it a bit. Land management in Trinidad and Tobago is no easy feat. Nobody, not the PP, not former PNM Governments could say that it is something easy to treat with. For the few weeks that I have been at the Land Management Division, I have taken the opportunity to properly assess what it means to engage in land management in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in his contribution spoke to it a bit, in relation to the duties of the Commissioner of State Lands and the

authority that falls under that particular office. So, no, Member for Chaguanas East, he was not blaming the Commissioner of State Lands. What he was doing was educating the public as to some of the functions of that office, but let me go a little bit further to break it down.

Land management in Trinidad and Tobago falls under three pillars: information, workflow management, and what you call EME, evaluation, monitoring and enforcement. If you do not have proper information systems, if you do not have a proper workflow management system which, as we would have inherited coming forward, remains predominantly physical, if you do not have those two things working properly, then you are going to encounter exactly what it is that we are encountering right now, to which the Member for Couva North himself spoke to, which every single administration has spoken to in relation to land management. This is why you are starting to hear now this idea of a single point of authority as it relates to land management.

The Member for Chaguanas East stated that we, as in this Government, has put land management above agriculture. Well, my response to that is this, I do not know where you grow your food but I know you grow food in land, and if you do not manage the land, then you are spinning top in mud when you are coming to increasing agricultural productivity which is why the single point of authority becomes important. It is to ensure you manage the information as well as the workflow management. Workflow management meaning the creation of new leases, the renewal of leases, change of use, all of these activities and procedures that need to take place. So, what are the benefits of something like that? Well, let me explain to you.

What is one of the problems that happens in relation to flooding and agricultural produce in Trinidad and Tobago? Flood comes, crops die, you begin

the process of applying for compensation for the loss of crops. If you have a proper information system, as it relates to land management, you can tell where all the state lands in Trinidad and Tobago are, what percentage of state lands are under agricultural produce right now, what are the cultivation levels, what are the soil types, who are the farmers, what are they growing, and that information can now be fed into policy decisions whereby individuals applying for new leases, agricultural leases specifically, can be told what to grow, what is the best commodity to grow based on what is already being grown.

We can even go further to incorporate the kinds of technology, which is already there I might add, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by way of something called the “land card”, where all of the information—so, a farmer or somebody who has been given state lands can walk into the Land Management Division, they have their land card, you swipe the card and all of their information in relation to when the lease is to be renewed, what you are growing, what are your cultivation levels—and, most importantly, we would know, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would know if you had crops planting yesterday and if a flood happens today, then it means that your compensation comes a lot faster. That is the type of initiative that would solve the problems in this country in relation to land management. That is why we speak about the single point of authority.

So, when you say nothing is being done in relation to food security, that is not true. If you would listen and understand how it all comes together, then this Motion would have never been moved.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: That is how you treat with the problem once and for all. You do not push it over to the next Parliament and the next Parliament, and the next government and the next government. You do not try to implement change of

use or licences or try to undermine the process that is there. You have to hold the bull by the horns and treat with the problem.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas East mentioned about the children and that they are returning to school, and she is wondering how they are going to be fed and how their nutritional requirements are going to be met. Well, I will allow my colleague, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, to treat with that more specifically. But all I would have to say to the Member for Chaguanas East is that there was a School Feeding Programme prior to COVID, there is a School Feeding Programme after COVID, and that programme is what was always used to ensure that the vulnerable in society, by way of the children attending schools, were able to have their nutritional requirements met. So, I am not sure where she is coming from, trying to say as though the children are going to be starving in school and therefore, they are not going to be able to focus on the schoolwork. I do not buy it. I do not buy it at all.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the arguments that I have heard repeated by the two speakers on the other side, in relation to the food box programme, was that it has been discontinued. And even though they chastised the programme whilst it was ongoing and are now changing their narrative to say bring it back, bring it back, bring it back, and the Member for Chaguanas East indicated that she did not hear anything from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in relation to the continuation of the programme, let me say this. Understand that the programme started because we were under a particular extenuating circumstance as it relates to COVID-19. You had to act quickly, and in that type of a situation—

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

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In that type of a situation, you have to act quickly. So, you engaged the programme on top of the

food card programme that is already there and has been ongoing, but as that programme came to an end, an assessment needs to be done. You have chastised the Minister of Social Development and Family Services in terms of a statement that she made but you did not try to understand the context of it. The context was that for as long as there are people willing to give, there would be no shortage of individuals willing to take, to the detriment of those that need, which is why when you engage these types of programmes you must do an assessment after to ensure that the programmes is actually meeting the needs of individuals that are most dependent on the programme. Otherwise, what is going to happen is that the objective of the programme is not going to be met. So that is what is taking place right now.

It does not mean that the programme is never going to come back. It means that you have to make sure that those that are most in need can continue to benefit and you can only do that through a proper assessment of the programme over that one-year period that it occurred.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in wrapping up I would say this, Members opposite have stated that they care about agriculture. I do not remember anything great happening in agriculture or fisheries specifically during their tenure. The one story I heard is of a gentleman in Tobago talking about in one cycle of planting cucumber and pumpkin, being able to build a mansion. And when I heard that story, not being an authority in agriculture, I said to myself, well, this reminds of another story I heard as a child of another Jack that planted beans, climbed a beanstalk and got a return on investment of a golden goose laying golden eggs. What I can say is that if it is that the Member for Couva North thinks that that is what productivity coming from agriculture means, that is what food security is, then the answer is no. And I can stand here categorically and state, with the full

backing of the Government, that we do not believe in fairy tales.

When dealing with the agricultural sector, it has to be planned out properly, it has to be built because it has to become sustainable—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas:—to the benefit of people in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, your time has expired.

Sen. The Hon. N. de Freitas: With those few words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Caroni East, and you have 30 minutes.

