HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Saturday, October 24, 2026

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2027) BILL, 2026

[Fourth Day]

The Standing Finance Committee of the whole House resumed its deliberations on the Bill and Estimates.

[*Chairman: Mr. Singh*]

10.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, everyone. This meeting of the Standing Finance Committee will resume.

Head 86: Ministry of Culture and Community Development $505,972,800.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the hon. Minister of Culture and Community Development to make a brief opening statement, the usual five minutes.

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Mr. Chairman and to all the hon. Members of this committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Standing Finance Committee for the second year.

As we examine the Estimates of expenditure for Head 86, the Ministry of Culture and Community Development, established under the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. Our mandate is to harness culture and community as drivers of economic diversification, social cohesion and national identity so that every citizen from Matelot to Moruga, from Crown Point to Charlotteville shares in our progress. The mandate sits squarely within the Government's three pillars: Putting people first by empowering communities to build resilience and opportunity, delivering good governance through policies that are transparent and impactful, and building globally competitive businesses with our creative industries as engines of growth.

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Mr. Chairman, last year I told this Committee that this Ministry would be judged by what it accomplishes. In this book, personnel expenditure increases from $35.7 million to $48 million. That increase makes provision for the new rates under the 10 per cent settlement the Prime Minister promised our public servants and delivered. And for the arrears falling due this year at the Ministry. We have hosted the best Carnival in recent years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: And this book and allocations increase NCC's allocation. Our theatre spaces are now receiving the attention they need to keep our culture alive. Replacing the air-conditioning systems, revamping equipment and beautifying the environment to scale experience.

In our communities, we have paid grants to over 164 cultural organizations and 208 festival organizations. We have taken over 5,000 persons from at-risk communities through programmes and training. We have seen our Best Village Programme, Grow with Juniors, into every county and welcomed back Tobago. Our mediation buses are back on the road. This year's allocation will support a new structure for the management of community facilities.

Our key focuses this fiscal, honouring our workers and addressing critical vacancies, maintaining our theatre spaces, celebrating our icons, setting the stage for future generations by providing the platforms for their growth and development. Mr. Chairman, this is an investment in our people's creativity and resilience, yielding lasting prosperity and pride. We stand ready to answer every query and provide every detail. And I look forward to a productive session.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Benjamin: I thank you, and I welcome questions from this honourable committee.

Question proposed: That Head 86 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: That said sum for Head 86 is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* which starts at page 492 in that relevant volume. Sub-Head 01, for the avoidance of doubt Sub-Head 01 runs from page 493 to 494 inclusive. Personnel Expenditure, 001: General Administration. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. To the Minister, we also look forward to a productive session, so we started with Item 01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance. How many positions are there on the establishment, filled as well as vacant?

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you, hon. Member, for that question. Just one minute, let me just—[*Member confers with technocrats*] all right. Member, we have 179 in total; we have 131 vacant and 48 filled.

Mr. Des Vignes: 131 vacant, okay? Okay, and 48 filled. How many positions were filled in the last year? Because I know last year when you came to Standing Finance, we spoke about filling positions as well. So, how many were filled during the year?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, as you will appreciate, this deals with the established—

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Mr. Des Vignes: Yeah.

Hon. Benjamin:—so this comes from Service Commission, so I do not directly have control. We are at the mercy as to when they do interviews and when they fill positions.

Mr. Des Vignes: I understand that, Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: But we were assigned two research officers.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay.

Hon. Benjamin: But we have to wait on Service Commission to do their process.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, it is two extras. What percentage of this amount, this increased amount, well, it is more than double the amount in terms of salaries obviously, because we are looking to fill 131 positions. What percentage of this is for backpay for current employees?

Hon. Benjamin: Hon. Member, as you will appreciate, this is to pay the arrears, and with regard to the backpay, that is something that the Accounts Department and auditing have to work out, and of course instructions will come from the Director of Budgets, so that process is ongoing.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, wait, we do not know the actual percentage today?

Hon. Benjamin: Not as yet.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So, you mentioned the 10 per cent due. Is it that employees in your Ministry are going to get their 10 per cent increase 100 per cent in cash, or are they also going to get it 40 per cent cash and 60 per cent, however else?

Hon. Benjamin: Again, hon. Member, I know the Minister of Finance would have dealt with that.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Yeah.

Hon. Benjamin: But provisions have been made. But again, we will get directions when we reach that junction.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. Okay. Because in your opening statement you mentioned 10 per cent—

Hon. Benjamin: That we got the 10 per cent?

Mr. Des Vignes:—so, I just wanted to be clear on that.

Hon. Benjamin: You will see various increases around salaries line Items, and it is reflected there.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay.

Hon. Benjamin: So, I thought it wise to notify of the reflection.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, no problem. So, we are moving to 14: Remuneration to Members of Cabinet-Appointed Committees. We see no committee was appointed based on the Estimate. Is it fair to assume no committee was appointed?

Hon. Benjamin: That is a fair assessment, Member.

Mr. Des Vignes: What is the committee that you plan to appoint in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: At the moment, Member, there is no appointed committee. But there is one with regard to culture. Of course, we are subject to the approval of Cabinet. The Note has not been there as yet, but there is one with regard to our icons and one with regard to culture. And we do have one with regard to tourism as well, partnering with the Ministry of Tourism.

Mr. Des Vignes: And for those three committees, the $150,000 allocation would be sufficient?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member. Most of the persons are on the committees.

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Again, these Notes are not before Cabinet.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, understood.

Hon. Benjamin: But most of the persons are public servants with one or two advisory positions.

Mr. Des Vignes: Oh, so people already—

Hon. Benjamin: It is just mostly travel allowances will be provided.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, understood. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Culture Division. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Salaries and Cost of Living allowance, Item 01. In 2026, the Revised Estimates show an increase of $1.3 million more than originally budgeted. What was the reason for this increase?

10.10 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, it is the same as before with regard to the arrears and there was $20,000 in the last fiscal year, in December, that was paid. Public servants were given $20,000 in December as the advance payment. So, you would have seen that reflected increase and then it went back.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, it was made up of arrears.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. And I guess, with that said, the $3.9 million would be for the increase of 10per cent, 40 per cent in cash.

Hon. Benjamin: Yeah.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, thank you. No further questions, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: 003: Community Development Division. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Again, same Item. Just for clarity, I see a $1.29 million decrease

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in salaries as we move into 2027 from 2026. Can the Minister provide clarity?

Hon. Benjamin: So, Member, same—it is with regard to the back pay that was paid. It is not really a decrease.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 004: Best Village. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 495 to 499; Item 001: General Administration. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Morning, Minister. 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Let us start at 08. This is for the Ministry, right? Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: You had a 2006 Estimate of $2.080 million and a Revised Estimate of $27,000,051. How much was actually spent?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, what was spent was the $2million.

Mr. Young SC: So, about $2 million?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: And this is for rent or lease where?

Hon. Benjamin: This is Chepstow House and also, UDeCOTT parking facilities.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Is the Ministry still at Nicholas Tower?

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, where are you all now?

Hon. Benjamin: Tower C.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. So, the 2027 Estimate has more than doubled. You have gotten an increase of almost $3 million, taking you up to $5million. What is that

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about?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. It is to deal with the arrears with regard to Chepstow House. The monthly there is $132,000, give or take some dollars, and we fell into some arrears.

Mr. Young SC: So, this is to clear the arrears for Chepstow House?

Hon. Benjamin: And Nicholas Tower.

Mr. Young SC: And Nicholas Tower. And is it intended to clear that early o' clock? No penalties, right?

Hon. Benjamin: No.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you. And to go quickly along to line Item 16—this is Contract Employment now, and again this is the Ministry. You had an Estimate of $2million. In 2026, you have a Revised Estimate of over three times that of $7million, approximately—$6.8 million. How many contract workers did that $6.8million cover?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, we have 48 warm bodies in those positions filled and we have 131 vacant.

Mr. Young SC: So, you have 48 bodies filled, but you went up to a Revised Estimate of $6.8million?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member—

Mr. Young SC: So, how much was actually spent?

Hon. Benjamin: $6.8 million.

Mr. Young SC: The $6.8 million was spent for 48 bodies in contracts?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, that is what we have now, but during the year, persons' contracts would have expired, and they have gone to short term,

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hence the reason we have 48 now.

Mr. Young SC: How many did you start the year with then? How many contract workers did you all have at the start of the year?

Hon. Benjamin: I could submit that figure in writing because I walked with actual figures. But—

Mr. Young SC: I just want to know the total you all started the year at.

Hon. Benjamin: Okay.

Mr. Young SC: How much is it?

Hon. Benjamin: I am being advised by PS. We do not have that number now, but what I did prepare for the committee is the actual figures. But I know during the course of the year, some persons came off of contract, hence the reason we are at 48.

Mr. Young SC: Right.

Hon. Benjamin: But we did expend that amount. I can provide—

Mr. Young SC: Well, how many non-renewals do you have?

Hon. Benjamin: Excuse?

Mr. Young SC: How many non-renewals? How many people came off of contract? Because those are people who have lost jobs, so how many? Well, if their contracts were not renewed—

Hon. Benjamin: Member, we are only in the proceedings, right? It does not mean that if somebody came off the contract Vote that they lost their job. We also have a Vote called Short-term.

Mr. Young SC: I am going there now.

Hon. Benjamin: The majority of my staff are existing in short-term facilities.

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And it is not that we did not give them renewal at the onset of the contract expiring. Some of the contracts do not have life in them, so the HR process—

Mr. Young SC: You have to go to Cabinet.

Hon. Benjamin:—has to be conducted and they have to go to Cabinet. But also, because we were on a six-year plan before, we do have to do it over with regard to the org chart. And as you would appreciate, with the Ministry being amalgamated, we would have lost some positions, so our org chart has to be revised. So, it is not that anyone has lost their jobs.

Mr. Young SC: So, Minister, you are saying that everyone who started the year with employment under contract employment—

Hon. Benjamin: Again, Minister—

Mr. Young SC: Let me finish—who may not have been renewed under contract employment are now contracted under short-term employment. Is that what you are saying?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, for clarity, I would say the majority. What I would also say is that it is an HR process. And as you are aware, appraisals have to be done and it is based on the recommendation of HR, so some persons were not facilitated. I cannot say what file is in transit and what position it is at the point in time, but that is an HR exercise.

Mr. Young SC: And now for 2027, you have gotten a further increase, and you have gone up to $7.2 million. So, I assume, having listened carefully to all that you have said, that you intend to go to Cabinet in this fiscal year, get the approvals for—

Hon. Benjamin: We have started—

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Mr. Young SC:—those additional 131 positions and then start employment.

Hon. Benjamin: I can give you an update. We have started. So far, we have gotten approvals with regard to one of our units—HR—and that is to be advertised shortly.

Mr. Young SC: To which unit? The HR unit?

Hon. Benjamin: The HR unit. Most of the contracts would have expired, so we would have gotten that renewal and advertisement. Of course, it has to happen because we had vacancies also existing.

Mr. Young SC: Right. Okay. So, now you are saying that you picked up a lot of the slack, although your increase in allocation under Contract Employment for 2026 went up over three times from $2million to $6.8 million. You said that a number of persons were not renewed, could be expiry of the contract positions, et cetera. But you paid out $6.8million, and you said that a lot of them—or some of them—let me be fair to you—not all were picked up now in Short-term Employment. Correct?

So, let us go down to Short-term Employment, line Item 22. You started off the year with $1million as your allocated Estimate for Short-term Employment. The Ministry then has a Revised Estimate of almost $6 million—$5.8 million. How many persons did you start off the year with under Short-term? Let us start with that.

Hon. Benjamin: All right. So, Member, that I will have to get to you. But as you can see, with regard to the revised figure, it kind of would reflect what I was saying, that we had to vire for money with regard to this Vote to accommodate Short-term Employment.

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Mr. Young SC: Okay, but what I am a little confused about—so then, let us go to the Short-term of how much the Revised Estimate is, of $5.8million. So that is over five times the amount of the original Estimate. And you are saying that above, at Contract, you went up over three times for the original Estimate. So, how many people did you end the year at under Short-term Employment? I assume that you spent the whole $5.8 million.

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, Member, I would get that figure for you. So, Member, what I would be able to give you is an estimated figure. So, it is looking at between 70 and 80 persons, but I would like to provide that in writing.

Mr. Young SC: Right. And now for 2027, you have gotten roughly the same; $5.8 million. But you have just told us that you intend to absorb persons from Short-term into the higher allocation you have gotten now for Contract Employment.

10.20 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Which would be the right thing to do, Member.

Mr. Young SC: Agreed. But what has me concerned is you maintain the same balance. There is no reflection of a downward balance under the short-term, if you say you are going to absorb them in contract.

Hon. Benjamin: So Member, as you would appreciate, that is going to be a process. So if that was not catered for here, you would have come and said that we are firing persons. What I thought it wise—

Mr. Young SC: I still am determined that you bring the information.

Hon. Benjamin:—is to cater for my employees while we go through the HR process.

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Mr. Young SC: Alright. So you may have a surplus here, right? Now, you have not provided the figures of how many people you started the year employed as, versus how much you have ended the year. You said that you are going to provide that—

Hon. Benjamin: This Committee allows me to provide certain things in writing.

Mr. Young SC: Correct. So you said that you will provide that in writing. So until we see those figures, we are not in a position to determine if you started the year with 100, you ended up with 48. Where those 52 have gone? So before I hand over to my other colleagues. I just want to go to Other Contracted Services now. What is the intention to utilize Other Contracted Services for?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, that is with regard to the bins in the toilets, the photocopiers along those lines.

Mr. Young SC: Photocopiers? Would photocopiers not come under the Minor Equipment and Rental?

Hon. Benjamin: Bins, sorry, bins. My apologies.

Mr. Young SC: Bins?

Hon. Benjamin: In the toilets, yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you. No further questions for me under this 02/001.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, we see an extremely big jump in terms of telephones—ten times the amount of the budgeted.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, just tell me which number you are looking at, please?

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, for 2026, and even the Revised Estimate, you had $100,000. Why is it now at $1 million, a $900,000 difference?

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Mr. Chairman: Yes, I think you need to identify the line Item by number.

Mr. Des Vignes: 05, 05: Telephones. My apologies, Chair.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, this is to treat with arrears that accumulated—I am being told prior to the 24th of November, 2024. So, we had some previous years' arrears to treat with.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So, all of that is arrears that was not budgeted for in 2026, but we are paying it in 2027. Looking at 37: Janitorial Services. We see Janitorial Services as well, an increase of $1 million. What is the reason for that increase? Were the Janitorial Services contracted to another janitor, what happened there?

Hon. Benjamin: Well, strangely enough that you would say that, as you would appreciate, my Ministry was amalgamated, so we were moving from different buildings and different staffing, different **GAs,** went to different Ministries. So by the time we were with our services and stuff, we did end up with some arrears. So this is to treat with that. Strangely enough, that you mentioned that.

Mr. Des Vignes: Understood, but the Ministry was amalgamated in 2026 so, why in 2027 we now speaking of this?

Hon. Benjamin: That was 2025. But as I said, with regard to what I just said, that is the explanation. It is to treat with arrears.

Mr. Des Vignes: So it was not dealt with in the previous budget, understood.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Des Vignes: What was that Finance Minister, you have something you want to say?

Mr. Tancoo: Are you sure you want to invite me to this conversation?

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Mr. Des Vignes: No.

Mr. Tancoo: Ask the question to the Minister, I will join in, in due course.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, I will do that. Thank you very much.

Mr. Tancoo: I appreciate your enthusiasm for my engagement.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I want to go to Official Overseas Travel, Item no. 27, Minister. Just for clarity, this would normally be for the Ministry to do some outreach to our foreign partners. Let us say if, you know, they are having a Carnival in Miami, what would this normally be? Let me get an understanding of what this Official Overseas Travel usually would be.

Hon. Benjamin: All right. So, with regard to Cabinet-approved travels, and I am probably right if we get invitation or so, but it is not just for a Minister to pick up themselves and decide to travel.

Mr. Des Vignes: No, obviously, obviously, obviously.

Hon. Benjamin: So we had no Cabinet-approved travels with regard to the Ministry, so there was no spend there.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, so none was spent, and is there expected travel in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: Well, we catered for it, and it is based on invitations and yes, we do have different cultural activities happening, and we intend to participate. But even before the activity happens, which is in the other fiscal, there are meetings that have to take place, so there may be at least two scheduled travels.

Mr. Des Vignes: Understood. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Item 02/011/43: Security Services. I see that the Estimates in 2026, Security Services was $179,000. I see the

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Estimates this fiscal is $1,379,000, an increase of $1.2 million. Could you tell, through the Chair, these Security Services have they been advertised as yet?

Hon. Benjamin: So these are for contracts arrangements that we inherited. We have not interfered with the security contracts arrangements for any of our buildings, and it is to service arrears, and this is with regard to MTS at Chepstow House and Jerningham, and Universal Protection Services at Tower C.

Mr. Scotland SC: Well, how come that was not catered for in 2026? If these are ongoing services and arrears, that means that this arrears would have been there in 2026 and known to you. Why was that not catered for then in 2026, if you are saying that it is arrears?

Hon. Benjamin: Right? So again, this some of these—with regard to the merger of the Ministry, some of the security services contracts came over to us. So one came over from Tourism, and again before we picked up on it, so we are now catering for it here.

Mr. Scotland SC: So you did not pick up on it last time, so it may not actually be correct.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, for clarity, when the Ministry was merged, we were existing in shared spaces, and that was before the arrangements were worked out; which staff will go where, which contracts will stay where, which service provider, So shared spaces.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, I will not beat that horse at this time. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin West.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Want to go to Item no. 62, Promotions, Publicity, and Printing. We see a doubling in the figure for 2027. What is the reason for that big jump?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, thanks for noticing. I would have so advocated when I had the meeting with Budgets that this is the culture Ministry, and we tend to do a lot of different advertising and engaging different persons, and of course, printing from time to time. So I did ask—under certain line Items, you will notice increases as we go.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, understood. What media channels do you plan to engage these new Promotions, Publicity, and Printing?

Hon. Benjamin: Well, it is in line with the Ministry's current cultural programmes, as you know, with regard to Best Village, we have Carifesta that we are preparing for, although that will be treated for in the other fiscal, we have Carnival upon us. We so—treating what the Ministry usually does. All our cultural programmes.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chairman. Minister, just to follow up on the question my colleague asked, specifically, where is the money going to be spent?

Hon. Benjamin: So, Member, that is a procurement exercise. So for me to sit down here and say that I will be engaging A, B, C, or D would be wrong of me. Procurement, depending on whatever programme, the different departments come up and what line of advertising we take or what promotional items we may say we need at the point in time, the purpose of the Procurement Unit is to procure.

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Mr. de Nobriga: Minister, I do not want to belabour the point. It is just simply that procurement is at the end of a process that starts with policy. So the question still remains: Where do you all anticipate utilizing any funds—

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I will say asked and answered.

Mr. de Nobriga: Minister, you cannot say that because I have not finished the question.

10.30 a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: My apologies, Member.

Mr. de Nobriga: No problem.

Hon. Benjamin: I do apologize.

Mr. de Nobriga: So my colleague had asked what media channels, and I do not think he wants you to specifically name channel X or channel Y. I think what he means is in terms of your use of print media, your use of television, your use of radio, your use of social media. How is this money going to be utilized? It is a simple question.

Hon. Benjamin: All. All. all of the above.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Chairman: Item 002: Culture Division. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Minister, line Item 62.

Hon. Benjamin: Sorry. Sorry.

Mr. Young SC: Culture Division, 002, line Item 62: Promotions, Publicity and Printing.

Hon. Benjamin: Just now "eh".

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Mr. Young SC: In 2026, there was an Estimate of $206,000; 2026, Revised Estimate, $50,000; 2027 is an increase to $3 million, an increase of $2,950,000, right? So from an Estimate of $50,000, what is that increase about, from $50,000 to $3 million under Promotions, Publicity and Printing?

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you, Member. Thanks for pointing that out. This was another Item I laboured when I went to meet with regard to budgets and the allocation of the Ministry. This is to treat with regard to the National Registry of Artists and Cultural Workers, and also, it will include the development of audio-visual programmes, the acquisition of memorabilia for cultural promotion, and with regard to some sort of sponsorship. In the sense when persons travel, as you would appreciate, we do have a lot of different pageants taking place internationally.

Mr. Young SC: So you are going to do all of that under the Promotions, Publicity and Printing?

Hon. Benjamin: That is the line Item that treats to that.

Mr. Young SC: So it means that in 2026, you did none of it?

Hon. Benjamin: No, we did.

Mr. Young SC: For $50,000?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. This line Item is reflected throughout this exercise, as we just came from a different division that has this.

Mr. Young SC: Well, we just came from head office and stuff, yeah, so now this is under culture.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So we do have the same line Item reflected throughout.

Mr. Young SC: So you are hoping in this fiscal to focus more on the cultural side

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and the promotion of the cultural side, artists, et cetera?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. We look forward to that.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Could it then be taken that unlike this fiscal, where artists were starved for funds from the Ministry, that in this year—

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Mr. Scotland SC: I am not finished with my question, please.

Hon. Benjamin: My apologies, but I reserve the right to sensitize. You may carry on, Member.

Mr. Scotland SC: So, thank you. Allow me to finish; I have five minutes. Unlike this, where artists were starved for little subventions and begging, are you going to say, under this Head, that artists and cultural activists in Trinidad and Tobago can expect more assistance from the Ministry in this fiscal?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, this is not that particular line Item, and as a seasoned Member of this House, and someone that sat in a Cabinet, I believe—I stand to be corrected—this is not the respective line Item for that. I would not have you say that "artists were starved". One thing I wear as a badge, we had more engagement with regard to artists in this current Carnival that went, and we intend to increase. So when it comes to making statements just for sound bites that "artists were starved"—

Mr. Scotland SC: Seriously.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, whether you sit on that side and you say "seriously", as a seasoned Member of this House—

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Mr. Scotland SC: Go on.

Hon. Benjamin:—I expect better from you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, I am not finished. Having heard your soliloquy, I am asking you under this same heading, this same line Item, Madam Chairman, and thank you for the unsolicited lecture. You, in your answer to the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, said to us that, "This will also include the assistance of artists." Did you not just say that to us?

Hon. Benjamin: Artists' registry, Member.

