

## ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

### AGALEGA ISLAND COUNCIL –CHAIRPERSON & MEMBERS - APPOINTMENT

**The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger)** (*By Private Notice*) asked the Acting Prime Minister whether, in regard to the welfare of the 52 families living on Agalega, he will state –

- (a) when will the Chairperson and other members of the Agalega Island Council, including three residents of Agalega and a relative of Agaleans living in Mauritius, be re-appointed;
- (b) what transport facilities are available to and from Agalega;
- (c) whether consideration will be given to the chartering of the Catovair plane as a means of transport to and from Agalega, and
- (d) when building site and other leases will be granted to Agaleans.

**The Ag. Prime Minister (Dr. R. Beebeejaun):** Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for bringing up this issue of Agalega. I will answer the questions as they are.

Mr Speaker, Sir, following the termination of the appointment of the former Chairperson of the Agalega Island Council in July this year, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Rodrigues and Outer Islands has been temporarily appointed Chairman of the Council pending the appointment of a new Chairman.

All other members of the Agalega Island Council have remained in post.

A new Chairperson of the Council will be appointed shortly.

As regards part (b) of the question, the Outer Island Development Corporation charters MV Mauritius Pride twice a year (April and September) for voyages to and from Agalega. In between these two main voyages, the services of fishing vessels as well as the Coast Guard vessel ‘Vigilant’ are also enlisted.

The House is aware that, for more than three years now, the surface of the runway at Agalega has deteriorated considerably rendering unsafe the landing and take off of aircraft. A Consultant, Gibbs (Mtius) Ltd, was appointed for the design and the preparation of tender documents, for the upgrading of the airstrip at Agalega. However, the matter rested there. In October 2004, it was decided to confer the responsibility of

constructing the airstrip to Airports of Mauritius Limited. But there was still no further development.

With the coming into office of the new Government, serious consideration for the rehabilitation of the airstrip at Agalega is being given. In this context, the Prime Minister, during his recent visit to India, requested Indian expertise for this project. The Indian side has agreed to give positive consideration to this request.

In the meantime, however, the '*Dornier*' is effecting flights only on an emergency basis.

As far as part (c) is concerned, I am informed by the Outer Islands Development Corporation that, in November of this year, it had approached the Ireland Blyth Limited for the chartering of the Catovair plane to effect a trip to Agalega. The company indicated that it was not prepared to effect the trip due to the state of the airstrip.

As regards part (d) of the question, I am informed by the Ministry of Rodrigues & Outer Islands that some 50 Agalean families had applied for the lease of land and the hire purchase of the house they are presently occupying. I am further informed that necessary survey works have been completed and that the Ministry of Housing & Lands will finalise the lease agreement very shortly. A letter of intent will be issued to each applicant before the end of the year.

**Mr Bérenger:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I am sure the Ag. Prime Minister is aware that, prior to the last general elections, as Prime Minister, I made a visit to Agalega. We introduced the use of money, whereas before the residents were paid in kind. There is now a resident medical practitioner. So, there have been quite a number of positive developments. Nevertheless, I would like to ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether he is aware that, after the House, in April 2004, approved the Agalega Island Council Act, there have been five very positive meetings of the Agalega Island Council.

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I am informed that there have been four meetings. Two Board meetings were held in Agalega in September 2004 and in April 2005, and two special meetings were held in Mauritius on 24 November 2004 and afterwards. I understand that the meetings have been positive, but there has been one major problem, namely attendance and quorum. The meetings that were held in Agalega had almost full quorum, whereby six out of seven members attended. With regard to the meetings that were held here, three representatives from Agalega could not come, and so there were only four local representatives. They are doing some good work.

Let me expand a little further on the subject. There has been a real problem of getting a quorum in this case, and attendance has been few. So, from August 2004 to July of this year, there have been only four meetings

out of the nine months because of these difficulties, and attempts to get a quorum have failed recently.

**Mr Bérenger:** I'll ask the Ag. Prime Minister to check his information. In fact, there have been two formal meetings here where the three residents from Agalega came and there were three other informal meetings here - the minutes of proceedings are available - where the three residents of Agalega could not come. The decision was taken that the Council would meet alternatively in Mauritius and in Agalega, but this was never implemented. In fact, if the Ag. Prime Minister will check his notes, we will see that there was no meeting in Agalega. There were two full meetings here and three informal meetings. But, my point, is, Mr Speaker, Sir - the Ag. Prime Minister will agree with me - that these meetings show how serious they were. The Chairperson, the residents from Agalega, the other members did a very good work. All the main issues, all the main problems in Agalega, affecting the residents, the 52 families there, were taken up. There were the issues of land leases, students travelling back to their families in Agalega during holiday time, educational problems, alcoholism, television reception issues, all these were taken up by the...

*(Interruptions)*

**Dr. Jeetah:** Mr Speaker, Sir, on a point of order. The Leader of the Opposition is getting into the habit of making speeches. It's question time. He should be putting questions.

*(Interruptions)*

**Mr Speaker:** I have already given a ruling on this issue to the effect that some latitude should be allowed to Members to make the questions intelligible. I will ask the hon. Leader of the Opposition to continue.