Dr. Rishad Seecheran: (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to this urgent and well-anticipated Motion by the Member for Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I commend the Member for this Motion and holding the Government to account for its inaction with regard to food and nutrition security. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you see, we on this side we are forward-thinking and we are anticipating what is to come in the future, and what we have seen is that food prices are increasing every single month. We are also people-centred and we care for the people.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Caroni East—Caroni East is a largely rural and agricultural constituency, and home to hundreds of the nation's farmers but today, many are on the breadline and many more have left the farming profession. I would like to tell the last speaker that. That many have left the profession and are trying to find alternate forms of employment.

As the Member of Parliament for Caroni East, I meet these persons every week in my constituency office and the young persons that have traditionally been in farming in their families are leaving the farming industry. They are trying their hand at plying taxis. They are moving into the food industry. Young people are leaving the agricultural fields in Trinidad and Tobago. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are very few opportunities available to the average citizen currently in Trinidad and Tobago. Gas prices are consistently on the rise. Food prices are also on the rise and thus, the cost of living is getting more and more difficult as with we speak. And this has been happening, Mr. Deputy Speaker, yes, definitely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has been happening even before that. But what we are trying to say is that it is going to get worse. By all accounts, the worst is yet to come.

There is a raging war in Europe between Ukraine and Russia, and we do not know the extent to which that war will progress. It could spread to other parts of Europe. COVID-19 is currently rampant in China. Much of China is currently on lockdown and, you know, China provides many of the raw materials that we need to run many industries in this world. So, it does not bode well for international food security, as well as for Trinidad and Tobago which is a high food importer.

With a \$6billion annual food import Bill, Trinidad and Tobago, we import most of what we consume. We found out that our food import bill also consumes a large amount of our US currency, and we found out that from our last Central Bank Governor who revealed the amount of US currency that companies such as PriceSmart consumes. Food inflation is currently taking place at an average rate of around 8 per cent while salaries, in many cases in the public service, remain at 2013 levels, and there are roughly, by most estimates, around 100-plus thousand workers that have lost their jobs since COVID-19.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, international experts project food inflation to rise dramatically over the next few months as a direct result of the Russia/Ukraine war, and the ongoing international shipping and supply chain issues. So, this Motion is very, very pertinent. What we are asking for here today is for the Government to account and to give us some direction on the way forward in the next coming months and the next coming year. During this ever-increasing, worsening crisis, this Government's response has been feeble.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, here are some of the major aspects of this Government's position on escalating food prices. They are boasting firstly about zero-rating some food items, but this was done in 2015 under the Partnership Government. In addition, this Government has removed some previously zero-rated items from such tax breaks. During inflation, zero-rating has minimal positive effect.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the People's Partnership Government was "ah eat ah food government", the Rowley administration is the "do not eat ah food government".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Secondly, they are saying that they are suspending about 20 food items from the Common External Tariff and bragging about the increased supply of foreign exchange through the EximBank. But just yesterday, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund reported a drop of \$1.82billion. We are on the road of riches to rags. We have seen what has happened in Venezuela.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the same thing. This is not a Motion about finance, 48(1). It is not a finance debate.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, tie in the point quickly, Member. Again, we are not dealing with the fiscal aspect. We are dealing with the agriculture. So, again, tie it in quickly.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Another promise of this Government is the agricultural stimulus package. As the Member of Parliament for Caroni East, I cannot speak of anyone who has made use of this package. The Government is also speaking about monitoring of food prices through the Consumer Affairs Division, I will get to that a little bit later on. So, none of these so-called measures by the current administration has had any discernible effect on the galloping cost of food. This Government needs to immediately implement several effective policies that would have a direct and measurable impact on food.

Some of these policies may be as follows: specific and immediate steps to grow more food, especially vegetables and other staples. Farmers must receive more incentives. Lands and access roads must receive immediate and requisite attention.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.00 p.m.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, a second measure is tangible measures to expand the food processing industry. And we need to foster and create more local food brands and promote the local food industry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Thirdly, we must have equitable distribution of foreign exchange so that importers would not have to buy forex on the black market. Reducing allocations, we must reduce allocations on many of our luxury items and non-essential foods.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for many, many months now Trinidad and Tobago has been in a prolonged recession or perhaps a depression. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. In my constituency office on a weekly, on a daily

basis persons are asking and begging for food. They are asking for a food card. They are asking for hampers. And what are we supposed to do? I use some of my personal funds every week to supply hampers to those who I think that may be most needy and these are personal funds, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Also, a comprehensive review must be done on the Common External Tariff regime. Such an exercise has not been done in many, many years. Relevant agreements with some of our Caricom neighbours is a good way forward, such as Guyana. Several Caricom countries have already engaged in such an exercise. For example, Barbados, Jamaica, Suriname and others that have entered into agreements with Guyana to purchase their rice at preferred cost. We must partner with our regional neighbours. There is more strength in numbers and it will better help us to weather the storm.

We must also have efficient and constant monitoring of retail cost to prevent price gouging and the laying of appropriate charges against culprits. We must have, of course, a vigorous “buy local” campaign. The Parliament here, in this Parliament, you know, we have a green campaign whereby we do not use plastic but all government campuses should be mandated to have a “buy local” campaign and foster our local food industry. We must create synergies among the relevant government Ministries and agricultural associations, chambers of commerce and manufacturers’ associations to improve productivity, ease bureaucracy and implement relevant policies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, according to a release by the Ministry of Trade and Industry on the 30th of March of 2022, the Consumers Affairs Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of food prices in the last two years. Approximately 180 food items

were assessed that form many of the basic basket of foods that an individual would use. And what they have found is that the average price of food has increased by approximately 9.7 per cent which is around 10 per cent and it is still climbing. As I have said, there are a number of factors that would cause the increase of the price of food in the coming months and this is just the tip of the iceberg. The Caribbean Millers' Association has also said:

“...due to global factors, the cost of producing flour in the Region has significantly been impacted...”—by the increase in—“...raw materials”—which have—“...increased by...40%.”