Mr. Scotland SC: Artists' registry. In this—

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So this—

Mr. Scotland SC: Hold on, I am not finished. Do not be premature. Under this line Item, what measures would you put in place to control your expenditure on promotion? "Because when I hear promotions from allyuh side, I feel I winning." What measures will be put in place to, one, curtail, because we do not have the OPR anymore, and put checks and balances as it relates to Promotions, Publicity and Printing? What measures would you put in place now that the OPR is out? The OPR has been gutted.

Mr. Tancoo: Member, while we await the Minister to get the information requested from the hon. Member, I just want to put it on record, maybe the Member is not aware, that the Office of Procurement Regulation continues to exist in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Gutted.

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Mr. Young SC: Now with a limit of $2 million.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, given what our Finance Minister just said, checks and balances exist, and we do have a procurement unit in the Ministry, and they will do the exercise as they usually do. So there is no, for all that you just said, for with regard to seeking your sound bite, that does not—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: When I am doing the—Mr. Chairman, the deflection and the self-fulfilling prophecy will not have any traction with me.

Madam Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Scotland SC: I am not seeking a sound bite, you know, I am querying this line Item, and I take umbrage to your suggestion.

Madam Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Scotland SC: If that is what you are doing, then good for you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Chairman: Alright, Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Good for you.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, Chair.

Madam Chairman: Alright. That is a kind of unwarranted admonition of the Minister, but let us move along.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, Chairman.

Madam Chairman: Let us go to Diego Martin West.

Mr. Scotland SC: You will get plenty today of sound bites.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Moving to 89: Cultural Programmes, we see an increase by $1.4 million, what are these new cultural programmes that the Ministry intends to implement in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: Thank you, Member, for that question. Just for clarity, we are at 89, right?

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So this is the treatment with specialized exhibition for an expo that we were invited to in 2027, with regard to Serbia, that is Belgrade, and then we have on the 5th of May to August, that is when that will be happening. We also have to start preparing with regard to CARIFESTA, so we intend to treat with that here as well. The preparation, of course, will just be basically doing the artist's call; allowing the national public to participate. So I intend to put out a call, artists that are interested with regard to participating. And then, of course, we will write whatever script, and what will be the focus of our country and our country night that we have prepare for. So that training exercise, and some sort of exhibition will happen here in our theatre spaces before we travel. That is the intent with regard to that, treating with all the different invitations that we have and cultural exchanges.

Mr. Des Vignes: Will these cultural programmes be outsourced from the Ministry? You mentioned the script writing and what will happen in terms of how the country will be presented, etc.

Hon. Benjamin: Internal.

Mr. Des Vignes: Internal. So this will be internal. So is it that staff will be getting incentives from this or this will be under [*Inaudible*]

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Hon. Benjamin: No, this is to treat with the spend. So as you would appreciate, in carrying out any sort of programme or preparing for any sort of travel or delegation, there is some sort of training that has to happen, so this will treat with that, knowing that we do have to participate in CARIFESTA next year, and although that spend will happen in another fiscal, we still do have to prepare.

Mr. Des Vignes: Understood. Thank you, Minister.

Madam Chairman: Item 003: Community Development Division. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you. In terms of the Community Development Division, under Short-term Employment, what was estimated in the 2026 Budget was 2.4, 4.4 was spent, what was the reason for this increase in spend in 2026 Revised Estimate? Item 22, Short-term Employment for clarity.

10.40a.m.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, we do have—in our community facilities, again, we had some contracts that came to an end. So, the staff are existing in a short-term facility until I can get back some life on the contract. And of course, they are going through some sort of—well, the HR director, with regard to appraisals, and what have you. So, as soon as we treat with that. So, we have to facilitate that. Because, again, as I would have explained, we do have to go to Cabinet to get life in these. So that takes time.

Mr. Des Vignes: How many employees are under short-term employment currently?

Hon. Benjamin: Just bear with me. I will give you just now. [*Confers with technocrat*] So, Member, approximately, we have like, 100 persons right now.

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Mr. Des Vignes: So, 100 persons. Is it that you intend to hire more in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: So, Member, as we go along, contracts tend to expire. So, it is just to give us a buffer while we treat to get back persons on contract. So, yes. It may be to hire. With regard to the community facilities, sometimes we do have to bring on persons on a short-term facility. We do have a Cabinet Note that we are working on with regard to the management of these facilities. So, we do have a pilot programme to run off. So, it is to treat with things like that.

Mr. Des Vignes: From what you are saying, is this for staff for community centres? You mentioned community—

Hon. Benjamin: Community facilities, not just the centres.

Mr. Des Vignes:—not just the centres.

Hon. Benjamin: As you will appreciate, we do have regional complexes.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, centres as well as—

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Des Vignes:—other facilities. In this Short-term Employment, given that the Cocorite and Carapo community centres and other centres remain unopened, does this also provide a buffer for when we open those community centres?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. With the rolling out of the new Cabinet-approved management programme. Yes. We want to put these centres under clusters, and of course, they would have managers in them.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Benjamin: Can you repeat the last part, Minister? Some of your Members on your side were talking incessantly. I really could not hear you. Apologies. But I could not hear.

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Mr. Chairman: All right.

Hon. Benjamin: So, the short answer to your question is—

Mr. Chairman: Members.

Hon. Benjamin:—yes.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. We would have some sort of management individuals in there.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, we do expect all centres that are closed, for example, La Horquetta, to be opened in 2027?

Ms. Ameen: Mr. Chairman, just for the record, the Carapo Community Centre is open and functional. We have meetings there regularly. The Member for Malabar/Mausica also was at meetings there. So, it is very open and functional.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. No problem. Let us talk to the Minister, please.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Ms. Ameen: "Yuh cah come here with lies and expect it not to be corrected. Talk about wah yuh know about."

Mr. Des Vignes: So, just—

Ms. Ameen: The centre is open. Do not mislead the public.

Mr. Young SC: "Aye. Aye. Aye!"

Ms. Ameen: Do not mislead the public.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Come on.

Mr. Young SC: "What really going on here?"

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: Come on. Let us stop this now.

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Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Come on. Let us stop this.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, Minister—

Mr. Chairman: For the avoidance of doubt, Diego Martin West and St. Augustine, all right, let us proceed in a polite manner towards each other. But there was no need for that retort. The Member is entitled to correct the public record. All right.

Mr. Des Vignes: No problem, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: So, let us just proceed being polite and civilized to each other.

Mr. Des Vignes: No problem, Chair. Nothing but respect from me. Just asking the Minister once again, do we expect these community centres to be open and staffed in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, even in my budget response, I would have given a status with regard to all community centres. The ones that are in a condition with regard to opening, they will be put underneath a management system. This is to treat with the employees.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So, do we expect that for the La Horquetta centre?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, they will be clustered. With regard to the status of the centre, it is dependent on if the centre is functional. They will be placed in clusters.

Mr. Des Vignes: Is the La Horquetta centre functional?

Hon. Benjamin: Let me give you the status of the centre. [*Confers with technocrat*] Right. So, Member, I am being advised that the La Horquetta Regional Complex has refurbishment work that has to be done.

[*Confers with technocrat*]

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And Greenvale is under construction at the moment.

Mr. Des Vignes: Under which contractor—carrying out the works?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member I have awarded no contract with regard to community construction since we took office. So, I would be able to provide that in writing. I would get that information from UDeCOTT, and I will provide it in writing to you.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister. We will move forward.

Mr. Chairman: Item 004: Best Village, 005: Mediation Centres. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: In terms of Mediation Centres, we see an increase of $1 million for Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage. What is the reason for this particular jump? Is it that we are going to have more mediation centres?

Hon. Benjamin: It is to treat with the Arima mediation centre.

Mr. Des Vignes: Does it need to be reconstructed/repaired?

Hon. Benjamin: Open it.

Mr. Des Vignes: It needs to be opened. Okay. In 2025, for the record, the amount was $1.4million. So, I could understand where the shortfall happened there. Moving to 22: Short-term Employment, we are now at $1.4 million, as we go into 2027. It was that amount for 2026. It was 626. At the start of 2026, that was the budget, 626. What is the reason for this big jump in short-term employment for the mediation centres?

Hon. Benjamin: The explanation is the same as before with regard to persons coming off of contract and that life has to be sourced. So, in the interim, we have staff that will exist in short-term.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Minister, if persons came off of contract and they are back on contract, then the amount would not—

Hon. Benjamin: They are not on contract as yet. They are on short-term facility.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, you are saying contracted employees are now going to short-term?

Mr. Chairman: No. I do not think that is what the answer was.

Hon. Benjamin: Because their contracts expired.

Mr. Des Vignes: Because their contract expired. The contract services employees. I am asking.

Hon. Benjamin: Yes, Member. I said that before.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So, from that note, then contract services would more than likely go down. But looking at contracted services, you know, there is no major fall in contracted services. It is around the same. So, it does not quite add up, Minister in terms of the figures and what you are saying.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, as you heard, we intend to open a new centre, which means I will have to get staff. Right.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yeah.

Hon. Benjamin: Also, with regard to mediation, we have an average of 40 vacant. Out of that 40, I believe 20 have life. So, we do have to advertise. With regard to the mediation department, most of the employees are on short-term right now.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: I met them on a short-term facility. So, we have to advertise.

Mr. Des Vignes: Either way, Minister, it is fine. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 500 to 501.

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001: General Administration, 002: Culture Division, 003: Community Development Division, 004: Best Village, 005: Mediation Centres. Sub-Head 04, pages 501 to 503, Current Transfers and Subsidies, 005: Non-Profit Institutions. Diego Martin West.

10.50 a.m.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Looking at the Transformation Development Centres, we see $2.14 million was allocated in 2026, but none was spent in 2026. I know these centres, for example, George Street, Spree Simon and Cocorite, they were opened since 1996. So, how come not a cent was spent on these Transformation Development Centres in 2026?

Hon. Benjamin: So, Member, what we inherited with regard to these centres was a report done by the former administration suggesting restructuring. A Note was taken to Cabinet and that will be attended to. So, this will be treated in this upcoming fiscal. But the report—and I could share parts of those reports with you, with regard to wastage and different suggestions with regard to restructuring. So, as you would see, the name alone suggests—with regard to Transformation Development Centres, the centres became just—with regard to food support and not really doing any sort of transitioning. So, as I said, the report that we found suggested some restructuring and we are treating with that. So that would be treated with in this upcoming fiscal.

Mr. Des Vignes: Minister, you mentioned the Transformation Development Centres help with food support. Given that they help with food support for vulnerable citizens, would it not be in the best interest of the Government, the country and citizens that they be given some sort of allocation to allow for them to

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provide food support in 2026?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, they are still functioning and providing overpriced food, but they are still functioning.

Mr. Des Vignes: But are salaries being paid?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, as I said, the report that we found suggested some restructuring and we are treating with it.

Mr. Des Vignes: I understand, but—

Hon. Benjamin: They are NGOs and I believe that they are still paying their salaries and waiting on government subvention, so as soon as the restructuring is processed, it would be treated with.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So, no allocation, but the salaries are being handled.

Hon. Benjamin: Member—

Mr. Des Vignes: No, Minister, I am just asking.

Hon. Benjamin: It is an NGO, Member.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, but NGOs do have employees, Minister, respectfully.

Hon. Benjamin: I agree. But at the end of the day, the Government gives a subvention.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, no problem. No problem, Minister. I want is that go to 04: Regional Complexes, $10.3 million was allocated, but only $6.5 million was spent. What is the reason for this lack of spending towards these Regional Complexes?

Hon. Benjamin: Could you say over the number?

Mr. Des Vignes: Item 04: Regional Complexes.

Hon. Benjamin: One minute, please.

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Mr. Tancoo: Again, if I may clarify a misconception that seems to be running the Member's commentary. There are three types of figures in the books before you. One is an Estimate, one is a Revised Estimate and one is an Actual. So, you are comparing, I believe, the Estimate to the Revised Estimate, correct? It still remains an Estimate. I am hearing you saying that so much was spent. These are really the Revised Estimates. There may be bills outstanding that will increase. But it is a projection, so it may go up or go down from, or stay the same as the Revised Estimate.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister of Finance.

Mr. Tancoo: Most welcome.

Mr. Des Vignes: But when I asked the Minister if anything was spent, she said none was spent.

Mr. Tancoo: Sure, thanks.

Mr. Des Vignes: Respectfully.

Mr. Tancoo: Respectfully, as well. But you have been making the same comparison on a continuous basis, and just for clarification.

Mr. Des Vignes: I understand Minister, we went through this ad nauseam yesterday.

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, you could just rephrase your question, or—

Mr. Des Vignes: I was asking about the Regional Complexes and the reason for the non-spending of the funds towards these regional complexes.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, I would not say it is non-spending—so, this is for the management of the regional complexes. We have managers in these

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facilities, so this money allocated here is with regard to paying security and utility bills. So, we paid what came due and what was requested of us.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister, briefly, line Item 11, under 04/005, Contribution to Cultural Organisations. I see you spent about $1 million—well, did you spend that full $1.094 million in 2026?

Hon. Benjamin: $5 million.

Mr. Young SC: $5 million. Sorry, $5 million?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: All right. Can we get the list of who it was distributed to?

Hon. Benjamin: Sure.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Hon. Benjamin: I could give that here now. All right. So, grants were distributed to 155 organizations in fiscal 2026.

Mr. Young SC: Okay.

Hon. Benjamin: The Woodbrook—

Mr. Young SC: Over the course of the year—

Hon. Benjamin: Yeah.

Mr. Young SC:—and depending on requests made, et cetera, right?

Hon. Benjamin: Yes. So, the Woodbrook/St. James Community Association, Pan on 'D' Avenue. We had 147 unsponsored steel pans, and that was for Carnival 2026. We had the Bocas Lit Fest subvention. We had Pan Trinbago—

Mr. Young SC: You all gave something to the Bocas Lit Fest eventually?

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Hon. Benjamin: Always.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, good. All right. Could you just provide listing—

Hon. Benjamin: No, I would like to—for the members of the listening public.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Go ahead.

Hon. Benjamin: Okay. So, Pan Trinbago, World Steelpan—

Mr. Young SC: Well, then, say the amounts.

Hon. Benjamin: Of course.

Mr. Young SC: Say the amounts as well. Pan Trinbago got how much?

Hon. Benjamin: So, I will start over. All right. So the grants were distributed to 155 organizations in fiscal 2026 as follows: Woodbrook/St. James Community Association, Pan on 'D' Avenue, $200,000; 147 unsponsored steel bands, Carnival 2026, $2.3 million; Bocas Lit Fest subvention, $100,000; Pan Trinbago, World Steelpan Day, $2.3 million; Kalypso Revue Tent, $300,000; Maco Meter, $50,000; National Action Cultural Committee, $475,000; "D" Massive Gosine Roving Chutney Calypso Comedy Tent, $50,000; Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society, $100,000. Those were the—

Mr. Young SC: Those were the—

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So those were the allocations and—

Mr. Young SC: You said 155.

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, if—right. So, you would have heard pan.

Mr. Young SC: I only heard about—

Hon. Benjamin: Member, 147—

Mr. Young SC: I only heard about 10.

Hon. Benjamin: Member, 147 unsponsored steel pans. I could provide you with

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that list.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, that is where it was? The 147 unsponsored steel pans?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, this line Item from—

Mr. Young SC: Couva Joylanders were part?

Hon. Benjamin: I have the listing. I could provide it to the Member.

Mr. Young SC: Oh, now you would provide the listing, no problem, provide it.

Hon. Benjamin: No, I could read out the listing, I have no problem. All right.

Mr. Young SC: Come, let us move on, Member, unless you really want to start going down those roads. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, are you through?

Mr. Young SC: Yeah.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah. Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 04/005/11: Contribution to Cultural Organisations. Hon. Minister, can you indicate whether the Laventille Steelband Festival Foundation, you would have received an application for support under this line Item in fiscal 2026?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, they did make an application and I know we did assist them. They would have received—[*Minister confers with technocrat*]

Mr. Marcelle: For pan on the main road.

Hon. Benjamin: So, they got $100,000 and we paid them, I think it is under this facility, Contribution to Cultural Organisations.

Mr. Marcelle: This $100,000 was for the 2025 or the 2026? Because I know

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commitments were made in terms of both years, 2025 and 2026. So, can you indicate whether the $100,000 was relative to 2025, and if 2026 is still pending, please?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, what I could do is provide you with the details with regard to that organization in writing, but I know we did assist.

Mr. Marcelle: All right. Thank you very kindly.

Mr. Chairman: 006: Educational Institutions; 007: Households. Member for Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Hosting of Cultural Camps, I see $100,000 was allocated, but according to the Revised Estimate, none was spent. Is this none was spent or was some spent? Did we have cultural camps? Did we not have cultural camps? Just for clarity.

Hon. Benjamin: So, Member, we did have cultural camps—through the Best Village, we did have some cultural camps with regard to the August vacation. We did not utilize this line Item with regard to this $100,000 spent here.

Mr. Des Vignes: Right.

Hon. Benjamin: But can I tell you, over the August period, we did have cultural camps and we had over 800 juniors in those camps.

Mr. Des Vignes: The cultural camps you mentioned were through Best Village.

Hon. Benjamin: We did have cultural camps.

Mr. Des Vignes: And other Votes, but not under this Vote?

Hon. Benjamin: No. This Vote, I am actually developing a Cabinet Note with regard to culture. This is for the Culture Division in the Ministry to do some revamping, because we do have different things that we want to do with regard to

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our icons and passing down different cultural aspects, so I intend to do some revision here.

11.00 a.m.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, and music schools in the—

Hon. Benjamin: Same thing, Member. This was very troubling to me. This is what this line Item usually gets, $50,000. As you would appreciate I do not know if you follow the Ministry, we had *Trinbago Got Talent*, where we built in some sort of musical training through that programme because this $50,000 we did not use it again because of that, but we did intend to pay a bill or two when we did have musical schools in the community.

Mr. Des Vignes: Through the Trinbago talent, but not separate and apart from? So, similarly with the cultural programme

Hon. Benjamin: So, again I intend to revise this.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, similarly with the cultural programme–the cultural programmes were held—

Hon. Benjamin: So, what I found is that the cultural department, some of the line Items year go, year come, even when you look at previous years and I know we can only discuss this allocation here—

Mr. Des Vignes: "Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm"

Hon. Benjamin:—this is what they usually get so they cannot really do an exercise. So, I did partnering with different departments in the Ministry. So, when we sit back here next fiscal, this will reflect differently.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. Okay, all right, Minister, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Other Transfers. Diego Martin West.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Quick question for the Minister on this one. National days and Festivals, in 2025 the amount allocated was $5.7 million and $4 million was actually allocated in fiscal 2026, less was spent. What was the reasoning behind that, and does the Minister see this $4 million as sufficient for National Days and Festivals?

Hon. Benjamin: So, this Vote, as you would appreciate our national days and festival do not always run current with our fiscal year. So, as you would appreciate if you start from October, you have Divali, Christmas, Ramleela ensuing. By the time we reach back—so I will pay that, and by time we reach back to our financial year others would be paid. So, I do not know if that explanation makes sense to you, Member, but it does not run current and it is all based when we get the application. But, as I stated we would have assisted more groups this financial year than what we would have met in previous years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister, is it possible to get the groups and allocations in writing?

Hon. Benjamin: I could give you that.

Mr. Des Vignes: Simple request. No, I do not need it now, but if we could get it so we can have it for future reference, for future conversations and debates and clarity.

Hon. Benjamin: I would like to provide it now for the listening public.

Mr. Des Vignes: I asked for it in writing, thank you, because I know it will take up a lot of time.

Hon. Benjamin: I will try. I will try.

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Mr. Des Vignes: You have it, but you will try, Minister?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Des Vignes: We are just asking for it in writing.

Hon. Benjamin: All right, so, we have Life of Christ Ministry, we have Aranguez Sports and Cultural Club, Aripo Community Council, Black Hawks Martial Arts, Bon Air Full Gospel—

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, we asked for it in writing. In writing is fine, we do not need it now. I asked for it specifically in writing, so we would not extend in terms of the time here. We can move on, Chair. We can get it in writing and move forward.

Mr. Chairman: You see—all right. And that is why you have to be somewhat careful in how you craft your question and the request you make. Right? In the interest of moving forward, Minister, can I just inquire of you how long that list is?

Hon. Benjamin: Two hundred and eighty.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, I think Minister, the Member perhaps would have—I want to say this in a very neutral way, but I think perhaps the Member would have sufficiently learnt his lesson, that you are prepared and you have—

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, I asked for it in writing from the start, Chair. From the start, I asked for it in writing.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Could you not raise your voice at me? I am not raising my voice at you. So, please speak to me in a calm and civilized manner. I am trying to suggest to you that there is an efficient way of asking questions and making requests, and that is why I repeatedly point to the Standing Orders. All right? Not everything you can pursue here in the most efficient manner. There are

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some of them that you make a request through a more efficient and economical use of the Standing Orders. So, in the interest of time, I am going to suggest to the hon. Minister, that she provide the list in writing to you because that was your request. All right?

But you see, what you did is that you asked for it, then when the Minister said, "I have it here", you somewhat resiled from that —

Mr. Des Vignes: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman:—no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. You somewhat resiled from that position, called the bluff of the Minister—

Mr. Des Vignes: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Listen, no, no, no, no. Listen, let me tell you a story—

Hon. Members: "Noooo."

Mr. Marcelle: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: About—no, well, I will tell you why. Sometimes it is important so that you learn a lesson.

Hon. Member: No, we doh need the story.

Mr. Chairman: No, well, I am afraid I am going to tell it nevertheless.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: No.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: No. I remember the legendary Theodore Guerra doing a murder trial and asking James Philbert for a pocket diary, and he bluffed and he said, "Well, I have it here. Yuh want it?" and Mr.Guerra said, "Yes, pass it, let me have it." Of course, he could not produce it. But, it is different. So, Diego Martin

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West, when you make a request you somewhat resiled from that. I tell you that only to understand that there is an economical way of doing things under these Standing Orders. Minister, I am going to allow you to provide it in writing. I think the reading out of the 200-and-something names will just take too much time, right. Thank you very much.

Hon. Benjamin: I am guided, Chair, it was just for the members of the listening public.

Mr. Chairman: So, can we have another question if there is another question, Diego Martin West?

Mr. Des Vignes: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Right, thank you. Sub-Head 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies; 004: Statutory Boards, page 503.