**Mr Bérenger:** I don't know if the Ag. Prime Minister read press conferences and statements in the press recently in reference to Agalega. Can I request the Ag. Prime Minister to see to it that copies of these five Minutes of Proceedings be sent to those who have taken public stands, Père Labour and others in the Catholic Church, certain journalists to show what concrete positive works had been done?

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** I agree with the Leader of the Opposition. In fact, I have met the Secretary to the Board this morning and the information I have given come from the Secretary, but maybe she has not got the full information, I certainly will make a point for circularising the information the Leader of the Opposition has requested.

**Mr Bérenger:** When the Prime Minister was back and before he left, I took up this issue of Agalega with him, which is very disturbing if we go by the statements that we read in the press. Will the Ag. Prime Minister agree with me that it is not a positive thing that there has been no meeting of the Agalega Island Council since the last general election, that is, over the last five months? I heard the Ag. Prime Minister say that

pending the reappointment of a new Chairperson, the Permanent Secretary is acting, but there has been no meeting of the Agalega Island Council. Can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether he agrees with me that the urgency right now is for the Agalega Island Council to sit, work and pick up where they left after those five meetings?

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** I agree with the Leader of the Opposition. The last sitting was in April 2005 it should have been monthly, it was not held due to certain difficulties and certainly I'll make it a point of asking the Prime Minister when he comes to see to it that things are speeded up.

**Mr Bérenger:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the big issues these days, as the Ag. Prime Minister pointed out is this lack of air communication between Agalega and Mauritius, because of the state of the strip, the decision has had to be taken that the *Dornier* will go there only in emergency situations, because the strip being as it is every time it lands, takes off and so on, there is damage to the radar and other installations. I heard the Ag. Prime Minister say that the *Catovair* Company has stated that with the bad quality of the airstrip as it is now that they cannot operate. Can I request the Ag. Prime Minister to double-check on that? Because my information is to the contrary, that unlike the *Dornier* which is a specialised plane, very low with radar and so on, the other plane is an ordinary plane, high on wheels and that could operate even with the bad conditions of the air strip.

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** I will certainly double check. I have checked this information this morning and, as the Leader of the Opposition, I am equally surprised that they have not taken up this urgent request from all quarters to help in communication with Agalega. Yes, certainly, I will double check?

**Mr Bérenger:** Can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether he can provide us with any information in relation to our Honorary Consul in Arizona, having visited Agalega and having made certain offers through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs according to a communiqué issued a few days ago by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** I am entirely unaware of what the Leader of the Opposition is saying, but from what I hear from my colleague, it is not to be taken seriously.

**Mr Bérenger:** Mr Speaker, Sir, can I again appeal to the Ag. Prime Minister, one, to circulate to Père Labour, the journalists concerned and so on, copies of the five Minutes of Proceedings of the five meetings that took place and that, indeed, that there is urgency for the Agalega Island Council to re-start its work if required under the Chair of the Permanent Secretary for the time being, it is urgent that it re-starts its work and that we appoint an independent person, either the former Chairperson – if you look at the Minutes you will see what great work he did – or anybody else with knowledge of Agalega, commitment to that kind of situation. I, therefore, appeal to the Ag. Prime Minister that we do these two things: we circulate those Minutes of Proceedings and we get the Agalega Island Council to re-start its work.

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** I have taken note, but as I've said, I am also aghast of this declaration and I would rather not make any reply in this House or anywhere else because it can only be replied by providing more information about what had been going in the past and what is still going on in terms of the efforts this present Government is making to see that the welfare of the Agaleans, including students, and everyone else takes place in the best of conditions.

**Mr Bérenger:** Can I also appeal to the Ag. Prime Minister that he should see with the Prime Minister? When we look at the Minutes of Proceedings we see that they took it up at the level of the Agalega Island Council that there is need for the Prime Minister to step in to have both the Agalega Island Council and the OI DC (Outer Islands Development Corporation) to knock heads together so that it be clear which role each one of them has to play because the OI DC - I am sure the Ag. Prime Minister will agree with me - for a long time it could work in certain circumstances, but it behaved as the owner of the island, whereas now there is an Agalega Island Council above it all and the OI DC is only one operator present in Agalega. There is, therefore, need to explain the role of each entity well for the welfare of the residents there.

**The Ag. Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I could not agree more with the Leader of the Opposition. The role should be defined properly.

**Mr Speaker:** Hon. Members, the Table has been advised that PQ No. I B/581...  
*(Interruptions)*

Order! Hon. Jugnauth order, please! I am on my feet, please.

The Table has been advised that PQs I B/581 and I B/622 have been transferred to Dr. the hon. Ag. Prime Minister. In keeping this practice, these questions will be answered at the end of Prime Minister's question time, that is, after PQ I B/572, time permitting. On the other hand PQ I B/567 addressed to the hon. Ag. Prime Minister has been transferred to the hon. Minister of Social Security National Solidarity, Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions. This question will be answered at the end of question time, that is, after PQ No. I B/632 time permitting.