So what will happen now is that wheat prices will then have an increased effect on the price of grain, on feed, on poultry and dairy products. So the cost of these products will increase significantly in the coming months. And what we are saying is that, what is the Government going to do about this? Show us the way forward. Let us and the public know that you have a plan. That is all that we are asking. So:

“The CAD has estimated that locally the price of flour”—has—“increased by 16 per cent...”

—in the last two years and it will increase further as we go along. Other items that they have assessed such as:

“...vegetable and soya oil”—has increased by—“(42 per cent); corn beef”—by—“(40 per cent); poultry (29 per cent); infant formula”—by—“(26 per cent); milk”—by—“(20 per cent); red beans”—by—“(16 per cent); salt fish”—by—“(15 per cent); rice”—by—“(13 per cent);”

So poor people must face the gas pump and the supermarket cashier every week with the same pay cheque that they have been getting since 2013 but every single thing is going up. So what are they to do? You know, the Member for Couva North spoke about what the Supermarket Association president has said. Right? Whereby

persons are shoplifting in order to eat. Persons are actually shoplifting because of hunger, Mr. Deputy Speaker, baby formula—

Mr. Al-Rawi: I rise on Standing Order 55(1). We have heard all about this from previous speakers opposite.

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to put a different twist on it, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, well, tie it in quickly.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Yeah. So what I was going to say is that because of the increased number of shoplifting, the groceries now have to implement security features such as security cameras and extra security staff to man the aisles and this, of course, will trickle down to an increase in food prices to the consumer.

Mr. Al-Rawi: I therefore rise on Standing Order 48(1) now. That is entirely irrelevant to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Couva North, you constantly—you constantly in this session, after everyone makes a point of order, you keep responding. You have been doing it constantly. So, please, I will make my judgment. I will make the necessary ruling. Thank you. Right. Yes. Member for Caroni East. Again, the Standing Order has been raised and, again, I will have to uphold it because, again, you need to be—you need to stay away from that particular angle that you are going. Right? So move on to your new point please.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you. So the Consumer Affairs Division is advising persons to purchase locally produced foods, as well as to supplement their home meals with home gardening. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what poor people have been doing for the last two years.

And I would like to go back to the global context, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So strict COVID-19 lockdowns in China have created serious shortages of fertilizer,

labour and seeds. And this is basically the world's factory. And according to my research last night, at least, 23 Chinese cities with a combined population of over 200million people are currently in a full or partial lockdown and this is because of China's zero-tolerance COVID-19 policy.

This—so during spring in China now, there is a planting issue and the war in Ukraine has also stopped shipments of corn and other important livestock feeds to China. Because of this, fertilizer factories and many other factories in China are struggling. These firms are having a lot of difficulty shipping to customers and securing raw materials that they need to produce various commodities. In many townships in China, trucks are not allowed to enter the city's compound because of these COVID-19 restrictions. What this means is that in the coming months there will be an increased price in fertilizers for our farmers because currently we are using fertilizers that were manufactured previously of the situation. And all of these costs will be borne by the consumer.

So, moving on to another point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Caroni East we have hundreds of acres of arable land. And it is one of the largest areas that we have in Caroni East, is unable to efficiently get its produce either in or out because of dilapidated infrastructure. The Lalloo Trace bridge has fallen into the water for over one year now. And despite repeated pleas by myself, residents, councillors, aldermen, nothing has been done to date. I have written letters, I have written letters to the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. I have written letters to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. I have even written to the Minister of Works and Transport for assistance in this. And this is one of the greatest insults that the farmers in this area have faced because they have produced thousands of pounds of produce for NAMDEVCO during the COVID-19 period, Mr. Deputy Speaker. These farmers need trucks, their trucks to pass over this

bridge. This bridge is currently impassable to both motor and pedestrian use. And the kind of work that these farmers do, you cannot use an AD wagon. You have to use a big truck. So this Government is not supporting the farmers.

We also have an issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was one of the saddest incidents I have ever faced during my time as a Member of Parliament, where I actually saw a father and his three children actually living in this area in the forest. They have no accommodation. They have no sort of dwelling and these children actually had to be taken from the father by the Children's Authority. And this is the level of destitution and poverty that some people are currently living in under this PNM Government. And then they are going to tell us to eat local. Well, what if there is nothing to eat, you know.

I have another issue. The Hercules bridge in Ravine Sable. If you see this bridge, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will not even walk on this bridge. The planks on this bridge are basically falling into the water. You know, one of my—one of the councillors in Caroni East actually took planks from another bridge in Toco and brought it in to just replace the planks on this bridge. And we have been asking the Minister to replace this bridge because this is also an agricultural area. Tractors and the farmers use this bridge and we are asking for a Bailey bridge on this site because it is very, very dangerous. At any point in time, you know, this bridge could fall into the water as well.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I am asking for basically in Caroni East is assistance with the Lalloo Trace bridge, the Hercules Trace bridge. I am asking that the Minister in his capacity could somehow give us an allocation to each constituency of temporary food cards to assist constituents during this time and this is least that they can do. At least attempt to show the population that you are trying to help them during these times.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government keeps stating that they are committed to developing the agricultural sector. But its annual allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is about 1.2 per cent of the national budget. Of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 91 per cent, roughly 91 per cent goes into recurrent expenditure such as salaries. We have the issue of praedial larceny as well in Caroni East. I know it has been spoken about a lot and this remains a prevalent problem to the farming community in Caroni East despite repeated pledges to the Government to deal with this issue.

The Government has also promised to provide more resources including vehicles to the police Praedial Larceny Squad. In 2021, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries said that these vehicles were being abused. So he was not assured if we would have gotten more vehicles.

In its first term in office, the PNM Government promised an agricultural sector plan with the aim of boosting the agricultural sector contribution to GDP. This has been repeated in numerous budget statements by both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. This promise remains undelivered.