Hon. Members, we shall now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, page 591.

20: Queen's Hall at 591. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007 Households.

21: Naparima Bowl. Sub-Head 001: General Administration; 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration.

Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases. Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007:

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Households.

22: National Carnival Commission of Trinidad and Tobago, page 603. Sub-Head 01 Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; page 603 we are on. Item 001: General Administration; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration; 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households. Item 008: Subsidies. Diego Martin West.

11.10 a.m.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. For Subsidies, we see a decrease of $4.785,500 under Transfers to Carnival Bodies, 01. What is the reason for this significant decline for the NCC for 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, I can assure you that not one of these stakeholders got a decrease. I have what they received. So, forgive me. As you would appreciate this is a budgeting exercise, but each one of those organizations—give me one second—and I will tell you what each one of the stakeholders, which is basically TUCO, TTCBA, and Pan Trinbago, received for the fiscal. [*Minister confers with technocrat*].

So, Member, when it comes to TUCO, they received $12.5 million. When it comes to Pan Trinbago, and I know it is a little more than this, we have $37.6 million. When it comes to mass, TTCBA, $14.3 million. So, I know it is more than what is stated here. So, forgive me again; this is a budgeting exercise. But no one received a decrease. So, it all depends on which respective bodies the drawdown was made to.

So, as you would see, it has Transfers to Carnival Bodies, and those are the

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three main Carnival bodies that you know. And then it has Grants to Regional Bodies, and then we have Carnival Awards. So, it depends on which drawdown the NCC administration would have used to pay out. But this is public record, and this is what those organizations received. And there is still some updating to do with regard to the figures I just called. But no organizations received a decrease.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, Minister, I understand what you are saying, but the Transfers To Carnival Subsidies in 2025 were $34 million. In 2026, what was required, based on the even reduced allocation from the Estimate, was about $30 million. Now we are down to $25 million, a decrease for the NCC. So that means somewhere, somehow, someone is getting less, no matter how we dance and spin it.

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member. Member, and it is public record. There is even an article in today's *Guardian* and even last week's *Guardian* with regard to NCC receiving $23 million more. As I just stated, there is no decrease with regard to our Carnival stakeholders. Everything is well secured, and this is what they received in the last fiscal.

Mr. Des Vignes: I understand what you are saying, Minister. But the drop would tell a different story. Let me go a little further with my question. Given the circumstances this year with regard to carnival and carnival practitioners and providers, are there any guarantees that carnival practitioners and cultural performers will be paid on time in 2027?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, again, I know that you are—I do not want to use the term "new to this". But with regard to research and what exists in the public domain, and even when I sat on that side, what a former Minister would have told

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me in 2022 and 2021 when I posed that same question—there are facilities to ensure that our carnival stakeholders are paid, and those stakeholders sit currently on the NCC Board—and they are well aware of the facilities that will be put in place with regard to receiving their payment.

I am not going to sit here and say it was not an unfortunate situation that they were paid late, but it happened in the past, and it was unfortunate that it happened this year. But I could tell you there are facilities with regard to them being paid and you could have conversations with those opposite Member. But there is no decrease, thankfully. And I want to thank the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: NCC received an increase, and due to the restructuring, that is going to happen; we are projected to earn. So, there is no decrease. So, forgive me what you are seeing with respective line Items here. I just read in the public record what those bodies received, and public record, and what they reflect in their bank accounts. They receive their moneys.

Mr. Des Vignes: They receive moneys, but less based on this.

Hon. Benjamin: No, Member. If they have received less, they would have been petitioning. They received their cheques, Member. They received their moneys.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: Prizes were paid. They were paid, Member.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Benjamin: I always show up. Always.

Mr. Young SC: On time.

Hon. Benjamin: Always.

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Mr. Young SC: On time.

Mr. Chairman: All right. 59. National Academy for the Performing Arts, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, 001: General Administration, page 609. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. 01/006: Remuneration to Board Members. Minister, I note that there is an increase of some $25,000 under this line Item, as it has been the case with all the other boards. Is that the number of persons on the Boards has been expanded or the monthly remuneration has been increased?

Hon. Benjamin: We have one new member.

Mr. Romain: One?

Hon. Benjamin: One addition.

Mr. D. Romain: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 02: Goods and Services, 001: General Administration, 03, Item 001: General Administration, 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, 005: Non-Profit Institutions, 007: Households, 009: Other Transfers. 60: Southern Academy for the Performing Arts, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; this is at page 614 of the relevant volume. 001: General Administration. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister 01/006, with respect to Remuneration to Board Members, how many new board members are there on the Board of SAPA?

Hon. Benjamin: One.

Mr. Romain: Well, since taking office, how many new board members have there been?

Hon. Benjamin: We started with 10, I believe, and then we put in place one more,

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so we are at 11 on the SAPA Board. But one minute, let me just confirm. [*Minister confers with technocrat*] Yes.

Mr. Romain: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, 001: General Administration, 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, 001: General Administration, 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimate of the Development Programme* at page 218 of the relevant volume. Pages 218 to 219, inclusive. 004: Social Infrastructure, A. Culture. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, let us deal with Item 001: Museum of the City of Port of Spain/Carnival Museum. We see that in 2026 $2.5 was allocated. Is it that was none spent for Museum of the City of Port of Spain/Carnival Museum? Just verifying.

Hon. Benjamin: Correct, Member, none was spent.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, no allocation was given. Could this currently be the reason why the Carnival Museum in Port of Spain had to be closed due to lack of funding? Because none was provided to them?

Hon. Benjamin: Member, Member, Member, this is DP. This is respective to building. This is not administrative. All right, Member? So, allow me to answer now. So now that we have established that we are in DP. Now that building was loaned or given to that organization, and the organization that gifted them that building is desirous of getting back that building.

Mr. Des Vignes: Correct.

Hon. Benjamin: Hence the reasons they did not make a request with regard to

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this building line Item. When it comes to that respective organization, we had meetings with them, and they are of the view that their current location is not suitable, and I may share that same perspective with regard to where it is located right now. But we are in conversations with them and looking for some sort of suitable location. But this has nothing with regard to them not being funded by the Ministry.

11.20 a.m.

Mr. Des Vignes: But, Minister, respectfully, the newspaper article says different. The organizers hinted that—

Mr. Chairman: Member, Member—

Mr. Des Vignes:—it was because of lack of funding.

Mr. Chairman: Member, can I have your attention, please.

Hon. Benjamin: Not funding from us.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, I think perhaps the Member is belabouring under the misapprehension as to what these funds are. These funds are not for operational expenses of other institutions.

Mr. Des Vignes: I understand, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: So, the question of a closure, or that does not arise here. That is the simple point I am trying to make to you, and I think—so I do not think it makes—let me put it in a polite way, I do not think it takes us any further to entertain an argument.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, okay, Chair, I can move forward.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Des Vignes: Now, with regard to the National Museum in Port of Spain, that

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is the building that is next to the National Academy for the Performing Arts. Will this contribute to that building and the Port of Spain Museum being completed?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, just bear with me, let me just find that respective line Item and get my notes. Right. What I can tell you, that is to pay—there is a $3 million with regard to paying one of the invoices that was submitted by the respective contractor, which I believe is—UNICOM? So it is to pay the contractor UNICOM. UDeCOTT would have submitted a bill, and, of course, it is all premised on what UDeCOTT reports to us with regard to the completion of the building. But that is what was requested. So, we have a bill to that effect, to that sum.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, I want to move to Development of First Peoples. In 2025, the allocation was $2.6 million for Development for the First Peoples. Has that work been completed**?**

Mr. Chairman: Member, can I just ask you, we are on page 218, right?

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. Chair, Chair, respectfully, I am on that same Item. This Ministry—

Mr. Chairman: No, hang on a second. Would you—

Mr. Des Vignes: You want me to point—

Mr. Chairman: In my volume, the one I am reading from, it is page 218; A. Culture—

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Am I correct?

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Line Item 007.

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Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: And towards the end of it there is project number 007, and there is a note there.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: I am not seeing any figures there.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay. So that is exactly my point, Chair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: I am asking a ques—

Mr. Chairman: No, there is no—the 2025—

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, can I—

Mr. Chairman: Hang on a second, would you.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yeah, go ahead. Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: So, there are no figures here in this volume to discuss.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So, there is nothing to discuss.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, this Ministry was named something else, previously. All right. As we are looking at 2026 to 2027, and we are seeing no figures there, we are asking about the future in terms of the development for the First Peoples. Today we actually have a display from the First Peoples in the Rotunda. I think it is prudent for us to ask these questions, Chair.

Hon. Benjamin: All right. So, Member—

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, but under the relevant line Items within the relevant rules. Nobody is preventing you from doing that.

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Mr. Des Vignes: But, Chair, there is no allocation, and that is my question. How come?

Hon. Benjamin: Right. So, Member, you probably would have missed it, right? So, there is an allocation with regard to First People in the Recurrent.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: So, there is a line Item there. So, you did not ask any respective question there, right? This Item is to treat with their development programme. Unfortunately, with regard to that contractor there, he walked off the site, and an award was already given to him. So I am awaiting a report on that respective contractor, and of course, it is premised to a meeting that I do have scheduled or have to reschedule with the First People, and of course this spend is influenced by them.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: But there is a contractor that was awarded, but he left the site.

Mr. Des Vignes: Okay, thank you very much, Minister for your—

Hon. Benjamin: Do you want the name of the contractor?

Mr. Des Vignes: I do not necessarily need the name of the contractor; I just need to know that something is being done for the First People and their development. That is my only question.

Hon. Benjamin: Of course, of course, Member.

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Hon. Benjamin: The First People, with regard to all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. Chairman: Community Development, page 219; 005: Multi-Sectorial and Other Services, page 220; A. Administrative Services. Diego Martin West. Sorry?

Mr. Des Vignes: Sorry, I made a mistake. Next Item.

Mr. Chairman: Oh, so you made a mistake, so you are just waving me on—

Mr. Des Vignes: No. Chair, I am not waving, Chair, Chair. I was saying we could move forward and I was raising my hand in advance for the next Item.

Mr. Chairman: Perhaps next time, rather than waving your hand, you can vocalize it. F. Public Buildings. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. So, regarding Item 001: Restorative Works to the former Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts Building located at Jerningham Avenue, $2million was allocated, none was spent, $5million was allocated in 2027. When can we expect work to begin on this building?

Hon. Benjamin: All right. Thank you for that question, Member. I would like to update the committee and the listening public, because I know there is some interest, persons passing around the Savannah and seeing this building. I myself would like to place my interest. I worked there when I worked in the Ministry of Community Development; that building is suited with regard to my Ministry. Yes, there was a respective spend. There is a tree that we had to cut and card away from that building and, of course, the engagement of UDeCOTT. Of course, you know, sometimes submissions of invoices are late, so the respective drawdown is not reflected here. At the meeting that I had with the Ministry of Planning, this $5 million here is supposed to secure us, starting the first phase with regard to getting the Ministry or getting that building back up functioning. So, there is an intent,

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and there was a respective spend, but, of course, submission of invoices was late.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you for that thumbs up, Diego Martin West. Infrastructure Development Fund, pages 315 to 316; A. Culture; A. Community Development, page 316.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 86 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, thank you very much and thank you very much to your staff.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Benjamin: [*Inaudible*]—secretary and all the cultural fraternity. Thank you, Chair.

11.30 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Head 67: Ministry of Planning Economic Affairs and Development. Minister, are you ready?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Head 67: Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development $419,888,800.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance to make a brief opening statement. The usual five-minute rule will apply.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Members, for allowing me to be here today. Again, thanks to the hon. Prime Minister and my colleagues for all their support. The core of our direction is strengthening the connection between national priorities, strategic planning, public investment and tangible

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improvements in the lives of our citizens. Guided by these three principles, the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, our focus for fiscal '27 will be implementation and evaluation of Trinidad and Tobago's strategic priorities within the economic reorganization plan and the Strategic National Development Plan 2027–2031; strengthening programme and project implementation; improving urban and spatial planning services; advancing national statistics and evidence-based decision-making; supporting innovation and economic diversification; integrating climate resilience and environmental sustainability into development planning; and strengthening monitoring, evaluation and accountability.

Chairman, Members, for fiscal '27, the *national Public Sector Investment Programme* provides just under $4 billion to support 1,272 programmes and projects across central government, local government bodies and the Tobago House of Assembly. The Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development undertakes the responsibility to strengthen the planning, coordination and monitoring of that programme, while executing agencies remain accountable for delivering their respective projects. The Ministry will also be responsible for working with Ministries, departments and agencies to ensure alignment of the projects within the economic reorganization plan and the Strategic National Development Plan. Our role as a collaborative and guiding Ministry will ensure that projects are implemented efficiently and to the benefit of the communities that the national development priorities outline.

Mr. Chairman, the Estimates before the Committee is considered in terms of their contribution to national development and the Ministry's capacity to deliver.

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We approach that responsibility with a commitment to prudent management, cooperation across the public service and transparent accounting performance.

Again, I express my sincere gratitude to the hard-working staff of the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, as well as the leadership and teams within our agencies and statutory boards for their unwavering dedication. I also extend special thanks to the Permanent Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretaries and the heads of division whose continued professionalism and commitment remain vital to our success. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Question proposed: That Head 67 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: The said sum for Head 67: Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. For the Members, it is at page—it starts at page 338 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, that spans pages 339 to 341; 001: General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot. No?

Mr. Gonzales: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay. 003: Technical Co-operation; 004: Central Statistical Office.

Mr. Gonzales: Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Arouca/Lopinot.

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Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 03: Overtime - Monthly Paid Officers. I observed, Minister, that there has been a decrease by $103,000 from a Revised Estimate of $155,000 in fiscal year 2026, and a significant reduction to $52,000 in the current fiscal year—well, the new fiscal year that we are moving into, 2027. Can you give reason why you have such a reduction in this line Item?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: All right. The PS has advised that we have transferred some to—we vired funds to make up for last year, but this year, we are expecting to have a reduction in how we manage everything.

Mr. Gonzales: So, how many monthly-paid officers are attached to the Central Statistical Office?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The staff complement for the CSO, currently, we have a general complement in the Ministry of—

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—the permanent establishment is 167 persons. In the CSO, we have a list of 174 permanent offices.

Mr. Gonzales: 174?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: 174. But vacant offices without bodies in the CSO—sorry, 174 permanent. All right. We have a number of contracted positions as well—

Mr. Gonzales: All right.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—but the number of vacant offices—it is a total establishment of 365, and vacant offices of the 125.

Mr. Gonzales: All right. But the allocation of $52,000, would that be sufficient

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for you to cover your overtime expenses for the fiscal year 2027?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes. Because remember, we have to go and ask Cabinet to reapprove certain positions and we refill those vacancies. We have 125 vacancies right now.

Mr. Gonzales: So, at this point in time, are you saying that the $52,000 is sufficient?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: At the current establishment, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: If I point you to Sub-Item 27: Government Contribution to Health Insurance for Monthly Paid Officers, in 2026, your allocation was $350,000, with a revised allocation of $333,000, but in 2027, it—again, this is Government Contribution to Health Insurance for Monthly Paid Officers—has been reduced to $100,000, a decrease by $233,000. What is the reason for that?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Again, when those vacancies are filled, if we need additional, we will go back, but at this stage, we currently have enough to fulfil the mandate of those who are there.

Mr. Gonzales: But your spend in 2026 was $333,000?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, our spend in 2026—

Mr. Gonzales: That was your Actual spend?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: But remember, we have to go and renew certain positions to Cabinet.

Mr. Gonzales: But if your Actual spend was $333,000, why would, in 2027, you would need—or rather, a $100,000 be sufficient?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No, well, again, what we are going to do is that we currently have enough to support who is there. Once those positions are

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renewed—and as you will know, next year, we are positioning ourselves to go out on a national census, and so a lot of the positions are going to be short-term contracted positions. So, we are now going to be filling some of the current positions that we currently have. The focus is filling the short-term positions to go out in the census. So, if the positions are filled and we need additional, we will go back to mid-term.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 05: Government's Contribution to N.I.S. In fiscal 2026, you had a revised allocation of $1.4 million and 2027, it has been increased by $200,000 to $1.6 million. Can you explain what is the reason for that increase in the allocation?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Sorry. Which Head are you on?

Mr. Gonzales: 05: Government's Contributions to N.I.S.

Mr. Chairman: Page 340.

Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: 05. Sorry. The increase by $200,000, and that increase includes for acting incumbents due to the NIS rates increase, as well as positions that we will probably fill, that we have gone back for renewal.

Mr. Gonzales: So, is it because of the increase in NIS—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Increase in NIS contributions.

Mr. Gonzales:—that should take effect in January?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Thank you.

11.40 a.m.

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Mr. Chairman: Item 006: Green Fund Executing Unit. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister under Remuneration to Member of Cabinet-Appointment Committees, has the Green Fund Board been appointed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No, that Note is currently before Cabinet and awaiting approval.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, so the expectation that would be sometime this year, hopefully?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, please.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay.

Mr. Gonzales: May I ask a question?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Sure, go ahead.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, how long has the Green Funds Unit been operating without a board?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As of sometime late last year.

Mr. Gonzales: Late last year?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yeah.

Mr. Gonzales: How has that affected the operation of that unit?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, the Fund could continue to do the work, it is just that there is no board to process some of the new applications, but there is lots of work that was already approved that the Fund has been managing.

Mr. Gonzales: So obviously, during that period of time, up to this point in time, there is no Board. You do not have a board in place; the matters that require board

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approval cannot take place or have not taken place because of the absence of a board.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Those are new applications.

Mr. Gonzales: Those are new—and how many applications?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: How many new applications?

Mr. Gonzales: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: None that has come to my attention.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Would you be able to say how many applications are before the Board, or rather awaiting the appointment of a board for approval?

Mr. Gonzales: Well, as I said, none that have come to my attention at this time, so I cannot answer that question. But currently, the persons who are there will obviously need to focus on managing the existing obligation that the Fund would have approved.

Mr. Gonzales: And how soon do you expect to have this matter resolved?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As I would have indicated to the Member for Arima, that Note is before Cabinet and waiting for Cabinet approval.

Mr. Chairman: 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Can the Minister indicate whether this unit is actually operational? Is it fully staffed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It is operational. Currently, we have 11 positions filled, but there are 29 vacant positions, 14 with bodies and 15 without bodies.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And is the expectation that you are going to fill those outstanding positions this year?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, please.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 342 to 346. 001: General Administration.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: Yes?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Sorry, I did have my hand up as it relates to 014: Environment Policy and Planning Division. That is the last item.

Mr. Chairman: That is 009?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes, please. Can I ask a question?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Chairman. Minister, can I ask whether that board has been appointed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Again, that is before Cabinet to be appointed.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Can I ask when that board expired?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: That board would have expired late 2025.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And the expectation as well is that it should be appointed this year?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, please.

Mr. Chairman: 02: Goods and Services, 001 General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 22: Short-Term Employment. In 2025, the actual allocation was $7.5 million, with a Revised Estimate down to $4 million. Or rather, your allocation in 2026 was $4 million. Your revised allocation was $9.6 million, quite a significant increase in your

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revised allocation. But yet, in 2027, it is back down to $5 million, a decrease of $4.6 million. What is the reason for that?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: A lot of the positions were filled, and therefore, those who were on contract were put in permanent positions.

Mr. Gonzales: So how many of those positions who may have moved from short-term employment into a permanent position? Well, I assume either permanent or three-year contract.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Or contract.

Mr. Gonzales: Yes. How many of those persons?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, currently there are 84 contract positions filled. We still have 85 persons in short-term employment.

Hon. Members.: 85 persons?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: And those 84 contracts or contract positions that were filled, they were filled—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: For three years.

Mr. Gonzales:—during the year 2026?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely.

Mr. Gonzales: And how many do you intend to fill in 2027?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Once again, positions have been approved by Cabinet. We can move, as you know, it has to be approved by Cabinet if we move from short-term to long-term.

Mr. Gonzales: So those positions have not yet been approved by Cabinet?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Some have gone to Cabinet, and some we are still waiting

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for PMCD's approval.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Do you have an idea as to how many are awaiting PMCD's approval? Because normally the PMCD—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The big one for PMCD is actually the IT department. They have been restructured, and so they are awaiting PMCD's approval.

Mr. Gonzales: So how many?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: That would encapsule, let me give you a precise figure, 10 persons in the first instance.

Mr. Gonzales: Ten persons in the first instance, and what are their positions?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I will provide the details. It will be from the director coming all the way down to technical persons, people who are to manage licenses, all the technical requirements for an IT department.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 002: Library Service Unit; 003: Technical Cooperation; 004: Central Statistical Office, Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, under Sub-Item 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage. In 2026, your revised allocation for this very important Head was $17.3 million. In 2027, it has gone downwards to $15.3 million, right. A decrease by $2 million. What is the reason for this?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The Permanent Secretary was able to find cheaper storage accommodation. So, we were able to reduce our overall order.

Mr. Gonzales: So, you have identified a cheaper storage location?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Identified and accepted and moved into.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, and where is that?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: In Aranguez, I think.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, has the Government entered into a lease arrangement already?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It will be done in this fiscal.

Mr. Gonzales: It will be done—and does this Item, the $15.3 million dollars until relocation expenses.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: For storage.

Mr. Gonzales: For storage?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yeah.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, thank you and sorry, my final question. Is it a five-year lease or three, at least?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: He is finalizing the negotiations as we speak.

Mr. Gonzales: What is that?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: He is finalizing the—

Mr. Gonzales: Or so the negotiation is still ongoing?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Still ongoing, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: When do you expect that negotiation to be completed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Within this fiscal.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you. But even though the negotiation is still going on—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: We were able to start to pack up and move some stuff into the basement in the Ministry of Finance in preparation for moving across.

Mr. Gonzales: But according to you, if negotiations are still going on, how sure are you that the lease is going to be cheaper than the previous years?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Because we are using some of the facilities in the

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Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Gonzales: You are using—?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The basement in the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Chairman: 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division; 006: Green Fund Executing Unit; 008—

Mr. Gonzales: Just now. Sorry, Chair. I know you are going a bit fast.

Mr. Chairman: No.

Mr. Gonzales: At 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division. I just have a question there.

11.50 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Do you know I havegone to the Green Fund Executing Unit, and I was about to call Project Planning, and, of course, we were going to—

Mr. Gonzales: It is right above, Chair, and it is just one question I have on one.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I will allow you one question, but I am not going to permit—

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, 23: Fees

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Sorry, say that again.

