Debate No. 26 of 03.08.04

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

GRAND' BAIE - EXPLOSION ON 25.07.04 – INQUIRIES

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) (By Private Notice) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Home Affairs whether, in regard to the explosion of Sunday 25 July 2004 in Grand’ Baie, he will state –

(a) if there has been a change in its cause as given in the communiqué of the Ministry of Tourism & Leisure of 26 July 2004 and, if so, why;
(b) the progress, if any, of the investigation after the interrogation of witnesses;
(c) if traces of explosives have been found and, if so, their nature, and
(d) if it has criminal and other links.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker Sir, the House will recall that on Tuesday last, that is, on the day following the issue by the Ministry of Tourism of a communiqué aimed at reassuring the tourism world in general, I made a statement in the House, indicating that, at that stage, all indications were that there was no terrorism dimension to last Sunday's incident at Grand' Baie but that, nevertheless, all possible causes of the incident were being fully investigated into.

Replying to a supplementary question, I had mentioned that the possibility that the incident had been caused by gas leakages remained the highest probability. But I had again insisted that all possible causes were being fully investigated into.

Later on that same day, the Forensic Science Laboratory reported that their physical examination of the site had led them to the conclusion that a high density detonation had occurred, suggestive of a high explosive having been involved.

The next day, the Forensic Science Laboratory reported that their chemical analysis of swabbings on items collected from the site had revealed
the presence of explosive residues. They added that the official forensic report, which will take some time to be finalised, would follow as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the fact that the Forensic Science Laboratory had reported finding the presence of explosive residues on the site does not modify the earlier assessment that there is no terrorism dimension to the incident, being given that three of the four elements normally involved in any terrorist event are not present.

The three missing elements are -

(i) the absence of evidence of items that go into the making of a "dirty bomb", i.e nails, iron filings etc;
(ii) the incident did not take place at a time of affluence, and
(iii) there has been no "revendication".

The reported findings of the Forensic Science Laboratory have brought the Police inquiry to concentrate on the local criminal trail, but all possible causes of the incident are still being fully investigated into with the assistance of experts from the FBI.

For his part, Mr Rex Stockham, FBI Explosive Expert who has inspected the incident site, has expressed the opinion that the incident involved a gas explosion although, at this stage, he could not state what circumstances had led to the gas explosion. He informed that he would continue further investigations and would submit his report in a week's time.

The House will be kept informed of further developments as the inquiries proceed.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Prime Minister for explicitly telling us that now the FSL is saying that explosive residues have been found. Can I, therefore, ask him what was the source of information that led the Ministry of Tourism to issue the first communiqué? Was it the Police, the Scene of Crime officers or the FSL?
The Prime Minister: That’s behind us, Mr Speaker, Sir. As I said, the communiqué from the Ministry of Tourism aimed at reassuring the tourism world in general, and it has done just that, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am not so sure that the Prime Minister is right on that. You cannot reassure anybody by giving misleading statements, which turn out not to be true. In fact, the contrary can happen and people become suspicious. I said that last week, Mr Speaker, Sir. I don’t think that it is right for the Prime Minister to say that this is behind us. It is important to know on what basis was that communiqué issued.

The Prime Minister: I don’t wish to add anything, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I cannot understand why the Prime Minister does not want to answer that question. Does he not agree, therefore, that it was wrong and reckless for the Ministry of Tourism to issue that communiqué?

The Prime Minister: No, Sir. As I said, the aim was to reassure the tourism world in general; and the Minister of Tourism with the officers of his Ministry have just done that.

Dr. Ramgoolam: How can it reassure when the communiqué states very clearly that it was an accident, not a criminal matter, that it was caused by an explosion of a gas cylinder and has no other links? Does the Prime Minister still stand by the communiqué?

The Prime Minister: I don’t stand by the communiqué. The priority of priorities, when the first statements were made and the communiqués issued, was to convince the world at large, particularly the tourism world, that there was no terrorism dimension to that incident. The Minister of Tourism, my colleague, the Minister of Public of Infrastructure, who was on the spot and questioned by the international press, and myself are fully satisfied that we were totally successful in eliminating, on the basis of concrete indications, any terrorism dimension to the incident. That was the priority of priorities, and we succeeded in doing just that. The Minister of Tourism and the Ministry of Tourism did their share in doing just that.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Does not the Prime Minister agree that it was misleading to say that it was a gas cylinder explosion when, in fact, now,
from what the FSL is saying, we hear that it is a high density detonation, suggesting high explosive and that traces of explosives have been found?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the hon. Leader of the Opposition has listened to half of my reply. I did say that our Forensic Science Laboratory has reported, and I repeat –

“(…) that their chemical analysis of swabbings on items collected from the site had revealed the presence of explosive residues”.