We also have the issue in Caroni East of farmers who lose their crops due to floods and are made to wait many long months for compensation. In some cases their compensation is denied despite their huge losses. And this is the issue farmers in low-lying areas of the country have to face on a yearly basis.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the 2018—I actually had, we had an issue, well, we had many issues where we had a neighbour on one side, let us say the eastern side getting compensation. The neighbour on the western side getting compensation. But the neighbour that was in between these two persons getting no compensation.

So how is that possible? There is no equity. There is no reliability in the process of compensation.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the delivery of land leases remains bogged down in red tape and scandal.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like— [*Inaudible*—and I would like to help—

Mr. Indarsingh: The antics of the chairman of the party.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: And I do not need any happy birthday songs.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Again—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, again, Members on the Government side, please, a little silence. I need to hear the discourse of the Member for Caroni East.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Caroni East as well we have the issue of construction and maintenance of access roads, drainage and irrigations systems, another essential need to the farming industry and it is taking place at such a slow rate that many of the farmers are complaining that they are getting no assistance at all from this Government. If you were to go and see some of our agricultural roads, they are some of the worst roads in the country. So the announced increased subsidies to farmers have not been provided in an efficient and consistent manner that they are happy with.

The Government announced in the 2015 general election manifesto that abandoned estates would be rehabilitated. We are yet to see any of that happening,

Mr. Deputy Speaker. Another broken promise is that of the upgrading of and modernizing and expanding of public markets. Markets remain cramped and in many cases dilapidated. The Agricultural Society remains unhappy about the neglect of potential food basket areas in our country. The abandonment of ponds and other water sources for farmers. And there is absence of essential road repairs and important infrastructural works. And they have identified many areas in the country that they have deemed under-resourced such as Felicity, Plum Mitan, Manzanilla, Tabaquite, Wallerfield, Orange Grove, Sangre Grande, Paramin, St. Joseph, Brasso Seco and Lopinot. So, you see, this crosses across the entire country. They have neglected the entire agricultural sector across the entire country.

They have also continued increases in the fuel price and this has a crippling effect on the fishermen and on consumers being able to afford this nutritional meal. The price of diesel to fisher folk remains—should remain fully subsidized. This is quite an important industry and they need the assistance in this. Several fishing landing sites are in urgent need of repair, as well as our fishermen need some level of security in plying their trade on the open waters due to piracy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: The promised digitization of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries through the National Seed Bank is taking place very, very slowly as the overall national digital transformation. As a result, efficiency remains very, very weak and it has negatively impacted food production through the slow pace of services to farmers and other stakeholders.

Progress has also been slow in the cadastral management system which handles the data entry of survey plans. And the much promised rehabilitation of the cocoa industry has not taken place. I was actually watching Sen. Mark make his

contribution to the committee before we came in here to debate. So the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has promised to strengthen the genetic varieties that grow and sustain the cocoa industry. And to date, this has not happened, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The pledge to establish a solar-powered drip irrigation system is another nonstarter. Improvement to the La Reunion Estate is going at a snail's pace.

So some of the challenges that I have found in my research in agriculture and some of them have been stated before by the Member for Caroni—sorry, for Couva North was the land rights uncertainty. And while Government's performance on land registration and cadastral information systems is very poor, thousands of applicants are still waiting for their agricultural leases. And in some cases some have been waiting for in excess of 15 years. Squatting on agricultural land remains a major, major issue and current estimates there, at least, 200 persons may be squatting on agricultural land. There is also a lack of access to capital because many farmers do not own their land. So due to an absence of land titles, it is very difficult for farmers to have collateral in order to obtain credit.

There is farm test and praedial larceny. We went over that already. And there is also now low competitiveness. Only 10 per cent, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the land of both Trinidad and Tobago is agricultural land. And agricultural productivity remains very low. Eighty seven per cent of holdings are smaller than five hectares, with 22 per cent less than .5 hectares. So therefore it is very difficult for us to develop economies of scale which is one of the reasons why production costs are driving up. And also because of the issues of land uncertainty, praedial larceny, farmers have very few incentives to stay in the industry. So that is what we were asking the Government to please address some of these issues. We have the issue of natural disasters and flooding. Caroni East constantly floods.

Oropouche East constantly floods. Oropouche West, these are farming areas in our nation and we are not looking after the land.

So irrigation, infrastructure, drainage systems, warehouses, post-harvest facilities, these are among many of the weaknesses in our agricultural sector. And to listen to those on the other side, they—it would seem as if everything was going correct but this is not so. Institutional infrastructure such as access to financing is an issue.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the few minutes that I have left I have a few key recommendations. First one being, is to expand and modernize our ports of entry and exit and this would assist our farmers in exporting their produce. To develop and maintain our national road network and infrastructure inclusive of bridges and agricultural access roads. We need to upgrade our national laws to harmonize local standards with international standards and regulations. We need to enhance the authority of national standard bodies to enforce compliance with legally mandated standards and regulations. Our farmers need easy access to roads. And finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to help hungry people. We need to help the poor and vulnerable in society.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to say in closing that I fully support the Member for Couva North's Motion here today. It is a well-thought-out Motion. It is well anticipated and in months to come we will see an increase in food prices. And what we are asking is that this administration show us the way forward. And if you cannot do it, we will show it to you. With that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture,

Land and Fisheries—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—and you have 30 minutes.