Mr. Gonzales: 23—

Mr. Chairman: At page 344, 02

Mr. Gonzales:—Urban and Regional Planning Division.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Sub-Item 23: Fees. Your 2027 allocation is $5.4million. Can you tell us what type of fees you expect to pay with this allocation?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: They are more for software licences and upgrades, AMS

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fees for perpetual term licensing, and permitting enterprise-wide licences for the DevelopTT platform.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. And that allocation will be sufficient to meet all of your outstanding commitments for 2027?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Item 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division; 009: Environmental Policy and Planning Division. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister, as it relates to 009/05/16: Contract Employment. How many bodies are employed here in the Environmental Policy and Planning Division?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Currently, there are no officers employed on fixed-term contracts in the Division. In order to maintain, there are 13 persons on short-term contracts, and there are currently six vacant positions on the existing establishment.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay. Let me get that again, you said there are no persons employed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No, no. I am saying that we are on fixed long-term contracts with—we have gone back—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Or fixed long-term with six positions?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, we have gone back for renewal of the positions.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, fine. So that—and the expectation is, because that is one of the most important units to fill the existing six positions.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Have they been advertised yet?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, we are waiting for approval—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Approval?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—for the positions to be extended.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, fine.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 347 to 349; 001: General Administration—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Sorry, my hand was up. In Item 003/001/02, as it relates to Minor Equipment, Minister, why would there be a decrease? I mean, that is always one of the biggest challenges for the Ministry, equipment. Is it that they all now—all equipment is needed?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I am advised that we have—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: They have equipment?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: We have equipment.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Alright. That is good to hear.

Mr. Chairman: Item 001: General Administration; 002: Library Service Unit; 003: Technical Co-operation; 004: Central Statistical Office; 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yeah, my same question. Will that—for Urban and Regional Planning, again, $25,000decrease. Is it also that that unit has all the equipment that is needed as well?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, I think what the PS is advising is that there was a push to make sure that everybody is fully kitted out. So, I think we are in a good position, and therefore, I am not anticipating any major requests for new equipment.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, fine.

Mr. Chairman: Item 006: Green Fund Executing Unit; 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division; 009: Environmental Policy and Planning Division. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 349 to 352; 001: Regional Bodies; 002: Commonwealth Bodies; 003: United Nations Organisations; 004: International Bodies; 005: Non-profit Institutions; 006: Educational Institutions; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, I observed that at 03: Provision of an Annual Subvention for the International Coastal Clean Up Activities in Trinidad and Tobago. You did not have an allocation in 2026; however, I am seeing a provision in the sum of $121,000. It is noted as an increase, not really an increase because we had nothing in 2026, but what do you plan to do in fiscal year 2027 with this allocation?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I think we were asked to change the line Item so that it came from the EPPD. So, it is traditionally under EPPD, and we were asked to change the line Item. So that is why it is showing up as a new line Item here.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: But there has been provision before.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. So—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: And it is an annual coastal cleanup.

Mr. Gonzales: But you have an allocation of $121,000here.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: What do you plan to do?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As you would have seen it happening in September, we

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do a national coastal cleanup every year. Traditionally, you will highlight the one on the Foreshore, which I will normally participate in. But it is supported by other international bodies as well. So, this is just the Ministry's contribution. That, when we did it in September, it was one of 16 sites. Our site was focused on the Foreshore.

Mr. Gonzales: I know. So how many sites do you plan to—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It is normally about 16 sites across the country from Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Gonzales: But do you expect to complete 16 sites with $121,000?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, because we did in September, about a few weeks ago.

Mr. Gonzales: Have those sites been identified already?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It was completed in September of 2026, and it will be September 2027.

Mr. Gonzales: So, in September2027, how many sites?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It was 16 sites, I think, in 2026, done with this 121.

Mr. Gonzales: So, the $121,000allocation is not money that you intend to spend, that you would want to spend in 2027?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I am saying we spent—that is what it cost us in fiscal 2026, and we anticipate it will cost us the same in fiscal 2027.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 010: Other Transfers Abroad. Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards & Similar Bodies; Item 004: Statutory Boards at page 352. Arima.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: We are going to a different book. Hon. Members, we now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. These Items are to be found between pages 483 and 484 of the relevant volume. We go to 02- Institute of Marine Affairs. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration at page 483.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: We are on the Institute of Marine Affairs. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Item 16: Contract Employment. Can the Minister indicate how many positions exist under this and whether there are any additional positions that are expected to be created by the Ministry?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: One minute, please. Could you repeat the question, please, Member?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Item 16, increased $465,000. I was just asking if that means you are creating any additional positions, and how many contract positions does that cater for?

12.00 noon

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I am advised that the increase in allocation will facilitate the recruitment of key management positions currently vacant. It is corporate secretary; human resource manager is acting, and the manager for IC is acting.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay. Does that mean that for the previous year '26, those positions were not filled?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: They were acting.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Acting? Okay.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes. So, we intend to fill those positions.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Minister, how many persons do you have on short-term employment in the IMA, the Institute of Marine Affairs? How many persons do you have on short-term employment?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I will have to get the exact number for you. I do not want to—hold a minute, let me just check the HR records here. [*Minister confers with technocrats*] I do not have it. I will get it to you in writing, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Oh, you do not have the information?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Not the exact number of persons on short-term—

Mr. Gonzales: Short-term.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—employment.

Mr. Gonzales: Now, at Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment, you do not have an allocation. And my simple question to you is that if you have persons on short-term, why do you not have an allocation?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I am not aware that there are short-term persons at the IMA.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I think we have some people in acting positions, we are trying to get them—the recruitment exercises have started in terms of getting them regularized but I am not aware that there are short-term persons. That is probably

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the reason I am not seeing the figure here.

Mr. Gonzales: So, is it that the persons that you have—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Are all on contracted positions.

Mr. Gonzales: They are all contracted positions, and all those positions are within the individual terms of their contracts?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Right. The two short-term appointments that I am aware of, that are waiting, that is the acting director.

Mr. Gonzales: Is the?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The director. The director position is on a short-term awaiting appointment of a board to be firmly regularized. That is the only one that I am aware of.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. But if you do not have a provision for short-term, how is the director being paid?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Because the director is being paid on—she is substantive. But her contract is up for renewal.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases. 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we shall now move to the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme* at page 156. Consolidated Fund, Item 001: Pre-Investment. L. Line Ministries/Government Agencies. 004: Social Infrastructure, page 157. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Page 156.

Mr. Chairman: 156?

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes. That is the first one you called, right? L. 003: Line Ministries?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: I had my hand up. That is Seismic Microzonaation Studies. Chairman, may I ask my question?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. What is the expected scope of work to be conducted for this period and the reason for the increase?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. The Seismic Microznation of T&T project is approximately 90 per cent complete. The completion of the seismic measurement in eight urban areas: Port of Spain, San Fernando, south-west Tobago, Diego Martin, Barataria/San Juan, Couva, Chaguanas and Curepe. Completion of mapping for Couva, south-west Tobago, Barataria/San Juan and Couva has been agreed to facilitate these technical reports. The final report was submitted in 2023 for south-west Tobago. Completion of the technical report for Barataria/San Juan, Couva data collection was completed, Chaguanas was completed, Curepe, Arima, St. Augustine, Tunapuna completed 2025. And again, part of it is to be completed by the end of 2026. Arima commenced its project in 2026, and in fiscal '26/'27, the following is proposed.

The completion of data collection and mapping of Arima, we have to enact a committee for five years in order to complete the essential work for the TSA under the MOU and a technical steering committee to operationalized inclusive of the TCPD and Tobago Emergency Management Authority. So, we are trying to complete—a lot of the mapping has been completed. We now have to put all the

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administrative things in place in order to complete all the processes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Minister, what is the total cost of this project and the possible completion date?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, the stakeholder engagement, as you know, commenced, and we hope to complete the stakeholder engagement by the end of this calendar year, but I will have to get a more updated project schedule and get it to you. But I do not have a complete schedule at this time, but we hope to complete the stakeholder engagement in this year, and we are finishing some of the mapping by the end of this calendar year, beginning the first quarter of fiscal 2027.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Chair, are we now at 004: Social Infrastructure? Just want to make sure that I am—

Mr. Chairman: Arima asked—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: I am finished on that Item.

Mr. Chairman:—is finished, but I think Laventille East/Morvant has one follow-up question on that. We will go to that right after. Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. L. 003, at Seismic Studies, could the Minister advise if this study took into consideration the revitalization blueprint that was announced by the Government?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No. So, this study was commenced before we came into office.

Mr. Birchwood: Before?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yeah.

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Mr. Birchwood: Okay. So is there—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, it would not have incorporated—sorry, I cannot see you because I am being blocked—

Mr. Birchwood: [*Laughter*] No problem, I am hearing you.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, it would not have incorporated new things coming in after the study commenced.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. So that would be the intention moving forward, right?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, no. Because, again, it was already procured given certain terms and conditions, so to amend that, we would have to go back, and that would derail the current mapping of the project.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay, okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Item 004: Social Infrastructure. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Minister, Sub-Item 057: Population and Housing Census: Conduct of the 2027 Population and Housing Census. You have a significant allocation of $50 million. All right, the revised allocation in 2026, from an original allocation of $26 million, it went down to $20 million, and now you have a significant increase of $50 million. What is the status of that census?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The pilot project is to be launched on Monday coming.

Mr. Gonzales: The pilot project is to be launched on Monday?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: On Monday.

Mr. Gonzales: All right.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Next Monday. As you know, the pilot project has to take place first before you can move—you have to do the pilot, you have to have a three-month review of the pilot, and then the first census is commenced on or

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before the second quarter of 2027.

Mr. Gonzales: How long is the pilot project expected to last?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The pilot project is, I think, three months.

Mr. Gonzales: Three months? Now, I am seeing in 2026 your revised allocation is $20 million. What did you do with that $20 million? If you are now going into a pilot project.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, Member, to do the census, you have to do the full remuneration, all the questionnaires. You have to get in all the experts to review all of that. That was done together with the UNDP and other technical experts. Once that is completed, then you have to create and build—it is going to be done on a tablet. We have to procure all the equipment, train the enumerators, hire persons to go out for the pilot and next year—that preparation took a lot of time because you have to make sure and get the questionnaire right, and we are doing it both in English and in Spanish. So, a lot of that work was done in 20—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, sorry.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah, focus.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: That work was done in the last fiscal, so the new fiscal is to launch the full census.

Mr. Gonzales: Do you have a special project unit being funded under this allocation to manage this very important project in Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, we do have some consultants that are supported by the IDB, Inter-American Development Bank—

Mr. Gonzales: By the IDB?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes. That is supporting the CSO in achieving this.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. How many persons have you employed to do this or execute this very important census in Trinidad and Tobago?

12.10 p.m.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Together with the Director of the CSO and his other—we have brought in, I think—so we have—no, this is the amount in the census—no, how many persons brought on to the project? This specific project itself.

Mr. Gonzales: To execute the census.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, we do have a project coordinator that is given to us by the IBD.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: We are working together with all the United Nations agencies, together with UNDP, and we have brought in two additional consultants to work with them in order to create the team moving forward.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah, but how many persons do you plan or have you already employed to do this census in this country?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, the pilot project will require about 39 persons. Thirty-nine persons for the pilot, but the full census next year would require about 3,000 persons.

Mr. Gonzales: Three thousand persons. Have you already recruited the 39 persons?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No, no. We have to go back to Cabinet once the pilot is completed in order to get the Cabinet's approval to move ahead with the full census.

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Mr. Gonzales: The $50million that you have here, would that be utilized to also pay persons who are employed—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Correct.

Mr. Gonzales:—in this critical project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, you mean for the pilot project.

Mr. Gonzales: The 39 persons that you have to employ.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes. So, it will be part of that and also to pay for what is to come in 2027.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. How do you plan to recruit? What recruitment process do you plan to engage in to get the 39 persons?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Those 39 persons were recruited earlier this year and they are all short-term employment.

Mr. Gonzales: They are on short-term.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: They are on short-term.

Mr. Gonzales: And do you plan to move them into contract positions?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No. Because the persons are recruited for the census. And the census, as you know, is specific to periods.

Mr. Gonzales: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, the national census is a six-month operation, and so I do not want to hire persons and have them around. My recommendation to the team is that we hire persons specific to the job that they are being asked to do.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. And what process did you utilize to engage those persons on short-term?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It was advertised in the papers.

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Mr. Gonzales: And the 3,000 persons that you plan to recruit?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: It would be advertised as—

Mr. Gonzales: You plan to advertise that openly?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: There would be a national recruitment process.

Mr. Gonzales: Is that process intended to—or rather, do you expect that process to start in 2027?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As I have indicated before, once the pilot is completed, I will take the report to Cabinet, and once Cabinet approves, then we will move ahead with everything else.

Mr. Gonzales: And my final question—because this is a very important matter.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Extremely important.

Mr. Gonzales: You are talking about going out and gathering information, data, going into people's homes in communities—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales:—in gated communities and communities that are not gated. How does your Ministry plan to engage the population from a PR or sensitization perspective as you move closer towards launching the pilot project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, I am sure you would have seen that the Ministry has already begun to sensitize the population. I have been doing so for the last few months as well, as Minister with the responsibility for planning. We have continuously been on a PR campaign, talking about the census to come, and we will continue to do so with the approval of Cabinet.

Mr. Gonzales: And the $50 million in the allocation, are you satisfied that it is going to be sufficient for you to start your pilot project and do what you are

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supposed to do in the 2027 fiscal year?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Let me be clear. The pilot starts now. The full census takes place in 2027, but then, we will also have an allocation in 2028, or will have to have an allocation in 2028 to deal with the analysis of the census. So, the census itself would take roughly about the next two and a half years.

Mr. Gonzales: What was the size of the loan that you signed with the IDB to fund this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: This is being funded with the good grace of the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Gonzales: So, not the IDB?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No.

Mr. Gonzales: So, the IDB is not funding this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No, no. The IDB is providing technical expertise.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman, I am going on to the next Item: 061—same 004/06/061—last Item on the page.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Minister, could you tell us what really is the 2027 Business Census, and what is the expected outcome of that census?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Of course. Thank you. The main objective is to establish a comprehensive and reliable database of businesses operating within Trinidad and Tobago. We conduct the business census to provide a statistical foundation for understanding the business environment and monitoring economic development in Trinidad and Tobago.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And could you give us an idea of the start and end time of this?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, I am hopeful that once we have—

[*Device goes off*]

Mr. Chairman: Whoever has that phone, can you go outside and turn it off, please?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: They cannot turn it off.

Hon. Member: Tobago.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Sorry, my apologies. Once we complete the population census—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—the intention is to move ahead to do a business census and one in the agri-sector as well.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay. And so that you complete the population, and then after you start the business?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Right. Because what we want to do is to have all the aggregated data over the course of calendar 2027.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And I assume to avoid some duplications. So, would you also utilize—probably, there are some things in the census—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson:—that would assist in terms of the business.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely. And possibly, it will avoid us having to retrain persons who are currently in the field.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

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Mr. Chairman: A. Culture. Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. Minister, 013/A. Culture; 007: Development of the Steel Pan Manufacturing Sector, the estimated cost is $6million and there was an allocation in 2026. Could you tell us what would have been done in 2026? Given the increased allocation, could you tell us a breakdown of exactly what the activities are? Could you tell us whether this would include any sort of research and training? How many manufacturers are expected to benefit? And, of course, what is the expected economic return, and is there any consultation with the steel band movement on this?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, that is what this allocation is for. It is to do those consultations—[*Inaudible*]—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay. It is consultation.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—and to put a framework in place. So, there is no specific design in mind. This is just simply to create the process by which you can get to a suggested outcome.

Mr. Chairman: 005: Multi-Sectorial and Other Services. Hon. Members, Item 005: Multi-Sectorial and Other Services spans six pages. Therefore, I would also announce the project groups. C. Caribbean Industrial Research Institute, page159. Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. 010: Implementation of Critical Infrastructure Works at CARIRI Facilities. Minister, could you indicate exactly what that is?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I am advised that similar to the prior—CARIRI seeks to upgrade existing facilities. Sufficient work has been completed in fiscal year 2026,

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and in fiscal year 2027, with pavers, also to be addressed in preparation for a marketing plan and business case for promotional purposes. Fiscal year 2027 funding was used for purchase of equipment for the rubber crumb machine, as well as infrastructure work to accommodate the machine.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, can I also ask the Minister, Minister, what is the Aquifer—012—let me ask 001 first. The Development of the Downstream, Value-Added Products for Rubber Crumbs, that is a new project, so could you tell us what the benefits of that would be? And , Chairman, if you would allow me as well—because 012, which is the next one—so I am also asking what the Aquifer Water Quality Assessment and Remedial Action Plan for Trinidad is. If you can give us those—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Of course.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And the third one being the Food Enterprise Accelerator Programme.

12.20 p.m.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. As you know, CARIRI continues to support a number of development initiatives, especially in the SME sector. But the rubber crumb project machine that is housed currently at UTT South Campus—and earlier on this year we did a distribution of the rubber crumb. So while CARIRI would have disintegrated the tires into rubber crumb, what they have endeavoured to do is to give that crumb to different manufacturers with the expectation that they would develop products from it, so, for example, value-added rubber crumb-based products such as tiles, mats, pavers, even road paving. So the rubber crumb product itself, and that development of the downstream value added, is to work

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with manufacturers to develop additional products that can be used from the rubber crumb, and there are other places where they use it for tiles, roof tiles, and other types of products.

In terms of the Aquifer, this is a three-year project totaling $3.2 million. The objective is to conduct a comprehensive assessment, to identify contamination hotspots, evaluate risk, and develop appropriate remedial measures. So it would be used to procure items of equipment such as a mass spectrometry graph, sampling device, and geographic information, a GIS modelling software system.

For Food Enterprise Accelerator Programme. This is a two-year project, cost of $1.9 million. The Food Enterprise Accelerator Programme will strengthen Trinidad Tobago's food processing sector by equipping 30 medium and small enterprises. Entrepreneurs with technical training, processing facilities, laboratory testing, regulatory guidance, business development support. The primary objective is to prepare food entrepreneurs to become more competitive, sustainable, and resilient through the use of modern business tools.

Mr. Chairman: Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: I am waiting. I think it is under Institute of Marine Affairs. So when you get there.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. D. Chaguaramas Area Development; F. Institute of Marine Affairs. Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister, Institute of Marine Affairs, F. 001. Could you tell us what is the status of this project? There was an Estimate of just about $1.4 million, then a Revised Estimate, and now there is an allocation of $1.3 million. Having regard to the challenges that existed in Tobago

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and in Trinidad from time to time, could you give us the status of the project and, of course, what proportion of this relates to equipment, software, training, and personnel, and what is the expected date of the completion of this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Currently, it was slowed down a little bit because they did not have a procurement supervisor. But as you know, the goal of the project is to maintain a national and regional fingerprinting database, based on liquid hydrocarbons from oils, gas, and petrochemicals operations, imported and exported crude oil. So, currently, high-solution availability fail-over cluster servers, including, support and implementation services and desktop equipment, we are in the process of still procuring some of those things. Network infrastructure—supporting network infrastructure, routers and servers, including configuration and structured cabling. So I am hoping that we can make substantive progress during the course of fiscal '27 and have these matters completed?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: A. Administrative Services.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Mr. Chairman, sorry, on the next page, I had my hand up, which is the Upgrade of the Institute of Marine Affairs. Could you tell us whether this is—are the upgrades related to hardware, software of the IMS network infrastructure, and could you tell us what is the proposed scope of works for 2027? And of course, how would this enhance the research capability of the Institute of Marine Affairs?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. Phase one, I think, was completed, which is the needs analysis. Phase two is the development of the PMSI web-based

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application and the rollout of the MDA. So this is fairly well advanced. Now we have to move to again to the procurement phase.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: A. Administrative Services. Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I notice, Minister, under A. 049: Integrated Public Management Information System, that there is an increase of almost $4 million. Could you tell us what is the projected activity in fiscal 2027 that would account for that massive increase from $2.5 million to $6 million.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. Because they would have conducted a needs analysis and gotten a more accurate figure as to what they would require in terms of application, software, or equipment. Hence, the reason why it is a more accurate restating of the needs for fiscal '27 as they move towards procurement.

Mr. Scotland SC: So it is not anything new, it is just a reassessment of how much the cost will be?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Precisely.

Mr. Scotland SC: That is a lot of increase there, Minister. Chairman, when you go down to 111 and 112 and 113, I have questions, but I do not know if the hon. Leader of the Opposition—

Mr. Chairman: No, we are under this, so you can ask your questions.

Mr. Scotland SC: I am now on 103: Strategic National Development Plan. This has gone from an Estimate of $500,000 in 2026 to a Revised Estimate of $100,000 in 2026, and now to a whooping $4.9 million in 2027. What has accounted for that exorbitant increase?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, as you know, the National Strategic Development Plan is an important part of the planning process for both economic as well as strategic national development planning. So, while Cabinet would have approved an economic reorganization plan, we now have to move to the next stage of developing a plan for 2027-2031 that all the agencies can use, including international agencies, rating agencies. Hence, the reason why we are moving into a higher state of public consultation and various stakeholder engagements, getting experts on board in order to be able to complete a plan that will be fully fleshed out.

Mr. Scotland SC: And could you tell us then, if you cannot now in writing, the breakdown of how this massive increase is expected to be disbursed, and the entities involved?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: The entities involved—no, there will not be entities involved. So the national strategic plan will articulate the national development agenda, and will serve as a reference framework for Ministries, departments, agencies, and key stakeholders. So what we would do is align national initiatives with international and regional commitments and climate resilient priorities, build institutional capacity for strategic foresight, policy analysis, and results-based management, which will assist in strategic resource allocation, and be supported by a monitoring framework through the Development National Performance Framework.

So the project received covering approval of Cabinet in 2026, where we agreed to adopt five strategic pillars based on the SNDP. So additional human resource support will be brought on board in the project and will be supported by

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significant stakeholder engagement that will be conducted over the fiscal '27. So the funds would be used to support those initiatives. So in fiscal 2027, funds will be expected to bring on consultants, and with the support of IDB and the World Bank, and plan hosting of stakeholder consultations, printing and publishing of materials and supporting development initiatives across the entire public sector.