I did add that, for his part, and I repeat –

“(…)Mr Rex Stockham, FBI explosive expert, who has inspected the incident site, has expressed the opinion that the incident involved a gas explosion(…)”.

I did say that I’ll keep the House and the hon. Leader of the Opposition fully informed as the inquiries proceed.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I heard the Prime Minister say that the FSL has said that they have found evidence of high density detonation suggestive of high density explosives and, therefore, that is also a possibility instead of saying that it was a gas cylinder. That is why I am coming to the point.

**The Prime Minister:** I have said what I have said.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I remember last week I asked the Prime Minister - I had this information, of course, you cannot say whether it is official or not - whether the people who supplied gas to that complex suggested that, first of all, they were quite sure that it was not a gas leak. Two things that they were saying were that the gas cylinders were intact, they knew how much gas they had supplied, how much was left in the cylinder and they had found no evidence of leakage. The Prime Minister said no, that information is incorrect. Can he say whether that information was correct or not?

**The Prime Minister:** Sir, I am not prepared at all to rely on information or comments made by private parties in such issues. We have experts, let experts deal with it. We have our local experts who are doing a fantastic job. The experts and the Police Force are being helped by the FBI, let them do their work. Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, I am not going
to rely on what the gas importers or any gas salesman and so on, have to say on the matter. Whatever assistance they want to bring in, they should bring in, but they should not interfere with the inquiries being carried out by the best professional experts.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** From what I see, Mr Speaker, Sir, the papers, in fact, even say that the gas experts who came from abroad are saying the same thing and they are submitting a report today, I believe.

**The Prime Minister:** Well, I do not go by newspapers. As you know, experts in such fields will never come out piecemeal. They will do their work and then come out with a full report, whereas journalists have to publish every day. So, they have to find *croustillants* news to publish and this is what has happened this morning. Reference to some private sector experts, I understand, concerns the experts that have been sent by insurance interest. They will do their share also, but I am not again going to rely at all on information or opinions put forward by those who represent private insurance interest. They have to do their work; our best experts, the Police and the FBI experts are doing their work. I am totally satisfied that the work is being done professionally, with utmost care; let the inquiries carry on, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can he say, as he said last week, that gas leakage is the highest probability? Will he still maintain that?

**The Prime Minister:** It seems again that the hon. Leader of the Opposition hears half of what I say. Last week I said that the probability of the incident has been caused by gas leakages or anything else linked to gas or gases as I put it. Now, I have just reported that the FBI explosive experts have come to the conclusion that the incident involved a gas explosion. At this stage, we have what our Forensic Science Laboratory has come forward with, we have also what the FBI explosive experts have come forward with. En passant, reading one of this morning's papers, you would have the impression that there are missing elements - *les conduits de gaz de la cuisine introuvables*. This is the kind of title to get the newspaper increasing its circulation, but it is wrong according to information I have. It is totally wrong. As I said, both our local and foreign experts are collecting all the items with due care. So, there is nothing *introuvable* as with that kind of explosion - I am sure the hon. Leader of the Opposition who was on the site would agree with me - that there is nothing *introuvable*, there is nothing
sensational like that. But it is a very difficult job being given the power of that explosion. Everything is being done and there is nothing introuvable, but there are things blown all over the place.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I do not know then why *l'Express* put that in their headline as it did. But I am asking the Prime Minister to confirm the information of last week, the highest probability was that it was a gas leak or a gas explosion of a cylinder. Is that still the highest probability after the FSL? He is not answering the question. He can either say yes it is or no, it is not. He is saying FSL has seen the trace of an explosive, he is saying that the FSL has said there is likely to have been a high density explosion suggesting high explosive and, at the same time, the FBI expert says something else. What is the highest probability now? That is what we are asking.

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I do not have to place a bet, but let us be serious. On the one hand, our Forensic Science Laboratory has put forward a preliminary report which points in the direction of explosive residues…

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Prime Minister has given reports from two different experts. Now you are asking about the probability; that may amount to asking the hon. Prime Minister to form an opinion on the basis of the two reports. That may not be correct, hon. Leader of the Opposition.