The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute in this debate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in preparing my response to the Motion brought by the hon. Member for Couva North, I must admit that I tried extremely hard to find a link or any relationship between the general purport of the recitals of the Motion and the Trinidad and Tobago reality. To support my argument, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I intend to dissect this Motion and rubbish if not every line of the Motion and prove to this august Chamber that the Opposition continues to be ill-advised, misinformed and strangers to the facts—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—bringing this baseless, meritless Motion without providing an iota of evidence to support the claims being made. But before I go into the Motion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, permit me to respond to Couva North, the hon. Member for Couva North in his contributions. And I must say, I really have just probably two lines to respond to in his arguments. He spent—the hon. Member spent some time speaking about the food-box Motion. And I call it a food-box Motion because most of his contribution centred around NAMDEVCO's ability to provide fresh market boxes for the population. But I want to ask the hon. Member from Couva North if he ever took the time to speak to any of the farmers that supplied produce to NAMDEVCO? If the Member did, he would know that after the budgeted market box initiative, the programme was such a success, NAMDEVCO continues to engage most of the farmers that are still providing produce, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In fact, I will go one step further to indicate that a major restaurant chain, and this is a private sector entity employing thousands of people, have placed their confidence in NAMDEVCO and the same farmers that the hon. Members opposite sought to represent in terms of giving them business opportunities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the commodities I refer to include cucumber, lettuce, green pepper and tomato. All local 100 per cent sourced from some farmers, the Member said we neglected, the same farmers, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In fact, I will tell you what we did. We did not give a fish. We taught the skill of fishing. We made businessmen of our farmers and they continue to produce and NAMDEVCO continues to facilitate. The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries referred to the amounts of the produce NAMDEVCO took from some of the farmers. And I think the acting Leader of the Government Business indicated, it was not pounds but hundreds of thousands of pounds. And just to reiterate the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in one month alone NAMDEVCO purchased from the same farmers that the Members opposite indicated that we neglect, 218,000 pounds of cassava, 136—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, please. Please.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—136,000 pounds of dasheen, 109,000 pounds of plantain, 144,000 pounds of squash. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could go on and on in terms of the contribution that these farmers made.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me do dive straight into the Motion. I will read the first recital and I will respond accordingly. This Motion brought about by the hon. Member for Couva North, the first two lines:

“*Whereas* the Government’s neglect of the agricultural and fisheries sectors has created a food and nutrition security crisis;”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, where is the evidence, statistics and data to support this claim? Not a single shred of evidence put forward by the hon. Member. Does the mover of this Motion even know what a food and nutrition security crisis looks like? Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to categorically reject this inference. In fact, I want to join the majority of the population in congratulating, saluting and thanking the farmers and food producers in Trinidad and Tobago for their patriotism in understanding the effects and challenges of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and stepping up the game to ensure a 24-hour supply of fresh nutritional local produce in the thousands of vegetable stalls, supermarkets, farmers' markets and municipal markets throughout the country. I am prepared to give way to any Member to honestly provide this House with evidence of anyone going to a market and not being able to access fresh leafy vegetables or root crops.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: In fact, in fact, it is quite the opposite. In the peak of the pandemic in 2020, Mr. Deputy Speaker, many farmers especially farmers from the Mayaro constituency reached out to us at the Ministry. I am certain if the hon. Member from Mayaro was here in the Chamber, the Member would truthfully confirm that his farmers have produced so well that NAMDEVCO had to urgently make 10 40-foot reefers and containers available to farmers to store their surpluses absolutely free of charge, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This service to farmers had to be replicated in Aranguez, Trincity and Piarco to accommodate many other farmers. Clearly there were absolutely no food shortages nor a food crisis in the most challenging periods during the pandemic. So how did the Member for Couva North arrive at the presence of nutritional security crisis in Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me state the facts. In the context of the school environment—and the hon. Member's Motion spoke about the nutritional security

but not a single word in his debate's contribution to what the nutritional well-being was supposed to be or any alternatives or anything as a matter of fact.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will tell you what we have done as a government in the context of the school environment. This Government understands the importance of the nutritional well-being of our most vulnerable. Some of the policy decisions taken include, the Ministry of Education Policy Paper 2017—2022 which is intended to provide the Ministry of Education with the strategic direction to guide its programmes, projects and action plans for all schools with healthy lifestyles of students being the desired outcome.

Under the Ministry of Health, a health promoting school policy 2020—2025 which speaks to all tenets of health and aims to empower children and adolescents to learn, live and lead healthy, happy and productive lives. The national childhood obesity prevention policy that proposes strategies for promoting healthy weights among school children. The national nutrition guidelines for food offered in schools. And I want to congratulate the Minister of Health most notably the ban of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—implemented since 2017. So when you talk about nutritional security, that is a government working in the best interest of our most vulnerable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, these initiatives are certainly far from neglecting our responsibilities towards nutritional security of our people. The hon. Member for Chaguanas East spoke to the School Feeding Programme and I almost doubted myself as though the programme was stopped. I want to sure this

august House that the School Feeding Programme is very much alive and working since February 2021. And we all know schools only opened for some and now we are in the stage of rolling out the full implementation of the School Feeding Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us explore the second recital in this baseless Motion:

“And whereas the Government continues to ignore the plight of farmers and fisher folk relating to praedial larceny and piracy;”

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to kindly remind hon. Member that praedial larceny and piracy are policing matters, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries supplement these efforts by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service using the praedial larceny squad. In fact, I would also remind this august Chamber that it was this Government that amended the Trespass Act, Chap. 11:07, in 2019, significantly increasing penalties and terms of imprisonment for criminal activity of persons trespassing. In every instance of loss or theft of agricultural produce, livestock, machinery and equipment, the perpetrators trespass—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—which violates this law and should be treated as criminals by the TTPS.

In fact, I would go a step further and indicate that at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, we understand the plight of the farmers and we have not ignored the seriousness of this matter. I encourage farmers and food producers to access the approved security initiatives available. We currently have incentives for approved systems against praedial larceny. In fact, farmers can access a 50 per cent of the cost of implementation up to a maximum of \$30,000,

for example, a security camera and monitoring system. We also provide an incentive of 50,000 of the cost of fencing farmland and wildlife operations up to a maximum of 25,000 per hectare.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, turning to the third recital of this baseless Motion:

“*And whereas* the Government has failed to establish an appropriate strategy to address this food and nutrition security crisis and runaway food prices;”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member alleges that we have failed to establish appropriate strategies. The Member simply had to speak to his colleague, former Minister of Food Production and Minister of Trade under the UNC, to know that this recital is totally false and totally misleading. The Roadmap to Recovery Committee had focused on three immediate priorities:

(i)—to—“address and mitigate the hardship inflicted by COVID-19;

(ii)—to—“restart the economy;”

And:

“(iii) lay the foundation for sustained economic recovery.”