Mr. Scotland SC: Okay. Mr. Chair, at 112, the Establishment of the National Planning Authority, which was there since 2025, I notice that there is a decrease. My question to you under this Head is whether the board of this authority has been established as yet, and if not, when will it be established?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So, the path has to be fully promulgated—

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—and that has not happened as yet, but it will happen in this fiscal.

12.30 p.m.

Mr. Scotland SC: And is that accounted for why nothing has been done with this, nothing at all?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: We cannot move forward until the path is fully promulgated.

Mr. Scotland SC: My final question to you under this is 113: Implementation of an ArcGIS Enterprise Solution at TCPD. There is a massive increase from $600,000 in fiscal 2026, to $2.170 million in 2027. What has accounted for this increase, firstly?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, two things. One is that in fiscal '26, what we were able to accomplish was the initiative of a new procurement cycle for the

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consultancy, for the implementation of the Enterprise Solution in TCPD. But in '27, we are continuing the procurement process to get the consulting services and pay for the annual maintenance fees and servers, desktop licences, advanced training for the use of the system, as well as to procure different types of protectors and hardware. Because there were delays in the procurement process, we are trying to complete all of it now, including licences and everything else that we are going to do.

Mr. Scotland SC: Having now—and I will use a neutral word—the word I want to really use is "gutted", I will use a neutral word—adjusted the OPR, what checks and balances would be put in place for this procurement process now that the real teeth of the OPR have been extracted from its mouth?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Under the existing OPR that continues to be alive and well, we will continue to follow proper procurement processes and rigorous procurement initiatives, led by the Permanent Secretary and his team.

Mr. Scotland SC: Including projects for under $2 million, because I see that this is at the cusp of $2 million? It is 2.170, it could easily just go down with the help of—

Madam Chairman: Alright. That is just speculative now, come on.

Mr. Scotland SC: Well, will there still be—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: There still will be the integrity of my Permanent Secretary and his team will continue to remain intact by following rigorous procedures.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: These are my questions, Mr. Chairman.

Madam Chairman: Member for Arima.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Minister, there are two training programmes—and, Mr. Chairman, if you could allow me just for the purposes of convenience just to link them, so I would not have to call the two Items; 067, there is training, and also 080. Mr. Chairman, can I be allowed to ask—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Chairman: Yeah, I think you could ask one question on that.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thanks. Sure. You have an increase of $3 million and then you have the $800,000, could you just give us an idea as to what is the expectation of the training in the Ministry, and of course how would that benefit both the Ministry and the country?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. As you would know, the PPRD is an important unit.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: One of the things that we would like to do, given where we are focused as well in terms of the PPP, and the different types of arrangements for projects, it would be important to get PPRD staff fully au courant with different types of funding strategies, especially even though we have a cash accounting system. A lot of these are accrual-based and span multiple years. So one of the areas that the PPRD staff has identified is the need to be able to become more familiar in order to monitor projects across the public service, because, again, we have over 1,000 projects, and more to come, especially with the revitalization and other strategies. So that the staff would be fully equipped to deal with some, and to be able to accurately account to the Ministry of Finance for the performance of some of these projects.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, can I ask on

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086, which is ICT Solutions Infrastructure Programme. So, Minister, that is originally $3 million and a Revised of $3 million, and it is now just about $5.4 million. So could you tell us the proposed scope of works and what specific ICT assets or systems will be procured, and, of course, what are the likely benefits, and would there be any cybersecurity enhancement for this particular project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, I think that is precisely so. It is required to support the Ministry's expanded ICT infrastructure, cybersecurity and digital transformation. Additional funding will facilitate the replacement of the servers, renew critical software licences, strengthen network security, backup recovery capabilities, and, of course, implementation of a procurement information management system.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, can I now ask as it relates to same Head, 103: Strategic National Development Plan. Minister, could you give us some particulars on that, as there was an original Estimate of $500,000, then down to $100,000, and it is now $4.9 million?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So the draft concept was approved by Cabinet, and now we are about to fully initiate on the planning process, which will include bringing consultants on board, doing stakeholder consultation across various parties.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. One last Item on that, which is the Establishment of the Urban and Regional Planners Council (TCPD). Minister, could you tell us what is the status of that?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: [*Minister consults with technocrat*] It is before Cabinet at this time.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And the expectation is for a favourable response?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes. We are waiting on a—but, again, we are also focused on getting the **path** fully promulgated as well.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Mr. Chairman, on the next page, are we on—

Madam Chairman: Yeah. I think for Port of Spain South and Laventille East/Morvant—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Go right ahead. Sure.

Mr. Scotland SC: I can give way.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: No, no, you can go right ahead, that is fine.

Madam Chairman: We are still on this?

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes. I am on Item 120: Establishment of the Economic Reorganization Plan (ERP) Project Executing Team. I did not see that in the budget, hon. Minister. Hon. Minister, this is a new project, is it not so?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes.

Mr. Scotland SC: Could you tell us, as a new project, what are the objectives of this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Part of it is to support the revitalization strategy.

Mr. Scotland SC: Can you provide the Parliament with the scope of this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Again, what this project is designed to do is in light of where we are—so there are two things happening at this time; one is the review of the revitalization strategy, vis-à-vis, the procurement cycle, and, secondly, the specific support will be dependent on the prioritization of projects, specific industries, and so on. So it is difficult to talk about it in isolation. It is going to be done in support of the work across the public service.

Mr. Scotland SC: But seeing the amount of money involved, $5 million is

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nothing to be scoffed at.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: This is what was appropriated.

Mr. Scotland SC: Could you then provide us, at least, with something in writing as it relates to the scope of this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, as I have just explained, the scope is to support the revitalization strategy and the economic roll-out of that strategy. That would be dependent on a number of assets that I do not have information on at this time.

Mr. Scotland SC: What about employment on this project, how many persons will be employed on this project?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: That has not been fully scoped out as it? So this is a provision. It is an Estimate.

Mr. Scotland SC: Alright. Thank you.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: I just have one last Item on that, which is to ask the Minister, what is the status of the Outfitting of the EMA's Offices for the Differently Abled, which is the last Item, 026? No, sorry, you would have to announce that, Foreign and Technical Assistance. My apologies. The last Item on the page, on 162.

Madam Chairman: That is under F.?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes.

Madam Chairman: So, Foreign and Technical Assistance, F. Public Buildings.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. Minister, could you give us the status on 026, which is the Outfitting of the EMA's Offices for the Differently Abled? I know that is a project that we have been trying to do for the longest while. Any idea on what is the status of it?

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Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: So my information is that the work at the EMA north office was completed. I do not have any additional information, but I think it was completed, the EMA north office.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay. Thanks.

Madam Chairman: B. Administration. Infrastructure Development Fund, page 284. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; F. Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 67 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: We will then move now to Head 65.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Chairman: Minister, thank you very much to you and your staff. Sorry to have brought you out—the staff out on a Saturday, but—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Members. Thank you, colleagues.

Madam Chairman:—it is the luck of the draw sometimes. Thank you very much.

12.40p.m.

[DR. ALI *in the Chair*]

Head 65: Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs $348,066,200.

Madam Chairman: I now invite the Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to make a brief opening statement, not exceeding five minutes.

Hon. Sobers: Madam Chairman, Members, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this meeting of the Standing Finance Committee for the fiscal year 2027 on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. This administration places an important role upon the shoulders of the Ministry of

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Foreign and CARICOM Affairs in making Trinidad and Tobago safer, stronger and more prosperous via engagement bilaterally and multilaterally at headquarters through its 17 diplomatic missions and three consulates general.

Madam Chairman, no other government in the history of Trinidad and Tobago has leveraged its foreign policy in such a short space of time to achieve tangible results for the people of Trinidad. The most recent poignant example in fiscal 2026 was the election of Trinidad and Tobago to the United Nations Security Council after over 40 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Sobers: More historically, since coming into office 15 months ago, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, through the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, has:

- Successfully hosted several high-level visits and bilateral meetings to advance this country's commercial interests;
- Elevated this country's relationship with the world's most powerful economy, and the country's largest trading partner, the United States of America, through participation in the Shield of the Americas and Counter Cartel Coalition;
- Advocated and ensured that this country's interests were advanced and actively pursued in CARICOM to strengthen the governance of the community;
- Built a strong working partnership with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela;
- Secured the relevant OFAC licences from the United States of America to

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allow this country to engage with multinational companies and bordering countries;

- Obtained grant funding of over TT $150 million;
- Actively pursued new trade relationships between Trinidad and Tobago and South America with respect to Mercosur; and
- Built new strategic partnerships with several countries, including those in the Middle East, such as the United Arab Emirates, where in a couple of months, we shall expand this country's diplomatic footprint to that part of the world for the first time since independence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Sobers: Madam Chairman, I take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Ministry at headquarters and at the overseas missions, who continue to offer yeoman service to this country by continually raising the flag of Trinidad and Tobago high, through promoting our country's interests. They do so tirelessly in an ever-increasing volatile and dynamic global environment. For their efforts, I express sincere appreciation. Madam Chairman, I thank you.

Question proposed: That Head 65 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, the sum of $348,066,200 for Head 65: Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, pages 332 to 337. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Member for Arima.

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Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you kindly, Madam Chairman. Minister, the increase of $25.6 million, Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, could you indicate what accounts for that increase? Could you tell us what is salaries and what is COLA? Could you also, at the same time, indicate how many vacant positions are expected, if any, to be filled? And how many persons are being catered for, as it relates to this increase?

Hon. Sobers: Thank you, hon. Members, for your question. The increase is provisional to fund, primarily, arrears from 2013—2019 at the 40 per cent cash payment estimated at 23.5 million. The arrears would also cover some of the SRC recommendations to five officers who would—they have already left post. Some of them being heads of missions, others not so disposed. That came up to an outstanding sum of $1.6 million. The established positions currently at the Ministry: total number of established offices would be 270; number of filled positions, permanent officers would be 120; number of vacant offices, 150; number of vacant offices with bodies, 91; number of vacant offices without bodies, 58. Contract employment: total number of contract positions,107, number of filled positions, 66, number of vacant positions, 41.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Madam Chairman, my next Item would be overseas. So, I do not know if anybody has anything else before.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain North/ St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Minister, 01/001/line Item 28. Minister, Remuneration to Cabinet

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Appointed Representatives For Trinidad and Tobago. There was an Estimate of $50,000 at the start of 2026. You have a Revised of $217,000. I see that—out of that $217,000, how much was spent?

Hon. Sobers: Member, the Actual expenditure actually was a tad bit more, which catered for the appointment of three persons who came on as sports ambassadors and cultural ambassadors. Their remuneration package was set at $21,000 a month, each. Hence the reason for the increase in that figure for this year.

12.50 p.m.

Mr. Young SC: And that would be prorated for the number of months that they would have served under the last fiscal.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Because I assume they were not appointed at the start.

Hon. Sobers: No.

Mr. Young SC: And is that million-dollar increase for this fiscal now, 2027, is that consumed by these sporting and cultural ambassadors?

Hon. Sobers: No. There would be some degree of room for maybe the appointment of possibly two more persons, and so we thought it would have been best to have a—

Mr. Young SC: So, you have a bit of a float?

Hon. Sobers: Yeah.

Mr. Young SC: Who are the three persons?

Hon. Sobers: The three persons that were appointed would have been, Mr. Dwayne Bravo, Mr. Kieron Pollard and Mr. Nicholas Pooran.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

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Madam Chairman: Item 002: Overseas Missions. Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you kindly. Minister, there is an increase there of $5 million—just over $5 million. Can you also indicate how many persons are expected to be impacted by that, as well as how much would be allocated to Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance?

Hon. Sobers: Member, I do not have the exact number of persons overseas who would be impacted, but this is really, as you may or may not know, to cover essentially the placement of additional staff overseas. The exact number would fluctuate from time to time. We expect this to occur whilst we fill some of the vacancies at the overseas missions.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you.

Madam Chairman: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister, this line Item that the Leader of the Opposition was just at, 002/01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance for Overseas Missions, this is the line Item that covers the salaries of all of our officers who are at our diplomatic posts abroad, correct?

Hon. Sobers: Correct.

Mr. Young SC: And as you rightly said in your opening, the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs is critical for the functioning of any government. In particular, they are the first line of management in overseas territories of the important relationships we have with various sovereign governments, correct?

Hon. Sobers: In some instances, correct.

Mr. Young SC: In some instances. This will also cover the cost of our ambassadors and high commissioners abroad?

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Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. The United States of America, we have a very important relationship with them, especially in Washington, D.C. Who is our current ambassador appointed to Washington, D.C.?

Hon. Sobers: Currently, we do not have an ambassador appointed to Washington, D,C.

Mr. Young SC: I heard you say a short while ago, 15 months, but it has been 19 months that you all are in charge now. And another important relationship, as you have said, including in your contribution in the debate, is our relationship with the United Kingdom out of London. Who is our current high commissioner appointed to London?

Hon. Sobers: We do have a substantive high commissioner appointed to London.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Another important relationship, as you just pointed out in your run-up or your opening is—let me choose my words carefully—the rekindled relationship in Caracas, Venezuela.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Who is our current ambassador in Caracas?

Hon. Sobers: I beg your pardon, Member?

Mr. Young SC: Who is our current ambassador in Caracas?

Hon. Sobers: We do not have a substantive ambassador in Washington right now.

Mr. Young SC: No, in Caracas.

Hon. Sobers: Caracas, Caracas.

Mr. Young SC: I know you get a little mixed up and it may come—China, Beijing. Who is our current ambassador in Beijing?

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Hon. Sobers: We do not have a current ambassador in Beijing right now.

Mr. Young SC: Delhi, India.

Hon. Sobers: We do have a High Commissioner in Delhi.

Mr. Young SC: Who is our current High Commissioner in Delhi?

Hon. Sobers: His Excellency Chandradath Singh.

Mr. Young SC: South Africa?

Hon. Sobers: We have someone who—the accreditation for his appointment has already been sent. We are waiting for the process to take its place and that—

Mr. Young SC: You mean prior to the accreditation, the process that is for the foreign government to say, yes, they have no difficulty.

Hon. Sobers: Correct, the agreement.

Mr. Young SC: Accreditation is when you arrive and you are waiting. Okay.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister, you would accept that these are important areas for us to put persons in post, because it would assist you and the Government greatly in carrying out the work that Trinidad and Tobago needs to get done with these sovereign countries. Yes?

Hon. Sobers: Yes, I would accept—as I mentioned earlier, Member, if you would allow me and recall my original answer to your question, all of these postings and consul general postings are of extreme importance to this administration. And yes, it may very well assist the administration in having persons at posts. But since entering office in 2025, I have been given the mandate to personally—

Mr. Young SC: To manage the relationships.

Hon. Sobers: Correct.

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Mr. Young SC: Understood.

Hon. Sobers: And I have been doing so, I would want to say, quite well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: They say self-praise is no praise, Minister, I will rescue you. My last question on this—

Hon. Sobers: And as charitable and as humble as I could have said it—

Mr. Young SC: You are quite right to be hesitant in self-praise. The last question I have on this line Item is the $5 million additional that would also go toward the hiring of necessary staff in your various missions, correct?

Hon. Sobers: Yes, please, Member. Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you.

Madam Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, Item 16: Contract Employment. There is a decrease of $1 million—just over $1.4 million. Could you indicate why there would be a decrease in Contract Employment? Can you also tell us how many bodies exist in these positions, and how many bodies do not exist in the positions, and if there are any expectations to fill any positions?

Hon. Sobers: Thank you very kindly, Member. Currently, in terms of the total number of contract positions, as I mentioned a bit earlier, it is 107. The number of filled positions is 66 and the number of vacant positions is 41. This increase, Member, we—coming into the Ministry, I took specific note that there has been a backlog tied up. I cast no aspersions or place no blame with respect to FSOs being established permanently within the Ministry, and so we have had some

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conversations with the Service Commissions Department.

We have the belief that within the very near future, a number of IROs may very well be applying and going across to become FSOs. And a batch of FSOs who have already written the exam may very well come on to the establishment. Based on that, we have this increase that we have proposed here. And then, additionally, if it requires any supplementation further than that, we would have to come back in the mid-year review. But we think this should be more than sufficient to cover the amount that we are looking at.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you. Just one other Item on that page.

Hon. Sobers: Yes, please.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yeah. Okay. If we go down to Other Contracted Services—

Madam Chairman: Which line Item, Member?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: 63.

Hon. Sobers: No, 28. Oh, 63?

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes. 63 would be Repatriation of Nationals. Can I ask the question? Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Minister, could you indicate whether the Government has established any policy as it relates to repatriation of nationals? I see that there was an original figure of $16,000; Revised, $13,000; and there is a slight increase—well, I guess it returns to basically the same $16,000. Is there any government policy as it relates to repatriation? Could you indicate, under this Item, whether there are any plans to do any repatriation this year?

1.00 p.m.

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Hon. Sobers: Member, thank you so much for the question. As you may or may not know, repatriation is something that comes up on an ad hoc basis. So from time to time, varying embassies, consuls around the globe would get a request from a national, more than likely in distress, who would require some degree of assistance to find themselves back home to Trinidad and Tobago. We do review on a case-by-case basis the requests that are made, and based upon the documentation, a summary of what has transpired to that individual, we make a decision whether or not we would cover the cost of the ticket to bring the person back home to Trinidad and Tobago.

For this year, I think, we have done maybe about four repatriation exercises with respect to bringing nationals back home, but it is based upon when those requests are actually made, we entertain them as quickly as we possibly can, and I must say that that has—the end decision lies with the Minister, but I must give my hats off to the Consular Services Division of the Ministry who work extremely hard in terms of trying to get that information across to me as quickly as possible, so that persons are not left in any dire straits.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister on that same line Item, because it was something I intended to raise, there is allegedly one of our nationals who is in Jamaica, has been emailing me incessantly saying how, "she is stranded at the university" and all of these sorts of things, trying to reach out for repatriation back to Trinidad. So, I am going to try to find the email and send it directly to you all, because it keeps getting more and more desperate. But that is the line Item, so I intended to raise it.

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Hon. Sobers: I welcome that Member, and for the listening and viewing public we also do have an established—

Mr. Young SC: Correct,—

Hon. Sobers:—and a high commissioner in Jamaica so—

Mr. Young SC:—which was the advice given to go to—the High Commission apparently, but I am saying allegedly, then said, "Well, look they can't do anything about it." So asking me to—so I will forward it on to you.

Hon. Sobers: Please.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Madam Chairman, on the same line Item, I myself have been sent as late as this month, and I did indicate to her, she has visited in Jamaica, our Embassy, and says that she has written. So, I will join with my colleague in also sending the appropriate information from the young lady.

Hon. Sobers: Yes, please, Ma'am.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you so much.

Madam Chairman: Item 002: Overseas Missions; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Overseas Missions. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. This is on 334. Minister, very quickly—

Madam Chairman: No, we moved on from there, Member. We are on page 335.

Mr. Young SC: We are still on 002. Chair, we were still on 02 Goods and Services.

Madam Chairman: No, I called the Item, I looked up, the Clerk look up —

Mr. Young SC: You called it 001; 002—

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Madam Chairman:—the Clerk looked up as well, I looked up no hands were raised, I moved on. I went onto Sub-Head 03: Item 001, still nobody. I am now on 002: Overseas Missions, page 335. Member for Arima.

Mr. Young SC: Page which, 335?

Madam Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes, Madam Chairman, Insurance: 61 there is reduction of almost $1.5 million, could the Minister indicate why would we have in such a critical area unless it is dealt with a reduction of $1.5 million for insurance? Page 335, 02/002/61.

Hon. Sobers: Thank you for your question, Member. The Actual expenditure as of September 2026 for this particular Head would have been $4.2 million. We have a reduced figure, yes, of $3.5 million. The insurance for our overseas staff is usually based upon trends and request that have been made by overseas staff when they do so, and so, we believe the figure that has been allotted will be sufficient. In the event that we require additional funding for it, we would come back to the hon. Minister of Finance, who has been very gracious in the last year, and I suspect he will maintain that composure and treat with us accordingly at that juncture, please.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 004: Regional Bodies, Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you, Madam Chairman, 004/001/01: Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM). There is a decrease of just over $9 million, can the Minister indicate what would be the reason for that considerable decrease? Can the Minister also indicate what was the assessed contribution to the

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CARICOM Secretariat for 2026, 2027? And also, to provide a breakdown of the allocation between the current year assessed and the contribution and arrears. And what is the Ministry's schedule for settling if there are any outstanding obligations?

Hon. Sobers: Thank you for the question hon. Member. As it pertains to the debt that we inherited upon coming into office, there was a debt left over to the CARICOM Secretariat budget for the year 2024, and well, the year ending 2025 totaling $53,113, 883, which we paid in the year 2026. The payment toward calendar year 2026 will be met in December 2026, and it is estimated to be $44.3 million. CARICOM is a body as you may be aware that would send their invoices at the end of the actual year as opposed to like September to September. They do end of the December year, they would send the invoice and we try our best to pay, but we had some arrears that came from before during the last administration's term and we settled those arrears.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Once you have received that invoice, can you share it at that stage? What is break down?

Hon. Sobers: It is approximately $44.3 million, please, Member. Yeah.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay.

Madam Chairman: Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies; Item 003 United Nations Organisations, Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Minister United Nations Organisations: 003 and the particular breakdown of the various programmes that is we contribute to, 08: International Criminal Court. I see the Actual spend in 2025 was $1.1 million, the Estimate in 2026 was $730,000, Revised Estimate the same $730,000. I see an Estimate for

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2027 is gone up to $950,000. Is it the intention to make this payment?

Hon. Sobers: Yes please, Member. Actually, we would have paid up all the arrears owing in 2025, and paid up in 2026. So, we would just have 2026—we paid for both 2025 and 2026.

Mr. Young SC: You paid 2026? I see that. So my question is that for 2027, we intend to pay this?

Hon. Sobers: Of course, yes, Member.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

1.10p.m.

Madam Chairman: Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers. Member for Arima.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Thank you kindly. Minister there is under 009: National Repatriation Committee, can you indicate whether that committee has been appointed and who are the members and whether the Government has any established policies on national repatriation?

Hon. Sobers: Member, thank you so much for the question. We do have an established policy for national reparations to guide the Committee. The Committee has not been appointed just as yet, but it will be appointed in due course, and that is why the line Item exists to ensure that when the Committee is in fact appointed, they would have funds available to undertake their programme of work.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Two follow-up questions.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Minister, I will be happy if I can get a copy of the

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policy.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Do you have any time frame for the establishment of that committee?