I invite Members opposite to take a read which I know they do not like to do, but take a read of the work—

Hon. Members: “Ohhh”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—that came out of this committee.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 44(10).

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: I do not need to spend too much time on this matter.

Ms. Mohit: I rise on Standing Order 44(10).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second. One second.

Ms. Mohit: The Member is continuously reading as he speaks about reading.

Hon. Member: What is the Standing Order?

Food and Nutrition Security Crisis
Sen. The Hon. A. Singh (cont'd)

2022.04.22

Hon. Member: What Standing Order?

Mr. Hinds: Sit down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, please.

Ms. Mohit: “Why you don’t get out”.

Hon. Members: “Oooh”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Please, Members.

Mr. Young: Feisty, man.

Ms. Mohit: Who are you speaking to?

Mr. Hinds: The naked untruth. **Ms. Mohit:** Not me.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. Mohit: You lacking something.

Mr. Hinds: You lacking clothes.

Hon. Members: “Oooh”.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think the Minister of National Security continues on this—

Mr. Young: What is the Standing Order?

Mr. Hind: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Indarsingh: 48—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one second.

Mr. Indarsingh: 48(4).

Hon. Member: Zero

Mr. Indarsingh: Talking about no clothes and all this—

Mr. Hinds: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Laventille West, please. Please. Again, Member for Laventille West, Member for Chaguanas East, if you all need to have a discourse,

you all can both do it on the outside or at the back of the Chamber. Okay? But I am not going to tolerate it in here, both Members. Right? With regard to your Standing Order, Member for Couva South, it becomes null and void. Right? So, both Members are free to go and have their chat on the outside.

Again, kindly—"oh", with regard to the Standing Order that you raised, again, we know it is a debate, Members—for all Members but again, the precedent has been set very early with the Mover of the Motion. So, when you come with 44(10), again, as the Speaker, I will give you the leeway. Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I invite Members opposite to take a read of the work that came out of the committee. And I do not need to spend too much time on this matter as my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, outlined the other policies and strategies being implemented.

But I want to turn to something that is very important in terms of sustainability and food production which is, in effect, what dictates the price because this recital in the Motion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, touches on the runaway food prices. And I want to indicate that when you look at what are the aspects that dictate the food prices, economies of scale, supply and demand, input cost and cost of production—and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to zero in on some of the costs that we have control over. Because most of the cost that goes into production, we, in Trinidad and Tobago, we are price-takers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And what I referred to is something that most Members might in passing hear about or probably know briefly, but I want to turn to something where we as a Government, we have really invested time, money and effort in term of the production systems in Trinidad and Tobago.

And, what I am referring to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the package of

incentives and subsidies that are afforded to farmers. And would you imagine, if I were to list out each item, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this incentive and subsidy package, I would spend probably 45 minutes explaining each but just simply to say, the Government continues to support farmers. We have not neglected—we have not neglected anyone. There are 92 categories of incentives and I will just briefly list a few just to put on record what the Government continues to do for farmers. And I will tell you, having represented the Government of Trinidad and Tobago just two weeks ago in Ecuador, in terms of the FAO meeting, I had the opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to represent Minister Kazim Hosein, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and you hear talk about what the Caribbean is doing and what Guyana is doing, Trinidad and Tobago—and this is to place on the record— supported the nomination of Guyana becoming the next chair of the FAO meeting—the biennium meeting to be held next year. So that is to be placed on record and we are well within the policies of getting to 25 per cent reduction in our food import bill and producing more food by 2025.

Coming back to the incentive package, Mr. Deputy Speaker, wheel tractors, farmers can access up to \$50,000, a rebate of 20 per cent of the purchase price of a tractor. Four-wheel drive—and I heard the hon. Member for Caroni East spoke about AD Wagons going into farms, but we do not subsidize AD Wagons, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We support 4x4's so farmers can access up to \$40,000 in an incentive to purchase a 4x4 for their farm.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Two-wheel drive pickups, used vehicles, used 4x4's, trucks, combine harvesters, altering vehicles, insulation and refrigeration, trailers.

“Machinery and Equipment”—up to the cost of \$50,000, 50 per cent of the purchase price.

“Water for Agriculture”—ponds, pond establishment.

A farmer can claim up to 75 per cent of the cost of putting a pond in his plot up to \$24,000. Wells, dams, water pumps, irrigation, irrigation watering systems, up to \$40,000, 50 per cent of the cost.

“Soil conversation”

“Land preparation...”

Starting new citrus fields, cocoa and coffee, rehabilitation of estates, starting of new estates, starting of new coconut estates.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“Protected Agricultural Systems”

The Ministry actually fits the bill to help farmers venture into these modern technologies in agriculture. We actually subsidize the construction of an approved fully enclosed shade house up to \$250 per square metre, 50 per cent of the cost.

“Integrated Pest Management...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the list goes on, as I said, 92 categories of incentives offered to farmers, and all of this information can be found on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, turning to the other recital:

“*And whereas* the global supply chain challenges pose a serious threat to food and nutrition security;”

Well, two points, simply to put, COVID-19 pandemic, Russia/Ukraine conflict. Nobody predicted both events which have devastating effects on global supply chain. So, when the Minister of Finance spoke in 2020 for the budget presentation, the Minister had no clue. In fact, nobody here saw the Russia/Ukraine conflict which is now significantly affecting and impacting on global supply chain. The Member for Caroni East spoke to the impacts of the Russia/Ukraine conflict

and we totally understand the implications, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Turning to other recital in this Motion:

“And whereas the Government has failed to reduce barriers and bureaucratic red tape to facilitate greater efficiencies in the agricultural and fisheries sectors;”

I would like to spend a few minutes on this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to simply say if the hon. Member had simply paid attention to the news, in terms of what has been taking place at the Ministry, he will know—the hon. Member will know that the import permit system is now fully digitalized. In fact, the processing time of weeks is now just a day or two. So, somebody wanting to bring in their own plant material, their own seed, somebody wants to bring in genetic material, simply goes online, makes the application and in a matter of a few days—prior to us coming into office it took weeks to get an import permit, now it takes days, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some elements of our fisheries management structure have been digitalized as well, for example, the data collection and the processing of fisherman permits and registration. And I want to admit, most of our fishermen, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are not tech savvy, so that we really have to revisit this option in terms of digitalization of the fishery sector. In fact, I will tell you, Cabinet has already agreed to bring the fisheries import and export of fish under the Single Electronic Window of the Ministry of Trade and Industry or as we know it, the TTBizLink. That will facilitate efficiency of the processing of import and export licences. My colleague, the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. The Hon. de Freitas, already spoke to aspects of the fisheries—the importance of the fisheries legislation. Because at the end of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that piece of legislation, really, we need the support of the Opposition to get that

through because our country has significant ramifications in terms of if that law does not pass.

Online training is now a success story as our intakes are higher, especially with the participation of many young people who would have not normally been interested in pursuing courses in a physical setting.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

And, of course, agriculture, Madam Speaker, and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is hands-on, so practical training is very important. We could also speak to the reduction in VAT from 15 to 12.5 per cent, the removal of VAT from basic food items, all designed to benefit everyone. So when the hon. Member speaks in his Motion about the failure to remove barriers, I have just outlined most of some of the implementation of the digitalization of processes that would normally take weeks to get done, you can get it done in days.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and, Madam Secretary—Madam Speaker, sorry, turning to another recital of this baseless argument and Motion, Madam Speaker:

“*And whereas* this food and nutrition security crisis will lead to increased poverty, unemployment and widespread starvation:”

Madam Speaker, there is no food and nutrition security crisis as the Opposition would want the population to believe. It is quite the opposite as reported in the *Newsday* newspapers, Sunday 05 September, 2021, in an article entitled:

“FAO report: TT obesity grows, more hungry people in the region”

The report highlights the fact that data from Trinidad and Tobago:

“...shows a marked decrease number of undernourished persons between the period 2014-2020, dropping from 11.1 per cent to 6.7 per cent.”

Starvation, Madam Speaker, is a very strong word, and the Opposition forecasting

this in Trinidad and Tobago is sad and disappointing to say the least. Because, Madam Speaker, to the best of my memory, and it is just 33 years of memory I can speak to, I cannot recall we ever losing anyone as a result of starvation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: If anyone knows otherwise, I am willing to give way. So when the Member puts in this Motion the word “starvation”, starvation is a very strong word, Madam Speaker. We are a blessed nation with—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—the abundance of food. We are surrounded by a rich biodiversity and accessible food. Madam Speaker, nobody here could honestly say they can go hungry.

The hon. Member for Couva South knows chowrai bhaji grows in abundance if you just spread manure in the ground. You do not even have to plant it. The hon. Member for Mayaro, the hon. Members of our coastline, the hon. Member for Cumuto knows you can simply go to any river, any shoreside and get food; crab, fish, shrimp. You cannot go hungry. You cannot starve in a rich biodiversity of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: But more importantly, Madam Speaker, more importantly, we are also blessed to have a PNM Government in office—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—to ensure the vision, this vision of starvation never materializes.

And, Madam Speaker, turning to the last recital now:

“*Be it resolved* that this House call on the Government to acknowledge the food and nutrition security crisis and to take immediate measures to prevent

food insufficiency and starvation in the nation, particularly for poor, marginalized and vulnerable groups.”

Madam Speaker, our country's social safety net has always been a priority to ensure the most vulnerable is cared for. Madam Speaker, approximately \$4 billion, and I am going to repeat that, \$4 billion annually is appropriated to ensure the various financial grants go to the most vulnerable. Madam Speaker, during these challenging times, not a single person that I am aware of or not a single beneficiary can honestly say that their grant was not paid on time and it was not paid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: We managed to foot the bill of \$4 billion in these challenging times for our most vulnerable in society, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Madam Speaker, I have commented on almost every line of this Motion and I am sure it is clear this Motion has failed miserably.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Madam Speaker, I did not even get to go into some of the details because most of the Members opposite spoke about what we are doing, why we neglect the farmers. Madam Speaker, \$27 million spent already, since 2015 to now, on access roads is not neglect; \$108 million for agricultural incentives from 2015 to date is not neglect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Forty million dollars for flood compensation is not neglect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Eleven million dollars, as by the end of this month, Madam Speaker, to the 100,000 grants funding that we are giving towards persons

who want to do climate-smart agriculture, modern technology, innovation; \$11 million, Madam Speaker, is not neglect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: One point eight million fruit plants, exotic plants—my friend, the hon. Member for Cumuto, Marper Farm is in his constituency, St. Augustine Nurseries is in the St. Augustine constituency, they all know this, Madam Speaker, any member of the public, registered farmers or the public can go to our facilities—Marper Farm, St. Augustine Nurseries, Centeno, La Pastora—and be welcomed with highly subsidized fruits, vegetable plants, fruit plants, tree crops and a whole list of ornamentals subsidized. Madam Speaker, you know what the price of a red stem palm outside is? Thousands of dollars. You can go to La Pastora and get it for just under \$100. Madam Speaker, grafted avocado plants and breadfruits and citrus, you could get that at the Ministry at a subsidized price of \$25.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Madam Speaker, 108 million plants produced and sold, delivered to persons, close to 100,000 pounds of seeds. I did not even get to go into the Grow Trinbago Seed Initiative: 50,000 families benefited from seeds to plant. In fact, I saw the former Member for Tabaquite's trunk in a post one day filled with pumpkins and baigan, and he thanked the initiative, the Grow Trinbago Initiative by this PNM administration, because we taught persons in public, get your seeds, your local seeds, grow your own food, eat what you grow. That is not neglect. Fifty thousand families benefited from 100,000 pounds of seed free of charge is not neglect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh: Madam Speaker, local varieties, we are developing

genetic material that does not require all this fertilizer, all this inorganic content, Madam Speaker. We are talking about the local peas, corn, hot pepper, bodi, pumpkin, melongene, the developing of these products, so that we can really, Madam Speaker, deal with this whole issue of food security.