Hon. Sobers: In due course, Member.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Due course?

Hon. Sobers: Yes, please, Member.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. 010: Other Transfers Abroad.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to *the Draft Estimate of Development Programme,* page 154. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services on page 161; A. Administration Services. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Minister, I see here in 2026—sorry, line Item 23: Establishment of a Document Management System, an Estimate of one and a half, but the Revised Estimates suggest no spend. Did the project commence?

Hon. Sobers: Thank you for the question again, Member. No, the project did not commence. This project is one that we consider to be important, but in dealing with a lot of other issues, sometimes these things tend to stagnate a bit. But this project is really centred on the digitization of the filing system at the Ministry because we still have to deal with a lot of actual files, and we hope to get it off the ground as quickly as possible during this fiscal year.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Have you completed a scope on that type of thing?

Hon. Sobers: Yes, yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you.

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Madam Chairman: F. Public Buildings. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister under F. Public Buildings, 066: Establishment of an Embassy in Doha, Qatar. There was an Estimate of $3million, and I see a Revised Estimate of $1.5 million. Did that commence?

Hon. Sobers: No, Member. The Cabinet has taken a decision not to proceed with the establishment of the Embassy in Doha, Qatar.

Mr. Young SC: You are going to the UAE instead?

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: That is where I was going. So, at 077: Establishment of an Embassy in Abu Dhabi, the UAE, so there is now a policy decision not to go to Qatar but to go to the UAE instead?

Hon. Sobers: To establish an embassy.

Mr. Young SC: Yes, that is what I mean, to establish the embassy. All right, and then at 075: Upgrade Works at Overseas Missions.

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: I see that this was an Estimate of $8 million at the start of 2026, but we have a Revised Estimate of $21.3 million for 2026. How much was actually spent?

Hon. Sobers: The Actual expenditure there, Member, would have been $14,710,496.

Mr. Young SC: How much of that was spent in New York?

Hon. Sobers: No, all of that would have been spent in Washington. New York, we still have work to do in New York, Member. Unfortunately, when works—well works were supposed to begin in New York there was an unpredictable

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accident that occurred with a tree being uprooted and falling on the house in New York, which completely damaged the roof structure of the New York residence.

Mr. Young SC: I see for 2027 you got $16.7million.

Hon. Sobers: Yes, Member.

Mr. Young SC: Which of our foreign posts is there an intention to spend that sum on?

Hon. Sobers: We are hoping to do it in New York, Member.

Mr. Young SC: Oh, that is New York, because of the roof, et cetera, and to continue the work?

Hon. Sobers: Yeah, and Member, you would also be aware, or if not, a lot of these properties, especially in the US, New York and Washington in particular, there are what you call protected heritage sites. So, it is specific contractors for specific works, specific materials, and so on.

Mr. Young SC: After you get the approvals?

Hon. Sobers: Okay.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you. That is it for under F.

Madam Chairman: G. Equipment and Vehicles. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Minister, this is for the purchase of vehicles abroad because I saw in Trinidad there was about two point something million under general. So, this $5 million for 2027 is for foreign missions?

Hon. Sobers: Well, this particular line Item we intended to utilize for both; it falls under *the Development Programme,* but because of the amount or the scale of requests to visit Trinidad and Tobago by foreign dignitaries, the Ministry of

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Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, for some time, if you look at the back, the building would have been a graveyard of vehicles.

Mr. Young SC: Correct. So, you are looking to buy some new ones for Trinidad for the purposes, as opposed to leasing every time somebody comes, and you have to provide them?

Hon. Sobers: Correct, yes.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, thank you. No further questions from me.

Madam Chairman: Infrastructure Development Fund page 282. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services. F. Public Buildings.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Minister, could you indicate, as it relates to upgrade works of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs—actually, relocation, could you share with us that there is a $1,500,000 Estimate?

Hon. Sobers: Yes.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: 005/06/001.

Mr. Young SC: I apologize, Member. Thank you so much for that question, Member. I do see the word "relocate". The Ministry is not relocating anywhere at this point in time. But we do have a lot of work that has to be done on the building at 2 Prada Street, where the building is currently located. We recognize that it is generally an inadequate building to accommodate the existing staffing requirements and for the continued defectiveness of service delivery.

The Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs is committed to the provision of an adequate, safe and comfortable working environment in compliance with the OSHA requirements, thereby mitigating overcrowding of the facility in accordance with the recommended footprint per square foot, and overall,

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the MSC is seeking to provide adequate accommodation for staff at the required levels and numbers.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, Minister, I did not hear you well—so, there is not, at this time, an issue of relocation?

Hon. Sobers: Correct.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: And as it relates to the—you talked about the OSHA requirements, are there any present concerns that you have received in the Ministry as it relates to any OSHA report?

Hon. Sobers: No. We have not received any such reports.

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Okay, thank you.

Hon. Sobers: Yes, please, Member.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 65 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Sobers: Thank you, Members, and I would just like to thank all members of the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs. Thank you.

1.20p.m.

Head 24: Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs, $590,660,430.

Madam Chairman: I now invite the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs and the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes.

Hon. Hosein: Good morning, Madam—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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[MR. SINGH *in the Chair*]

Hon. Hosein: Thank you colleagues. Good afternoon, Madam Deputy Chair and now Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to present the work achievements, priorities and expenditure requirements of the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs for the financial year 2027. When we assumed office, we inherited persistent challenges surrounding access to secure land tenure; delays in the processing of special licences; delays in state land applications and leases; and the need for greater efficiency, transparency and accountability in the administration of lands.

Since then, the Ministry has embarked on the modernization of the land administration systems and the resolution of long-standing tenure and regularization affecting citizens. Under our administration, the MLLA has addressed many of the deficiencies through stronger institutional oversight, streamlined procedures, improved service delivery, and the renewed commitment to ensuring that the administration of Land and Legal Affairs translates into tangible benefits for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry's work has a direct and meaningful impact on the lives of citizens. It affects the family that has waited decades for a state grant; the former agricultural worker awaiting agriculture lease; those awaiting residential leases who have lived on those lands for their entire lives; the entrepreneur seeking to register a company; the parent applying for a birth certificate, the landowner seeking to register a property transaction; and the event our business owner seeking protection for intellectual property.

Mr. Chairman, we inherited a Ministry with several state enterprises sinking under the weight of corruption, nepotism and mismanagement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, we have a mandate to clean up the PNM's corruption and mess that they have left us in.

Hon. Member: "Yuk."

Hon. Hosein: The Ministry's core responsibility in relation to public administration, land development and corporate governance, asset management and the delivery of public services. Mr. Chairman, the Ministry has supported the regularization of informal settlements through the LSA, including the distribution of over 100 Certificates of Comfort in January2026, and also the Ministry in April 2026 distributed 100 state grants to many citizens who have been waiting almost 20 years for their tenure.

Further, Mr. Chairman, the Ministry reported that more 800 residential leases have been distributed to former Caroni workers—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein:—who have waited 23 years for those leases. The Registrar General's Department reports that it has facilitated more than 161,000 online transactions in the last year. These transactions demonstrate the growing importance of digital service delivery, and I am pleased to announce that the Bedside Birth Registration Service was launched in January this year at the San Fernando General Hospital, and over 600 births were registered by virtue of the bedside registration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein:—and on October 14th we launched that same service at the Sangre Grande Hospital Campus, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, the Ministry's online services also provide intellectual property filing systems, valuation-related services and electronic engagement to

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the public. Mr. Chairman, over the last year we have, in fact, distributed many of those long-awaited licences, over 100 persons were appointed marriage officers who have been waiting many years for them. We have also appointed Justices of the Peace and Commissioners of Affidavit.

Mr. Chairman, the Ministry's responsibility is vast, and I would like to thank my Permanent Secretary, Mrs. Nela Dwarika-Ali, the officers of our Divisions and Departments of the Ministry, our state enterprises and we present ourselves before this Committee for examination. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 24 stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Members, as you are aware, the sum of $590,660,430 for Head 24: Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure, the Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly* and *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, at page 157 in the relevant volume. It spans pages 157 to 160 inclusive. Sub Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: 001/04. Can the Minister explain what the allowances for monthly paid officers are in this Item?

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, that particular line Item deals with the payment of allowances for the officers that fall under the Salaries Review Commission.

Mr. Imbert: Yeah, but what are they for?

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Hon. Hosein: As the Member would well know, because he was the one who engineered the revised Salaries Review Commission Report, this deals with housing, service duty, telecommunication.

Mr. Imbert: I see. And the amount is proportionate to the amount of people?

Hon. Hosein: Yes, please.

Mr. Imbert: So why was there a 36 per cent underspend in 2026?

Hon. Hosein: We were not able to fill certain positions—

Mr. Imbert: I thought so.

Hon. Hosein:—like the deputy Permanent Secretary, which is not the purview of the Ministry to fill.

Mr. Imbert: It was when I was there apparently.

Hon. Hosein: Well, you are no longer there, so.

Madam Chairman: 002: Law Revision Commission; 003: Registrar General; 004: Registrar General (Tobago). Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Can the Minister explain why you are not populating the Office of the Registrar General in Tobago? You had an allocation $1.5million for staff in the Registrar General's Office in Tobago. You only spent $500, a 67 per cent underspend. What is the problem in Tobago with the Registrar General's Office?

Hon. Hosein: The Member well knows that this particular line Item deals with public officers.

Mr. Imbert: You could not do that either?

Hon. Hosein: There is no duty for us to usurp the jurisdiction of independent Service Commissions. These are positions that are on the establishment. When we get to contract employment, the Member will well see the spend there.

Madam Chairman: Diego Martin North/East, could you turn off your mike if

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you are not—you will put it on—

Mr. Imbert: I did not touch my mike.

Madam Chairman: But it is on.

Mr. Imbert: That may be so, but I did not touch it. I will turn it off for you.

Madam Chairman: I would be very grateful, thank you. 007: Intellectual Property Office; 008: Surveys and Mapping. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Allocation of Surveys and Mapping, wages and COLA was not spent. Why, in full? How come?

Hon. Hosein: Which line Item is the Member on?

Mr. Imbert: 008/02. I said Wages. It is only one wages Item under 008.

Hon. Hosein: So, these deal with, Mr. Chairman, the wages for daily paid employees that are on the establishment. There are 138positions being utilized. The Ministry recently would have engaged in the recruitment process, and that particular spend will increase, as you would have seen in the Estimate for 2027.

1.30 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Land Management. Diego Martin/North East.

Mr. Imbert: I see a zero spend here on 01. How come? Salaries for Land Management.

Hon. Hosein: I will explain this particular Item, Mr. Chairman. This line Item deals with—it ties back to the one we just dealt with in Surveys and Mapping. The establishment used to be that there used to be one position called Director of Surveys that did the function of both the Commissioner of State Lands and the Director of Surveys. Historically, there have been the validation Act, and so on, with respect to the function and exercise of the Director of Surveys, as opposed to the Commissioner of State Lands. So, all of the COSL positions—this particular

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line Item deals with COSL—is paid out of the Surveys and Mapping.

This was an issue that we inherited by the previous administration. I have instructed the Ministry to ensure, going forward, that it reflects properly what is Surveys and Mapping and what falls under COSL, but it is one establishment as we speak.

Mr. Imbert: Going forward is fine, you know. I am talking about 2026. You had an allocation, you spent nothing.

Hon. Hosein: They have been paid through the previous line Item. We just covered that. I do not know if you are not hearing or understanding what I am saying. As a former Minister of Finance, you should have known this. We inherited this.

Mr. Imbert: Why was this allocation here then?

Hon. Hosein: This allocation was here because the process started in terms of splitting the establishment. The Ministry underwent several realignments over the last year, as you well know.

Mr. Imbert: So, you could not finish your exercise, okay.

Hon. Hosein: Nobody said we did not finish the exercise.

Mr. Imbert: That is what you just said.

Mr. Chairman: 010: Valuation Division.

Hon. Hosein: Nothing here? This is property tax, you know.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 161 to 168; 001: General Administration. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: 010, I see you have a 62 per cent underspend for Travelling for General Administration. Is it that the people in the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs do not need to travel?

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Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, unlike the previous administration, in terms of spending enormous amount of money and waste and mismanagement and corruption, and so on, we are cleaning up the system.

Mr. Imbert: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Hosein: We are spending less with a more efficient—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: By not travelling—[*Inaudible*] That makes sense. Still on 01, Mr. Chairman. 09: Rent/Lease - Vehicles and Equipment. I see an underspend here of 40 per cent. How come? No vehicles? No travelling? They are staying in the office?

Hon. Hosein: So, Mr. Chairman, with respect to this particular line Item, we would have inherited assets out of the Office of the Attorney General when the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs was created. There was no need for any additional rental and so on. There are in fact assets that we used from other divisions that came under the Ministry, such as valuation, and so on, so therefore we do not need to rent vehicles, especially from financiers like Southern Sales.

Mr. Imbert: I see. So, what was the allocation for then? The $500,000?

Hon. Hosein: There were existing contractual arrangements and arrears.

Mr. Imbert: I see. Could I go to 10 now? Office Stationary, that is down by 60 per cent. You did not buy any paper?

Hon. Hosein: We have no shortage of paper.

Mr. Imbert: I see.

Hon. Hosein: That is why we had enough paper to print 800 leases for Caroni workers—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Hosein:—100 state grants for persons who have been waiting over 20 years for their leases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein: We have been able to complete every Certified Copy requested by members of the public from the Registrar General's Office. So, not your propaganda here this afternoon.

Mr. Imbert: Propaganda?

Hon. Hosein: That is propaganda.

Mr. Imbert: I am seeing an allocation of $2.2 million for Office Stationery and Supplies in a very important area, and you only spent $900,000. Why did you ask for $2.2 million in the first place?

Hon. Hosein: Because what we were doing is we were actually—in this $900,000, again, we inherited assets from the Office of the Attorney General. So, we did not need to spend also.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: "He just start".

Mr. Chairman: 002—

Hon. Hosein: You want to know how many paperclips there are?

Mr. Imbert: No, no. I am still on—

Mr. Chairman: You still on—

Mr. Imbert: I am still on 001, Sir; still on 001.

Hon. Hosein: You want to know how much staple guns we have too?

Mr. Moonilal: Staplers.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Imbert: I have a lot on 001, Mr. Chairman. I am just letting you know.

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Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Mr. Imbert: 16: Contract Employment. Now, I heard the Minister claim that the reason why posts were not filled and he could not employ people was because of the Service Commissions, and when I get to Contract Employment, I will see an increase. I see a reduction here of 23 per cent under Contract Employment. That is not consistent with what you said earlier.

Mr. Chairman: All right.

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, the audacity of this former Minister of Finance to ask these ignorant questions—and I will tell you why—

Mr. Imbert: Ignorant? [*Laughter*]

Hon. Hosein: And I will tell you why. This particular line Item deals with General Administration, which is employees of the Ministry. When we get to officers of the Registrar General's Office later down in Goods and Services, you will see the spend for Contract Employment there. You are very disappointing as a former Minister of Finance; very disappointing. I am very disappointed. We now understand why you crashed the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Go ahead.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: My first question—for the education of the Minister and the edification of the listening public, my first question on this Ministry—

Mr. Chairman: All right. Just now—

Mr. Imbert:—was on General Administration, staffing.

Mr. Chairman: Ask a question, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Why were you unable to hire people on contract in this Ministry?

Hon. Hosein: But we hired $4.6 million worth of persons under Contract

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Employment.

Mr. Imbert: There is a 23 per cent underspend. Contract Employment is down, 23 per cent.

Hon. Hosein: $4.6 million.

Mr. Chairman: Can you ask a question, Member?

Mr. Imbert: I have more questions.

Mr. Chairman: Well, yes, I am aware of that—

Mr. Imbert: 21.

Mr. Chairman:—so if you could proceed, I would be very grateful.

Mr. Imbert: I am going on because, I mean, the answers do not make any sense. 21, you had $500,000 to repair your buildings. You only spent $175,000. How come?

Hon. Hosein: Do you know, Member, that we share accommodation with the Ministry of Justice, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs at Richmond Street? All of us contribute towards the repairs and maintenance of the floors that we occupy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein: Simple arithmetic; simple.

Mr. Imbert: So, the original Estimate was wrong. Can I move now to 22?

Hon. Hosein: We split the cost. We are saving, Member.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: You can.

Mr. Imbert: Can I move to 22, please? 22, again, the Minister said, when I raised the issue of understaffing in General Administration, that he would hire people on contract. Contract Employment is down by 23 per cent. Now I see Short-term

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Employment down by 40 per cent. Explain that.

Hon. Hosein: You see, unlike what the Member is accustomed to and what that former Government did was that they were recruiting their party cronies as short-term employment in every single Ministry. What we have done on this particular line Item is try to conserve in terms of the personnel expenditure, and if the Member knows what is short-term, we inherited some of these short-term, again, from the Ministries, such as Finance, under the Valuation Division, under the Office of the Attorney General, because the Ministry came out of that particular larger Ministry. What we have been able to do is cut down the amount of short-term expenditure and place persons on long-term contracts through proper recruitment and fair, transparent processes.

Mr. Imbert: How is that possible when your contract employment is down—long- erm contract employment is down?

Mr. Chairman: Is that a question or is that a comment?

Mr. Imbert: Yes. He is saying—

Mr. Chairman: Minister, answer the question.

Hon. Hosein: Asked and answered.

Mr. Chairman: If you wish—

Hon. Hosein: Asked and answered.

Mr. Chairman: Asked and answered. Thank you.

Mr. Imbert: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: Next question.

Mr. Imbert: When you get to 002.

Mr. Chairman: All right. I am about to get there. 002: Law Revision Commission. Diego Martin North/East.

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Mr. Imbert: 16, why are you not—

Hon. Hosein: Which Item?

Mr. Imbert: Why are you not hiring people on contract for the Law Revision Commission? Your expenditure is 26 per cent below your allocation.

Hon. Hosein: In this particular Estimate here, Mr. Chairman, we received an allocation of $1.8 million. We now have a Revised Estimate of $1.3 million. The information that I have, and I am advised, is that this figure reflects up until July. There was a recruitment subsequent to July.

Mr. Imbert: Oh, I see. "You gone back to dis July ting". Okay. [*Laughter*] No problem. Can I then get an explanation for 37 and 43? Why are these things down? Janitorial Services, down by 80 per cent. Security Services, down by 46 per cent for the Law Revision Commission. What is going on there?

Mr. Chairman: Minister, can you answer them in the order they appeared on the line Items?

Hon. Hosein: Yes. I can answer totally.

Mr. Imbert: 37 and 43.

Hon. Hosein: What is happening now, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Imbert: You stopped cleaning the building?

Hon. Hosein:—is that we are doing in-house janitorial at the Law Reform Commission, so we do not pay party contractors and financiers. And also, for Security Services, the Ministry will—our plan in fiscal year 2027 is to consolidate the entire Ministry. So, therefore, we will not need the total amount of money at this point in time. No more guards, but security.

Mr. Imbert: Supplemental question: How is that possible when public officers employment is down, contract employment is down, short-term employment is

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down? But you are, all of a sudden, doing everything in-house, using what? Ghosts?

Hon. Hosein: The moneys are being paid through this particular line Item.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, just ignore that facetious question. Just ignore that facetious question.

Mr. Imbert: I am on to 003 now, Sir.

Hon. Hosein: "You want guardsman?"

Mr. Imbert: 003.

Mr. Chairman: Well, I was not aware you were calling the Sub-Items.

Mr. Imbert: No. I am waiting for you. Waiting for you.

1.40 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: Minister, explain in 03, 04, Electric and Telephones why you are only spent half of the allocation. Do you have arrears for phones and electricity?

Hon. Hosein: No. Again, the Registrar General is housed in the office of the Attorney General building, floors 1 to 9. The cost is now being disaggregated between the Ministry of Justice, the Attorney General, and the Registrar General, Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, supplemental then. Why do you have these allocations here, $1.2million for Telephones?

Hon. Hosein: This $1.2 million was the Estimate.

Mr. Imbert: It is a bad Estimate; no problem.

Hon. Hosein: And then we have to spend 600 because it is a joint expenditure now.

Mr. Imbert: It is okay.

Mr. Chairman: Alright, can you please ask your question, take the answer, and

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stop—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I will stop when he stops rambling, insulting, and making all kinds of remarks about corrupt PNM, which you are allowing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Which you are allowing.

Mr. Chairman: You are asking questions—

Hon. Hosein: But we have evidence of the PNM being corrupt.

Mr. Chairman:—the Minister is answering, and you are putting your own interpretation as a comment—

Mr. Imbert: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Hang on a second, would you? Is it expected that the staff at *Hansard*, how are they to record that comment? As evidence, or your opinion?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Imbert: His opinion. How the *Hansard* recording that?

Mr. Chairman: It is part of his answer. What I want to know is what part of the *Hansard* does your comment make? Is it that you expect it to be reflected as the evidence? Is it that you expect it to be reflected as a comment?

Mr. Imbert: I am ready to move on.

Mr. Chairman: Well, you know—

Mr. Imbert: I am ready to move on.

Mr. Chairman: —it really is disappointing sometimes.

Mr. Imbert: Alright, I am ready to move on.

Mr. Chairman: Would you go weary of that behaviour?

Mr. Imbert: I am not tired. I am ready to move on.

Mr. Chairman: 004: Registrar General (Tobago); 007—

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Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I said I had a lot more at 003. You jumped 004 just so?

Mr. Chairman: What I would—

Mr. Imbert: It has about 60 Sub-Items.

Mr. Chairman: Well, you know what? I can actually check the *Hansard* to see if you actually did say you had a lot on 003.

Mr. Imbert: It is up to you, Mr. Chairman. You are in charge. You do what you want.

Mr. Chairman: No, I do not recall it, but I can check it now. Give me two minutes. If you did say it, then I will come back.

Mr. Imbert: It is alright; do what you have to do. Let us go on.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I am going to move on. 007: Intellectual Property Office; 008: Surveys and Mapping; 009: Land Management; 010: Valuation Division. Sub-Head 03, 169 to 171. Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration; 002: Law Revision Commission. Oh, your hand was up on General Administration?

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Right, thank you.

Ms. John: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Imbert: What was—I know exactly what I am doing. What was the allocation for under 001/02: Office Equipment?