So, in closing, Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for this my first opportunity to present in this august Chamber—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. A. Singh:—and say, I am extremely sorry it was to rubbish this Motion because it has failed miserably. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. And to my learned friend who just spoke, I must say I will take you to some of my medical clinics. Yes, there is malnutrition, there is starvation among our people in Trinidad and Tobago. You do not see it but it is there, my friend.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Madam Speaker, I am honoured to stand before you in this august Chamber to speak on this very important Motion brought by my colleague the Member for Couva North, and I support fully. Madam Speaker, it is not a secret that a large portion of Trinbago's budget is expended on the importation of food, as was alluded earlier by one of my colleagues, food that could be grown locally. It is trite, commonly known that there has been a drive to a more sustainable Trinbago. The population is aware of the agricultural potential of the very lands we stand on today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: The drive for agricultural reform has been a pressing concern, not today, not yesterday, but for years. It takes an emergency Motion for this Parliament to have this conversation by the Member for Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Food security and sustainability must be of paramount concern for this House and for this Government, an issue that the Opposition and our Opposition Leader do not take very lightly, and we must keep it live and kicking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: My colleague who just spoke mentioned about the Roadmap to Recovery accorded food security the highest priority to address the COVID-19 pandemic, Madam Speaker, which induce challenges anticipated in respect of food security. Agriculture is the best basic source of food supply and our food security programme will raise consistently the contribution of agriculture to economic development.

Our proposed solutions in the Roadmap to Recovery said that they are not only game-changing but also pragmatic. They are well aligned to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. We designed this programme of action from broad-based consultations with non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academia, civil society and other key stakeholders. Madam Speaker, this sounds very familiar, does it not? These are not my words, Madam Speaker, these are the words of the Minister of Finance in his budget statement for 2022. So, my question we are here today is: Why are the poor suffering from lack of resources, such as food and even life-saving pharmaceuticals in the country where Government has unequivocally stated its intention to revolutionize the agricultural sector? So, where is the pragmatism? Where is the adherence to the sustainability goals?

And, Madam Speaker, if you will just permit just to read something that I picked up, and I think it is very important for us here and as we stand in the honoured Chamber.

It has been—“...three consecutive years of almost no rain...”—in the —
“East African country of Somalia...”

This is the—“...worst drought in more than 40 years.”

And according to the analysis by the World Food Programme, the food association branch of the United Nations.

Madam Speaker, it is with a heavy heart to inform this House that the nations' 16 million residents will have to face potential dire farming very shortly. And unfortunately, we may recall in the period of 2010 to 2012—and why I mentioned this, food, quarter of a million, during that period, of Somalians died because of starvation and malnutrition and half of them, Madam Speaker, were children. So, you see why food is important, farming is important?

And, Madam Speaker, again, in the international circle, Somalians, they not grow any wheat and 90 per cent of the wheat comes from Ukraine and Russia. And that war has caused the whole globe to change, and food security is very important. So with that, what is going to happen to that country? What is going to happen to that people? What is going to happen to all of us? So, as we stand here this august Chamber, we are not immune to a shortage of food and we need to grow locally. And the reason that I put this out there, this is real time, this is what is happening in the world.

Madam Speaker, what I want to mention is that my constituents in Cumuto/Manzanilla, they do not come from a wealthy class of people. They are humble agriculturalists, simple people relying on the fruits of their toil and labour of the natural resources in this abundant country to sustain their livelihood. With

the cost of living constantly being increased, my constituents are struggling, just like the rest of the country, Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, to afford to live is a difficult challenge. It was the intention of this Government to boost the agricultural economy, a hope for my constituents, and we have a lot of agriculture in Cumuto/Manzanilla, as the hon. Minister said in agriculture.

The Government has taken away—because of the high cost of living, they give it with one hand and they take it away with another. I can tell you as a medical practitioner, I see it every day, as the cost of living goes up, my patients tell me, they cannot afford the medication and they do not know how to buy food because it is either buy life-saving drugs or they buy food. The question is, which is it?

So, now that I come to this part of my contribution, I am just going to track back a little bit, Madam Speaker, because we are talking about the agricultural sector. When the Rowley administration came into office in 2015 to present, agriculture has been suffering. I want to take this Parliament back to 2018 when there was major flooding which spiralled the entire Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, farmers were totally flooded out. They lost everything and many of them are still waiting on their moneys.

Madam Speaker, why when the PNM is in power, our citizens are treated like second class citizens? It is our farmers who keep the agricultural sector going. No matter how humble and simple they are, they feed us. Madam Speaker, it is important to note that due to an increase in food prices and fuel prices, the chemicals, the insecticides, the pesticides, the prices have gone up astronomically, but yet they try to tie the price of the goods to a minimal because they know people do not have money, because they know people are struggling.

As we are dealing with agriculture, Trinidad and Tobago must take into account the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla, an area that is predominately rich

in all forms of agriculture. Madam Speaker, Cumuto/Manzanilla is blessed with land, labour, capital and human resources. The constituency holds tremendous potential for the area as well as in the national community. So, an allocation of 1.249 billion in the 2022 budget was for the sector but this is simply not adequate.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday the 29th day of April, 2022, at 1.30 p.m. Madam Speaker, on that day we will continue with the debate on the cannabis report.

Question put and agreed to.

House accordingly adjourned.

Adjourned at 6.01 p.m.