Hon. Hosein: Office Equipment? What do you want to know?

Mr. Imbert: I have said exactly—I know what I am asking, you know. Your friend does not think so, but I know what I am doing. 001: General Administration; 002: Office Equipment. What was the original allocation for?

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Hon. Hosein: The Office Equipment is to buy office equipment.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, was there a list of office equipment that you had in mind?

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: Then why did you only spend half the money?

Hon. Hosein: That is all we needed.

Mr. Imbert: I see. So, the original Estimate was wrong.

Hon. Hosein: Yes. What I can indicate to the Member is that no red couches were purchased for this line Item.

Hon. Members: Ohh—[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: All right. Minister, let us also keep the answers tight as possible.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright, shall I move on?

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. 003: Registrar General; 004: Registrar General (Tobago); 007: Intellectual Property Office; 008: Surveys and Mapping; 009: Land Management; 010: Valuation Division. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Notwithstanding the very childish remarks over there, I would like to ask a question on 007/40: Gratuities to Contract Officers. Original allocation $5 million, revised $2 million, an under-spend of $3 million. What happened with the payment of Gratuities to Contract Officers in 2026? What happened?

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, what I can say again is that this is a Revised Estimate as of July because, as the Member well knows, before an officer is paid his gratuity, the files must be audited by internal audit. So, those audits were taking place, there were payments post-July of this year when these numbers were

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submitted.

Hon. Hosein: I see, so that is your excuse today. Okay, can I go to, after you, Mr. Chairman, I have a question on 009. I better tell you in front, because you will jump. I have something on 009.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Other Transfers, Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: 009/01: Land Survey Board. The allocation for the Land Survey Board was $2.5 million, but you only gave them $1.2 million, half of what was required. Why?

Hon. Hosein: This is a subvention that is normally given to the Land Survey Board. This would cover stuff like Rent, Remuneration to Board Members. There was a delay in the appointment of the members of the Land Survey Board and therefore you would have seen an increase in the Estimate of 2027 for 1.8. In fact, this particular board, if I am not mistaken, was placed in a very small office in the HDC Building. I think it was a broom closet that they had these persons functioning in. So, we want to have them placed in better accommodation also, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Imbert: Could you explain, since you are now saying that your 2027 allocation is 1.8, why your original 2026 was 2.5? Is it that you have still been unable to properly operationalize the Land Survey Board of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Hosein: The Board is operationalized.

Mr. Imbert: So then why was the original Estimate 2.5 and you only have 1.8 for 2027?

Hon. Hosein: Because we saved.

Mr. Imbert: What?

Hon. Hosein: We saved.

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Mr. Imbert: Same what?

Hon. Hosein: We saved.

Mr. Imbert: [*Member steupses*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: You know, do you not find that incredibly rude and infantile—

Mr. Imbert: No, no, no—

Mr. Chairman: To react to that—

Hon. Hosein: I do not—

Mr. Chairman:—answer which you do not like.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: You know it really—I think everyone in here is weary and tired and quite frankly fed up of this petulance, juvenile, infantile, and **quarile** behaviour—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: All right.

Mr. Imbert: I am being very serious.

Hon. Hosein: Item 010: Other Transfers Abroad; 011: Transfers to State Enterprise—Other Transfers Abroad?

Mr. Gonzales: Transfers to State Enterprises.

Mr. Chairman: Transfers to State Enterprise? All right. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Minister, your allocation for LandmarkTT Properties Limited is $3.6 million. Is that for the operational administration of this state enterprise for 2027?

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

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Mr. Gonzales: How many employees do you have there?

Hon. Hosein: I will have to check with you. But what is happening, Member, because it is a newly formed state enterprise, as you know, the organizational structure has to be approved by the PMCD of the Ministry of Public Administration and therefore, then we will have the full structure. So if I have to give you vacancies, I would not give you an accurate figure. But most of the staff there are, in fact, in contract positions until PMCD gives us the approval for the organizational structure. But it is for operations for both personnel and materials and supplies and so on.

Mr. Gonzales: So PMCD is still in the process of finalizing the formal structure—

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales:—for the organization?

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So, the persons who are employed in that organization are they on short—

Mr. Scotland SC: Wake up, wake up.

Hon. Hosein: I beg your pardon?

Mr. Chairman No, no, I am reading; continue.

Mr. Gonzales: The persons that are employed in that organization, are they on short-term contracts?

Hon. Hosein: Some of them are on short-term contracts, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: How many of them—

Hon. Hosein: I will have to get that number for you.

Mr. Gonzales: And how many of them are on full-term contracts? Because if

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PMCD is doing the review or finalizing the structure—

1.50 p.m.

Hon. Hosein: I will get that number for you also.

Mr. Gonzales: So, you will give us a breakdown of those persons that you have on contract and those that you have on short-term contract?

Hon. Hosein: I will verify with the Ministry, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Did you give an estimate as to how many persons you have employed in that organization at this point in time?

Hon. Hosein: I will have to get back to you on that number.

Mr. Gonzales: The same for Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited.

Hon. Hosein: Sure. This figure also represents the subvention for the year, the 8 5, so yes.

Mr. Gonzales: How many—and that is for the operation of the state enterprise for this fiscal year?

Hon. Hosein: Is it that the same questions you want to—

Mr. Gonzales: More or less the same question.

Hon. Hosein: Okay, sure. I will get back to you on it.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: Just as I had promised, I checked the *Hansard*. The Member under 002: General Administration said I have more questions. Under 003, the *Hansard* is silent. The member made no such assertion, just for the public record. Hon. members, before proceeding, I wish to indicate—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Shall I stop whilst you have a cross-corridor conversation? I wish to indicate that under the *Draft Estimates Recurrent Expenditure* Sub-Head

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06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, Item 004: Statutory Boards appears on page 173 *of the Draft Estimates*. However, the detailed examination of these allocations is contained in the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*.

We will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. Page 213. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head: 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration.

Chaguaramas Development Authority, page 222. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers.

Head 54 - Land Settlement Agency. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* Consolidated Fund on page 65; Item 003: Economic Infrastructure, pages 65 to 70; K. Land Acquisition. Item 001: Social Infrastructure; E. Settlements. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Line Item 004/08, can the Minister indicate what that original

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allocation of $32 million was for?

Hon. Hosein: Which particular line Item, because 08 is broken down into E.; 001; 002; and 003? Which one of the line Items?

Mr. Imbert: Okay. That will be page 67. When one looks at the total spend, it is significantly less than allocated. Survey of Squatter Sites, down by $9 million. Land for the Landless, stalled, $8million down. Regularization of Squatter Communities down by $2.5 million. The total for E. is a reduction of a significant amount: $12 million. Initially, those items, if you could put them altogether, or tell me one by one, what was intended in 001, 002, and 003, those allocations there, $10 million, $11 million, and $11 million?

Hon. Hosein: First, we will deal with 001: Survey of Squatter Sites. That is the $1 million—

Mr. Imbert: "Yuh" had $10 million allocated.

Hon. Hosein: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: "Yuh" spent $1 million.

Hon. Hosein: Yes, we spent $1 million, because all we had there were some surveys. It did not cost the full $10 million at this point in time.

Mr. Imbert: So, why did you ask for an allocation of $10million, when you only needed to spend $1 million? Am I expected to believe that?

Hon. Hosein: We were able to do the work with $1 million.

Mr. Imbert: I do not believe you.

Hon. Hosein: Well, that is your problem.

Mr. Imbert: And could you explain 002? You had an allocation of $11. You only spent $3 million for Land for the Landless.

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

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Mr. Imbert: That one stalled for sure, I know.

Hon. Hosein: So, what I could tell you, Mr. Chairman, is that the Land for the Landless is being administered through the Land Settlement Agency. Mr. Chairman, when we went into the LSA, we had several issues with respect to personnel that were employed at the LSA that were planted there by the former administration. Mr. Chairman, we had slowed down the work of the LSA simply because the work was being frustrated by the massive amount of corruption that was exposed at the LSA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, for example, I have a list in possession with names of employees at the LSA, and I am not going to call the first name of the employee, but just the surname, and I will tell you who the recommenders of these persons were, one:

- Jones: Pennelope Beckles-Robinson;
- Alexis: Pennelope Beckles-Robinson;
- Brusco: Foster Cummings;
- Cunningham: Beckles-Robinson;
- Edwards: Leonce;
- Lezama: Robinson-Regis;
- Ramsingh: Former Chairman, Innis;
- Lewis: Beckles-Robinson;
- Karlene Jones: Recommended by Cummings;
- Rondon: Beckles-Robinson;
- Hazar Hosein: One, Colm Imbert.

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Mr. Imbert: Me, Hazar Hosein was—

Hon. Hosein: And the list goes on and on and on. This is a document that I have received from persons at the Land Settlement Agency. So, Mr. Chairman, you understand the weight of the corruption that that Agency was operating under that it stalled the work of people of Trinidad and Tobago for the last fiscal year.

Mr. Chairman: All right, let us move on. Port of Spain North.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]. You have to, because what he is saying is not true.

Mr. Chairman: All right—

Mr. Imbert: Hazar Hosein has been working there for decades.

Hon. Members: Decades.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: And "yuh" saying I recommend him. "Dats ah total untruth."

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North—

Mr. Imbert: Total untruth. The man working there for decades, under UNC; under UNC—

Mr. Young SC: When we got there in 2015, he was there.

Mr. Imbert: Under UNC.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North—

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, as we know—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: All right. Let us calm down.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Everyone, calm down!

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, as we know, when contracts come to an end, they have to be renewed.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Nonsense.

Mr. Chairman: All right, calm down, calm down. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Mr. Chair, after all the "hypering"—

Mr. Chairman: Hyperbole—

Mr. Young SC: No, no, no. The "hypering" of the Chamber, my friend, the Minister, and all of his wild—

Hon. Member: Acquisitions.

Mr. Young SC: Well, I do not know what the acquisitions in particular are, because what he said is that these people were employed. Of course, he said there was corruption, et cetera. I am asking that any corruption you find, send it to the necessary authorities. But what we are focused on here is the utilization of the *Development Programme*. This *Development Programme*, of course, Minister, is not the full amount of money that would have been allocated to the LSA. So, to get back to the Land for the Landless programme, which is just one of the programmes to be implemented by the LSA, what was done for the $3 million in your tenure?

Hon. Hosein: Sure. Minister, what I can tell you is that there were some sites that preliminary works would have been done with. So, we have to do, for example, the clearing, because there were overgrown lots. We also had to do some perimeter surveys in order to identify the lots and so on, and that would take place for the $3 million. If you see the allocation for 2027, which is $20million—

Mr. Young SC: Correct. You are planning now to go in and do—

Hon. Hosein: For the infrastructural work, yes.

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2.00 p.m.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. And may I ask where you have identified to begin—

Hon. Hosein: Sure.

Mr. Young SC: So, where is your prioritization of this work?

Hon. Hosein: There are several sites, one in Carapichaima, one in Chaguanas Factory Road, which you should know where that is, that area there—

Mr. Young SC: I know where it is, yes.

Hon. Hosein: Carapichima, again, Roopsingh, we have Carson Field, which is a cashew garden site, and we have a site in Balmain, Couva. Those are just the sites that we intend to do work on in this fiscal—

Mr. Young SC: In this fiscal year, the infrastructural work is now that you have done the mobilization and the preparation.

Hon. Hosein: Correct. And then we have some greenfield sites also that we will do some preliminary work on.

Mr. Young SC: And in this Land for the Landless Programme, how is it that you are intending to do the distribution to those who qualify?

Hon. Hosein: So, Member, you would know that we would have placed public advertisements for persons to put in their applications. So, there are several categories: those who are general public, we also had a category for public servants, and we also have a category for servicemen and women from the protective services and also university graduates. So, we have those four categories that we are using.

The criteria, of course, would be those who are landless. Of course, we do the necessary background in the registry to make sure they do not own any interest in land. Also, there must be a qualifying salary, because you would know that

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these lands are not free. They are subsidized.

Mr. Young SC: And these are lands that you are preparing for them to build their own homes on?

Hon. Hosein: Yes. So, the reason why the preliminary work is important, and the infrastructural work is, is because when they purchase the lots, they will be approved lots. So, therefore, those persons can go to the bank and seek financing for the construction.

Mr. Young SC: And you have divided it into 5,000-square-foot lots?

Hon. Hosein: So, some may range. It may be more or less 5,000. I cannot say all will be exactly 5,000.

Mr. Young SC: And for this $20 million, Minister, how many lots are you hoping to be able to achieve in the next fiscal?

Hon. Hosein: In this fiscal, what we are trying to do is achieve at least two to 3,000 lots. It is a massive amount, but we are certain that we can get at least about 2,000 for sure.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Thank you. And then, if I may go to E. 003: Regularisation of Squatter Communities.

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: When you are governing the State, this is an area that requires a lot of sensitivity, because, of course, you do not want to necessarily encourage illegal squatting.

Hon. Hosein: Sure.

Mr. Young SC: The Revised Estimate is $8.5 million.

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Can you say where you all focused in the last fiscal on the

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regularization?

Hon. Hosein: Yes. Member, this work commitments as of the 30th of September, 2026, for Civil Works at Rwanda East Site A, Grande.

Mr. Young SC: So, this is Grande?

Hon. Hosein: Grande. And, Member, why you would not see an allocation for 2027 is because the LSA has to go to Cabinet to bring some legislative amendments to make it easier for regularization. Because, as you know now, although the LSA is the adjudicating body to determine if you are a squatter by issuance of the Certificate of Comfort.

Mr. Young SC: Correct.

Hon. Hosein: You still have to knock the Commissioner of State Lands' door to issue the lease.

Mr. Young SC: And then also identified areas under the legislation, et cetera.

Hon. Hosein: Correct. And you know that there is a gap between the processing of that lease to actually execution.

Mr. Young SC: Are you all looking at any areas in particular?

Hon. Hosein: For?

Mr. Young SC: For the legislative amendments?

Hon. Hosein: So, if you look at the Schedule to the security of tenure regularization of squatters Act, you will already see that they are designated areas.

Mr. Young SC: Correct, that is what I mean.

Hon. Hosein:—outlined in the Act.

Mr. Young SC: I assume you are looking to add to that.

Hon. Hosein: Well, there are some existing ones that work has to be done on, and also outstanding regularization. Because how it works is that when you get your

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certificate of comfort, you are then moved towards a deed of lease because the persons have to still pay for the deed of lease. So, there are several persons who are moving towards that phase of deed of lease now.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you.

Mr. Imbert: Chairman, I was not allowed to ask my question. I was interrupted by that mirage of untruths over there. May I ask a question on 003, please?

Mr. Chairman: You can. We are still there, so you can still ask questions.

Mr. Imbert: So, there is no allocation for Regularisation of Squatter Communities in 2027. Does this mean you do not intend to regularize any squatter communities in 2027?

Hon. Hosein: Asked and answered, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah. I think that question was just asked.

Mr. Imbert: All right, hold on, hold on. Wait, wait, wait. Is there going to be no expenditure on the Regularisation of Squatter Communities in 2027?

Hon. Hosein: Asked and answered, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Imbert: You did not answer at all.

Hon. Hosein: I said that there were legislative amendments—

Hon. Hosein: You did not answer. That means you are doing nothing in 2027. No problem.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Chair. Minister, up to 2025, the LSA started a project in my constituency.

Hon. Hosein: Which line Item is that?

Mr. Gonzales: Same line Item, with survey—

Hon. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

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Mr. Gonzales: Yes, please. The Windy Hill Community, Five Rivers, and I think there is a part in Garden Village in Arouca. The LSA has started a lot of work to regularize a lot of squatters on state lands in that area. I was hoping to hear, given the programme of works that you have set out for the LSA, and especially in this fiscal year, whether or not the LSA intends to and you may not have the information now—continue the work to regularize a lot—thousands of squatters in the Windy Hill area, Five Rivers, and in the Garden Village area.

In Five Rivers, for example, the surveys were being completed before you move towards the issuance of the Certificate of Comfort. So, I am a bit concerned that the allocation that you have been provided in this fiscal year may not give you the resources to complete these massive projects. So, how do you plan to continue the work that the LSA would have started some years ago?

Hon. Hosein: Firstly, Member, thank you for the question. With respect to that particular area, I have asked the technical officers at the LSA to take note of your query. I will certainly get some more information on it, but we have to now change the model in terms of what the State can afford in terms of resources and balancing the need for someone to move towards their deed of lease. I want to move as many persons' towards their deed of lease so they have tenure. That is a particular issue I have taken note of, and I will probably get back to you on that.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, pages 68 to 70. D. Chaguaramas Area Development. A. Administrative Services.

Mr. Young SC: Sorry, A is now—from what I am seeing here, under 06: General Public Services, right? Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairman: No, we are on to Multi-Sectoral and Other Services.

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Mr. Young SC: Correct. Page 69.

Mr. Chairman: Page 69.

Mr. Young SC: Right. Sorry—

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain North?

Mr. Young SC: I am at F.

Mr. Chairman: Oh no, we are going to get there now. F. Public Buildings. Port of Spain North.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you. Minister, I heard what you said, I think, a short while ago. I think in response to my friend, my colleague from Diego Martin North/East, under the Recurrent, where you said that, if I heard you correctly, the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs, I think AG and Justice, are in the tower at the Government Campus. I see here at 101: Outfitting of the Ministry, $2 million for 2026 was provided, $500 spent, and now an Estimate of $3 million. Certainly, up to the point when we left, those buildings were already outfitted. Is this something to do with, what, reconfiguration or something like that? What is this $3 million for?

Hon. Hosein: You are asking in particular to the $500,000, right? The spent for $500,000?

Mr. Young SC: No, no, no, no, no. For the—I see there—okay. Let us start with the $500,000. You spent $500,000 this year. I mean that is a—

Hon. Hosein: I will tell you why, because we now had to accommodate space for the two PSs, from the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs and also a Minister's office. And both Justice and Land and Legal Affairs are on the same floor at the AG's office.

Mr. Young SC: Okay.

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Hon. Hosein: So, you understand the space constraint.

Mr. Young SC: I say AG's office is supposed to be moving to Tragarete Road?

Hon. Hosein: I think not the entire office, only parts of the office. But you will see that we have an Estimate for $3 million—

Mr. Young SC: $3 million, so what is that for now?

Hon. Hosein:—which we are planning to relocate the Ministry. We are working with PRESD from the Ministry of Public Administration to have a building.

Mr. Young SC: Your whole Ministry or just Legal Affairs or?

Hon. Hosein: Member, the reason why we want to do this is because my entire rental bill for the month, for just the Ministry's Divisions, ranges to about $1.1 million in rent per month. For example, where the valuation is housed in Barataria, whereas the IQOR building—those floors there alone, the entire building is just $500,000 a month.

Mr. Young SC: But they are being fully utilized?

Hon. Hosein: So, what we did is that we saved rent by the CSL office that was on El Socorro Road. We saved $250,000 from there, moved them into the valuation building because there is now space, the licensing division is now there, and we have moved parts of our HR into Barataria. But because of the disconnect, you understand that there would be difficulty for the transportation of files.

Mr. Young SC: And that is what I was coming to because you now are in charge of the land—

Hon. Hosein: Correct.

Mr. Young SC:—documentation for Trinidad, and you also have inside of there aged deeds and leases that when we were looking at it, you have to be very, very careful in the movement of it because it could become powder very quickly. So,

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how are you dealing with that?

2.10 p.m.

Hon. Hosein: So right now, we have signed an arrangement with the UNDP for the digitization of the Ministry, one, and two, to connect all of the parts. So, Valuation would connect with RHU, which connects to the COSL, which will connect to the Land and Survey Mapping. So all of them would connect on a digital platform. But with respect to the—

Mr. Young SC: The outfitting.

Hon. Hosein:—housing of those sensitive documents, I do not want to say where they are housed, but your government would have also put arrangements for those things. I do not think it is prudent for me to say it on the national platform now, but those documents are housed, and what we want to do is to put all of the divisions—COSL, Valuation and everybody—into one building. So therefore, I do not have an excuse that the file is stuck somewhere in a different location.

Mr. Young SC: So, where are you looking to go to?

Hon. Hosein: Prezi has several options for us right now, so we are looking at the best option.

Mr. Young SC: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: K: Lands and Surveys—Infrastructure Development Fund—Item 003: Economic Infrastructure—page 240; F: Land Management Services. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Page240, right?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: F: Land Management Services; 001: The Development of Land at Caroni and Orange Grove by EMBD. Last fiscal year, the original estimate was

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$30 million, with expenditure on the Revised Estimate at $5million. This fiscal year, the Estimate is increasing to $50million. What is the intended use of these funds?

Hon. Hosein: Member, I can tell you that if you are asking for the spend for 2026, these are the sites for the former or X Caroni workers. So, we would have done enormous work in Exchange for II A and B, Exchange III A, Exchange III—

Mr. Young SC: When you say enormous—what clearing and preparation?

Hon. Hosein: Clearing and preliminary works, yes—Exchange III B, Roopsingh II, Waterloo II, Petit Morne II, Petit Morne III, and Cedar Hill II A. So, all—

Mr. Young SC: So, for the $5 million?

Hon. Hosein: What is that?

Mr. Young SC: You only spent five, or did that went up?

Hon. Hosein: No. So, this figure, we would have spent close to what was allocated.

Mr. Young SC: Okay, I thought so.

Hon. Hosein: This is a figure up to July. I think releases came in thereafter in terms of the payments.

Mr. Young SC: So, you spent close to the 30?

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: Alright. And now for the 50 in this fiscal year.

Hon. Hosein: Yeah. So that initial spend of the 30 would have done all of the preliminary work, and so on, and the 50 is now to actually go with the machinery and so on, to get the work done.

Mr. Young SC: Learn from the past mistakes, right? J—sorry, I have no—under J, Minister, PSAEL has now been moved to you.

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Hon. Hosein: Correct.

Mr. Young SC: PSAEL—001: Infrastructural Projects by PSAEL.

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: And of course, now, quite a significant sum of $150 million is being allocated for this fiscal year. What is the intention there?

Hon. Hosein: So, Member, you may not have known what was happening there, but I can tell you. With the PSAEL, under the former administration, there was one infrastructural project that was phased into Phase I and II. There were works being done all over Trinidad under Phase I and II. The project's scope was indicated for an agricultural access road, which then morphed into doing box drains and road paving in residential areas in the lead-up to the general election. We have had a former chairman of this particular PSAEL, Mr.Junia Regrello, who was hand-selecting contractors, telling them to go and do work. There was no procurement, there was no contract, and now we are being sued to pay these people, and we are very concerned about what was happening there.

Mr. Young SC: Member, so this 150 is for what?

Hon. Hosein: So, I can tell you. The 150 will be used to cover some of the arrears from Phase I and II. And I will tell you that one of your former colleagues, on the Friday before the general election, was bullying public servants at the Ministry to release $40 million under this particular project. The Friday before the general election, the public servants had to stop him because, when they verified the projects, they were incomplete, may not have started, and there were several issues.

Mr. Young SC: So this 150 is also to cover some of that?

Hon. Hosein: Some of those arrears that we have certified for works being completed and then we will do some more infrastructural works.

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Mr. Young SC: I smile, because I remember the General Election of 2015, the Sunday night before, how busy they were down at Chaguaramas Development, which now falls under you. And leases were going early into the morning of the 7th of September 2015.

Hon. Hosein: I am happy that you raised that because it had some very busy activities at CDA right before the general election, too, where I think, one Michael Quamina—

Mr. Young SC: "Nah", it was not Chin Lee.

Hon. Hosein:—got four lots of land at Turtle Bay—

Mr. Young SC: Chin Lee brought his own from private people in America.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—for $2500 per month, you know. For $2,500 per month—I think, four lots of land in Turtle Bay to one, Michael Quamina—$2,500 a month. So, there were some busy activities at CDA right before the 2025 General Elections.

Mr. Young SC: So, now to come back to the PSAEL and the 150—

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC:—after all of that and these allegations. And as I say, if there is anything—

Hon. Hosein: No, this is a registered deed, Member.

Mr. Young SC: This is?

Hon. Hosein: It is a registered deed I have—a registered deed of lease for Michael Quamina.

Mr. Young SC: I know, but that is under CDA. I am on PSAEL now.

Hon. Hosein: Yeah.

Mr. Young SC: So, under this 150, it says, "Infrastructural Projects".

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Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: So, you said about certain things you discovered, and it is to cover some of that, et cetera.

Hon. Hosein: Yes.

Mr. Young SC: But I assume at some stage that you are going to move on and do real work to take us forward.

Hon. Hosein: Yes, correct.

Mr. Young SC: So out of the 150, what is the infrastructural work that you now intend to do and where?

Hon. Hosein: Member, what I would do is I would have to get back to you. Because I told you, initially, that they were still certifying some of the works that would have taken place under Phases I and II. So, once we can disaggregate what can go towards arrears, then we will have the exact figure—

Mr. Young SC: That you can spend.

Hon. Hosein:—of what can go towards future works.

Mr. Young SC: All right.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Under the same line Item—Minister, based on what you would have just said, would any of this be used to pave secondary roads that fall under LSA?

Hon. Hosein: No. How LSA works, Member, is that LSA is not really responsible for paving of secondary roads. They are more for the infrastructural works on the site itself that is deemed to be a designated area. The PSAEL used to do work on agricultural access roads and so on, but then we had Phase I and II, which were doing work all over Trinidad. This will not be towards the LSA site per se, unless

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any one of these Phases I and II fell into an LSA site, which I can probably check.

Mr. Romain: Right. And you intend to continue the paving of agricultural access roads?

Hon. Hosein: This will have a—based on the existing allocation of whatever remains back from the arrears owed, we will have to give a determination on that.

Mr. Romain: Alright. So, you do not have a prepared list as yet.

Hon. Hosein: Because we are still verifying some of the works, yes.

Mr. Romain: Alright. So, can a request be made?

Hon. Hosein: You can request the—

Mr. Romain: Can a request be made by MPs with respect to this line Item for certain—

Hon. Hosein: You can write at any point in time. Yes, that is no problem.

Mr. Romain: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: All right, 005: Multi-Sectorial and Other Services; Q: Evolving Technologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited; F: Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 24 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Hosein: Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Hon. Hosein:—I would like to thank the staff at the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs for coming out on a Saturday afternoon to assist this honourable House.

Mr. Chairman: I myself would like to thank them and to apologize to them as well for having to come on a Saturday. Members, we will suspend and return at 4.15 for a lunch break. Thank you.

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2.18 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee Suspended.*

4.15 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Head 34, Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation.

Head 34: Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, $925,554,881.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation to make the usual brief opening statement. Minister, five minutes, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Zakour: Good day, Chairman, Members of the Committee, and Members of the viewing and listening public. I am joined today by Permanent Secretary, Beverly Reed Samuel, along with Members of the Ministry's technical team. I welcome the opportunity to address the proposed allocations for the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation for fiscal year 2027. Mr. Chairman, when I appeared before this Committee last year, the Ministry faced significant operational, administrative and financial challenges. Our priority was to stabilize operations, address long-standing deficiencies, and strengthen accountability. Today, we can report meaningful progress.

In civil aviation, we have advanced initiatives to strengthen regional and international connectivity, welcomed new airlines, expanded airline services, and modernized airport infrastructure. In public transportation, we have assessed the challenges facing the Public Transport Service Corporation and have identified requirements for a phased fleet renewal programme to improve reliability and expand services.

Within the licence division, we have advanced regulatory reforms allowing motorists to renew their driving permits up to three months before expiry, expanded the vehicle inspection framework, and introduced a fixed penalty

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warning system. We are also working on several additional initiatives, including the introduction of a reserved registration number system, the regulatory framework for the importation and registration for classic, antique and vintage vehicles, secure licence plates, and red light enforcement to strengthen compliance with traffic laws and improve road safety.

In traffic management, we introduce experimental schemes, including the Eastern Main Road Reversible Lane Initiative. In road safety, we established a dedicated road safety unit and are preparing to launch our "road safety starts with me" campaign. We are also advancing a first of a kind road infrastructure safety assessment, covering approximately 2,000 kilometres.

Mr. Chairman, these developments represent meaningful progress, however, challenges remain. We must recognize that nine and a half years of neglect, underinvestment, and institutional weakness cannot be reversed overnight. Our responsibility is to ensure that every dollar allocated is utilized responsibly, delivering meaningful value to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Chairman, I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 34 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: The said sum for the said Head 34 Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure, the Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly, and of the Draft Estimates of the Development Programme.*

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We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, page 228. These Items, which I will call, are to be found between pages 228 to 229, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration; 002: Transport Division; 003: Traffic Management. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration; 002: Transport Division; 003: Traffic Management; 004: Traffic Warden Unit. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 233 to 234. 001: General Administration; 002: Transport Division; 003: Traffic Management; 004: Traffic Warden Unit. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 235 to 236, 003: United Nations Organization; 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers; 011: Transfers to State Enterprises.

Hon. Members, I wish to indicate that under the *Draft Estimates* of *Recurrent Expenditure*, Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies; Item 004: Statutory Boards appears on page 236 of the *Draft Estimates*. However, the detailed examination of these allocations is contained in the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly.*

We will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, page 263. 39: Airport Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration; 002: Passenger and Cargo Terminals; 003: Airports Operations; 004: Runways, Taxiways, Grounds and Car Parks; 005: Security. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration; 002: Passenger and Cargo Terminals; 003: Airport Operations; 004: Runways; Taxiways; Grounds and Car Parks; 005: Security.

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Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; 52: Public Transport Service Corporation, 278 to 279, Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration; 002: Vehicles and Maintenance; 007: Property Development Services; 008: Transit Express Commuter Services. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration; 002: Vehicles and Equipment Maintenance; 005: Port of Spain Transit Centre; 006: Para Transit Unit; 007: Property Development Services; 008: Transit Express Commuter Services; 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers, 57: Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfer and Subsidies; 001: Regional Bodies; 004: International Bodies; 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we shall now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme Consolidated Fund*, page 92. 001: Pre-Investment; A. Administrative Services; Item 003: Economic Infrastructure, pages 93 to 95, P. Coastal Protection; A. Air transport; B. Bus Transport; G. Road Systems Operations and Services; Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, pages 96 to 97, P. VMCOTT, page 96, A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings; I. Administration.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 34 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Minister, thank you very much staff.

4.25 p.m.

Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, $459,794,800.

Madam Chairman: I will now invite the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister to make a brief opening statement. Prime Minister.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Madam Chairman: The usual five minutes. Thank you very much.

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, as my Government delivers on job creation, safety and security, reversing rural neglect and levelling the playing field for the ordinary law-abiding citizen, the Office of the Prime Minister appears before this Standing Finance Committee as the main driver of national development. Today, the Office of the Prime Minister is no longer a slush fund for the lavish lifestyles—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC:—of those who treated themselves as emperors. From 2016 to 2025, our nation's taxpayers funded $19.2 million in official entertainment for the Office of the Prime Minister. From 2016 to '25, while thousands lost their jobs, the Office of the Prime Minister spent $80.5 million on the Prime Minister's establishment. Simply put, expenses for the Prime Minister's household. Not for the Office of the Prime Minister, but for the household. From 2016 to 2025, while thousands lost their lives to crime, the Office of the Prime Minister spent $14.7 million on hosting conferences and seminars.

In total, over the last 10 years, the Office of the Prime Minister spent **$114 million** on fine dining, vacations, fine wine, sightseeing and splurging as our nation suffered. Those days are over.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: In 2025, under the previous administration, the OPM allocated $1.2 billion, a high allocation to fund luxury lifestyles. In the first full fiscal year of my Government, as these Estimates would show, we restored fiscal responsibility with a Revised allocation of $465.7 million, down from $1.2 billion from the previous year under that administration. This fiscal '27, the allocation, inclusive of the Development Programme, is $462.7 million.

Importantly, the OPM's recurrent expenditure increased by $26 million. Why, to support higher salaries as we remain committed to the workers' agenda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC: Again, within our recurrent expenditure, we have increased training for workers by $250,000, as we continue to focus on workforce development. While the OPM's recurrent focuses on empowering workforces, our Development Programme focuses on preserving heritage, investing in communities, and empowering our digital development.

The OPM's Development Programme is focused on delivering tangible results through key projects, Nelson Island project, digitization of government media assets, investments in our national libraries, and investments in Government Printery, and the institutional strengthening of TTT. In the last 18 months, the Office of the Prime Minister has become a delivery Ministry—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC:—restoring TTT to global leadership as we work with the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs to ensure the strongest US-TT relationship in our history and, of course, our historic election to the United Nations Security Council.

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The Office of the Prime Minister has driven social equity by spearheading the prosthetic limb programme with the Ministry of Health. These are just a few programmes, Mr. Chairman, the OPM has taken a direct role in improving well-being. I want to thank all the hard-working PS and all the hard-working staff at the OPM, led by a very dynamic head, PS Natasha Barrow, for your team and for all Permanent Secretaries for their public national service. I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 13 stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: The said sum for the said Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, page 55. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, pages 55 to 57; 001: General Administration; 002: Gender Affairs Division; 003: Communications; 004: Government Printery; 005: National Archives. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Gender Affairs Division; 003: Communications; 004: Government Printery.

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Chairman: Diego Martin—not you, Port of Spain North/St. Ann's East. Item 004: Government Printery; 005: National Archives; 006: Freedom of Information Unit; 007: Office of Information Commissioner.

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Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 63 to 64, inclusive. Item 001: General Administration; 003: Communications; 004: Government Printery; 005: National Archives. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; 001: Regional Bodies; 003: United Nations Organizations; 004: International Bodies; 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers; 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, page 67. Item 004: Statutory Boards.

4.35p.m.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly* at page 05, 53: National Library and Information System (NALIS). Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure. This is at page 5. Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration, 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the Draft Estimates of Development Programme, page 19, Consolidated Fund. Item 004: Social Infrastructure; G. Educational services, page 20; E. Settlements, page 21; A. Culture, page 22; C. Welfare Services, page 23; Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, pages 24 to 25; A. Administrative Services, F. Public Buildings.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the Infrastructure Development Fund at page 229. Infrastructure Development Fund pages 229 to 231, inclusive; 004: Social Infrastructure; B. Recreation, A. Community Development; 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; F. Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

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Head 13 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, PS and your staff. Head 01: President $20,975,800.

Mr. Chairman: Minister of Finance, might I invite you.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: You are waiving the opening statement?

[DR. ALI *in the Chair*]

Head 01: President, $20,975,800.

Madam Chairman: I now invite the Minister of Finance to make a brief opening statement, not exceeding five minutes.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. The Office of the President serves as the official institution that supports and facilitates the work of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, who is the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The President's role is quasi-ceremonial and constitutional in nature. The President serves as a non-partisan safeguard of the Constitution, ensuring that all branches of the Government operate as required by legislation. In this regard, the Office of the President provides administrative, protocol and logistical support for the President's official duties. We are accompanied here by the technical staff who will be willing to answer any questions that the Members opposite of this Committee will have. Thank you.

Question proposed: That Head 01 stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: Hon. Members, the sum of $20,975,800 for Head 01: President is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*

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and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, page 1. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration, Item 002: Tobago Services. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, page 1. Consolidated Fund, Item 004: Social Infrastructure, page 2; A. Administrative Services.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 01 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Madam Chairman: Thank you very much. Head 05: Parliament,

[MR. SINGH *in the Chair*]

Head 05: Parliament, $160,344,300.

Mr. Chairman: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, section 39 of the Constitution states that there shall be a Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, which shall consist of the President, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the country's national legislature, where, among other things, Bills are debated and passed into law for peace, order and good governance of the country and where the people's representatives speak to and represent their interests.

The Office of the Parliament provides the administrative and apolitical support services to the Parliament and the office functions under the strategic leadership of the Clerk of the House, assisted by the Clerk of the Senate as deputy

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head. Mr. Chairman, I want to take this opportunity on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and on behalf of Members of Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, to sincerely thank the Clerk, his support staff and all the administrative and Hansard staff—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Tancoo:—of the Parliament for their diligence and support to the governance of Trinidad and Tobago. We hold ourselves available for any questions that Members of the Committee may have.

Question proposed: That Head 05 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: The said sum for Head 05: Parliament is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the Draft *Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, pages 23 to 24 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; 001: General Administration; 002: Office of the Ombudsman. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, 001: General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

4.45 p.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, I am Sub-Item 16: Contract Employment and if you please allow me, I can also refer to Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment, because I think they are both related. Is there an approved staff structure for the Parliament?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, there is.

Mr. Gonzales: How many contract officers are on that approved structure, as well as how many permanent staff?

Hon. Tancoo: Your question, Sir, was how many—total staff, the complement?

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Mr. Gonzales: Yes. How many permanent staff, how many contract officers and how many do you have on short-term contracts?

Hon. Tancoo: We have two—

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, do you have the figures for contract officers and short-term? I realise you are having some challenges.

Hon. Tancoo: How much stuff—

Mr. Gonzales: Yes.

Hon. Tancoo: Complement is 147 individuals.

Mr. Gonzales: 147 contract?

Hon. Tancoo: Yeah, 147 contract.

Mr. Gonzales: And how many do you have on short-term?

Hon. Tancoo: 78, would be short-term.

Mr. Gonzales: 78.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: How many in the last fiscal transitioned from long-term contract into short term?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that the Clerk will not have that breakdown; we could provide that for you in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. So I observed at Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment, there is a decrease in the allocation by $2.1 million.

Hon. Tancoo: Right. The Clerk has advised me that that would have been because of the transition, where we would have had some staff transitioning from short-term to longer-term contracts.

Mr. Gonzales: So in the current 78 staff members who are on short-term, how many do you expect to transition back into long-term contracts in this fiscal year?

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Hon. Tancoo: Yeah, I think they will not be able to provide that kind of information yet because they are awaiting some completion of some procedures.

Mr. Gonzales: Say again?

Hon. Tancoo: They are awaiting the completion of some procedures, including Cabinet approval for transitioning.

Mr. Gonzales: Is the matter being engaged by PMCD?

Hon. Tancoo: In some instances, I am advised, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So the staff who are on short-term, they have to await the completion of the PMCD exercise before they are considered to go back into long-term contracts?

Hon. Tancoo: So what the Clerk has advised us, if they were previously on PMCD contracts, then we will have to—[*Inaudible*] previously on fixed-term contracts, if those individuals were previously on fixed-term contracts then the Parliament will have to carry it to PMCD and then we will be looking at the establishment of the contracts.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, so just a supplementary to your answer. So in the 78 officers or employees who are currently on short-term contracts, are you saying that some of them were never on long-term contracts?

Hon. Tancoo: So yes, there would have been some persons on short-term contracts and it is not likely that they all never would have had longer-term contracts.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, so is the administration of the Parliament putting things in place to ensure that those short-term employees they transition back into long-term contracts once all of these matters are settled?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

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Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 002: Office of the Ombudsman; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; 001: General Administration; 002: Office of the Ombudsman; Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 27 to 28, 002: Commonwealth Bodies; 004: International Bodies; 007: Households. Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, I observe there is a short decrease in the allocation for Gratuities to Contract Officers. Given the fact that you have a number of employees that are currently on short-term and awaiting perhaps transitioning back into long-term contracts, how is the allocation going to impact upon the Parliament's ability to pay outstanding gratuities with this allocation?

Hon. Tancoo: So, Member, I am advised that payment is made as and when the gratuity becomes due, and the expectation is that should the funding not be sufficient, they would make an approach to the Ministry of Finance for reconsideration in the mid-year review.

Mr. Gonzales: So with the allocation of $2.8 million, can you say whether or not that allocation will be sufficient to pay outstanding gratuities in the new fiscal year?

Hon. Tancoo: That is the expectation, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And if it is not sufficient?

Hon. Tancoo: Then there are options available.

Mr. Gonzales: Then the appropriate arrangements will be made.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And how soon do you expect those outstanding gratuities to be settled?

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Hon. Tancoo: Well, those will be settled as they become due.

Mr. Gonzales: How many do you have outstanding at this point in time?

Hon. Tancoo: The Clerk has advised that he will put it in writing and share it with you.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, we will not move to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, at page 9, 005: Multi-sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 05 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Caesar and his ever-efficient team. Hon. Members, the question is that the sum of $51,439,319,662 be approved as a grand total.

Question put and agreed to.

Schedule ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be reported to the House.

4.55 p.m.

House resumed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo): Mr. Speaker, I wish to report that a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending the 30th day of September, 2027, was considered in

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the Standing Finance Committee and passed without amendments. I now beg to move that it be read a third time and passed.

Question put: That the Bill be now read a third time.

Mr. Gonzales: Division.

The House divided: Ayes 28 Noes 12

AYES

Padarath, Hon. B.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Hon. K.

Tancoo, Hon. D.

John, Hon. J.

Moonilal, Hon. Dr. R.

Lee, Hon. D.

Hosein, Hon. S.

Ameen, Hon. K.

Alexander, Hon. R.

Maharaj, Hon. D.

Mohit, Hon. V.

Sturge, Hon. W.

Bodoe, Hon. Dr. L.

Dowlath, Hon. Dr. M.

Ali, Dr. A.

Morris, W.

Benjamin, Hon. M.

Sobers, Hon. S.

Watts, Hon. P.

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Seecheran, Hon. Dr. R.

Kesar, Hon. E.

Elder, Hon. C.

Sam, Ms. S.

Narinesingh, H.

Roopnarine, Dr. N.

Gosine, Dr. C.

Thomas, D.

Sampson, J.

NOES

Gonzalez, M.

Beckles-Robinson, Mrs. P.

Imbert, C.

Gadsby-Dolly, Dr. N.

Young SC, S.

Scotland SC, K.

Robinson-Regis, Mrs. C.

de Nobriga, S.

Marcelle, K.

Des Vignes, H.

Birchwood, C.

Romain, D.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: Shame! Shame!

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Speaker, what type of parliamentary harassment is this? What

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is that about?

Hon. Members: Shame! Shame!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Come on, come on, silence! Come on! Members, silence! Let us just get on with the business at hand please.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

APPOINTMENT OF SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES

SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES

(APPOINTMENT OF)

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, can I revert to Announcements to make an important announcement? Pursuant to Standing Order 89(2), I have appointed the following Members to serve on the Sessional Committees of the House of Representatives for the Second Session Thirteenth Parliament.

Standing Orders Committee

Mr. Jagdeo Singh	Chairman
Mr. Saddam Hosein	Member
Mr. Wilfred Morris	Member
Mr. Hansen Narinesingh	Member
Mr. Marvin Gonzales	Member
Mr. Colm Imbert	Member

House Committee

Mr. Barry Padarath	Chairman
Mr. Clyde Elder	Member
Mr. Wilfred Nicholas Morris	Member

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Dr. Aiyna Ali	Member
Mr. Marvin Gonzales	Member
Mr. Colm Imbert	Member

Committee of Privileges

Mr. Jagdeo Singh	Chairman
Mr. Barry Padarath	Member
Mr. Saddam Hosein	Member
Mr. Devesh Maharaj	Member
Mr. Stuart Young SC	Member
Mr. Keith Scotland SC	Member

Statutory Instruments Committee

Mr. Jagdeo Singh	Chairman
Mr. Hansen Narinesingh	Member
Dr. Narindra Roopnarine	Member
Dr. Colin Neil Gosine	Member
Mr. Keith Scotland SC	Member
Mr. Kareem Marcelle	Member

Business Committee

Mr. Jagdeo Singh	Chairman
Mr. Barry Padarath	Member
Mr. Davendranath Tancoo	Member
Mr. Wilfred Nicholas Morris	Member
Mr. Marvin Gonzales	Member
Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly	Member

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ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Speaker: Thank you all very much. Leader of the House.

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath): Thank you most kindly, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Government inclusive of the hon. Prime Minister who has led this Bench. I want to thank Members of Parliament, all Members on both sides of the House for their participation during this exercise, and on behalf of all elected MPs, I wish to thank the staff led by the Clerk of the House—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath:—for phenomenal approach in terms of their work ethic and their guidance in delivering the Budget 2026/27 to its completion in terms of the debate and the Finance Committee. Mr. Speaker, we wish to thank you and the Deputy Speaker as well—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath:—for your leadership. Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday 30th October, at 1 30 p.m.. In due course, I will advise my friends opposite in terms of what will be the agenda for Friday's Sitting.

Mr. Speaker: Before I put the question on the adjournment, I myself would like to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of the staff of the Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Year after year, the staff of the Parliament displays its outstanding professionalism, commitment, and dedication, so I wish to place that on record.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.03 p.m.

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