**The Prime Minister:** I was not going to give an opinion. I was going again to point out to the two reports that are before us and to appeal to the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the House to stay with us and I said, as Prime Minister, I would keep the House fully informed as the inquiries proceed.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I am not asking for an opinion, but last week he himself said it was the highest probability that it was gas. Now we cannot downgrade the FSL for having found explosives. This is a fact that they found explosives and this is a new element in the inquiry. Does not the Prime Minister agree?

**The Prime Minister:** There are two new elements. The findings of the Forensic Science Laboratory and the opinion put forward by the FBI explosive expert; and inquiries are not yet completed. Inquiries are going on
and I am satisfied, as I said, that the inquiries are being carried out with the utmost care and professionalism. So, I do not think that we have to rush in to anything. Let them complete their work, let the inquiries be completed and I'll keep the House informed.

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, the whole population is baffled by the amateurism with which Government is dealing with this matter…

(Interruptions)

The Prime Minister: Shame!

Mr Dulloo: We only have to read the answer of last week…

Mr Speaker: Order please!

The Prime Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, Sir, on such a matter of national importance, the hon. Member does not put a question, but makes a statement which goes to the heart of the professionalism of our experts and the FBI expert. I think he should be made to withdraw that statement, Sir.

Mr Dulloo: The amateurism of Ministers…

Mr Speaker: Hon. Dulloo, please. Let me reiterate again my earlier stand that this is Question Time and its purpose is to seek information from Ministers and this is what Members have to do if they want to put questions. Ask for information, put questions, make no statement, please!

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, in the answer given last week by the hon. Prime Minister, he insisted on the question of gas and this is what he said. He mentioned cooking gas, air conditioning gas, gas used in nightclubs to create atmosphere and these were after the official communiqué from Government stating that it was a gas cylinder explosion. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether, when he was making the statement in the House, he relied on the preliminary inquiry from the Police to make such a statement?

The Prime Minister: I said yes last week.
**Mr Dulloo:** May I ask the hon. Prime Minister, therefore, on what date and at what time was the report of this preliminary inquiry submitted to him and by whom?

**The Prime Minister:** I have said what I need to say at this stage, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Mr Dulloo:** May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether it is not amateurism to report to the House something which was not in the report of the Police?

**The Prime Minister:** No, Sir.

**Mr Dulloo:** I asked the hon. Prime Minister a question last week. The preliminary inquiry suggests - Government officially said to the public and to the nation at large - that it is an accident caused by the explosion of a gas cylinder and has no other link. And the hon. Prime Minister said that the preliminary inquiry was based on the report of the Police. The preliminary inquiry referred to was the report of the Police. This is why we are asking him whether at all the Police submitted a report of the preliminary inquiry to him and whether that report was based on the fact that the explosion was caused by a gas cylinder and that there was no other link.

**The Prime Minister:** I was in touch with all the officers concerned on a daily basis, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Mr Hurnam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, would the Prime Minister inform the House when was the latest interim report sent to him regarding his answer today?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't know which interim report the hon. Member is mentioning. But I was very precise in making reference to the report from the Forensic Science Laboratory which, as I said earlier on, came in last Wednesday and the opinion put forward by the FBI explosive expert these last hours.

**Mr Hurnam:** Well, I assume, Mr Speaker, Sir, that the Prime Minister gave the first reply last week on the basis of preliminary inquiry so that there must have been a report then when he made the statement last
Tuesday. Subsequently, how often does he receive an interim report on the issue?

**The Prime Minister:** I have replied. I think the hon. Member did not listen to what I said. Since that explosion on Sunday, I have been in touch with the Commissioner of Police and all the officers concerned on a daily basis. That's what I said two minutes ago.

**Dr. Boolell:** Will the Prime Minister state whether besides the US, assistance has been sought from other countries?

**The Prime Minister:** Assistance has been offered from, as I said, Mr Speaker, India, France and South Africa. I have had the occasion of thanking those friendly countries for the assistance offered and should we find that we should request for further assistance, we shall certainly do so.

**Dr. David:** Can we know, Mr Speaker, Sir, from the hon. Prime Minister why the assistance of these countries has not been enlisted so far?

**The Prime Minister:** Because the experts concerned have not advised me in that direction, Mr Speaker. The Commissioner of Police and his top officers have been working day and night. They have not advised me that we need further foreign assistance. They are doing their job, as I said, professionally and with utmost care.

**Dr. Jeetah:** Mr Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Prime Minister why assistance was sought from the FBI and not from other countries?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the hon. Member has not listened to what I have just said. Assistance was not sought from the FBI. Assistance was offered by the United States and the FBI. That assistance was agreed upon. There is good collaboration between the Mauritius Police Force and our Forensic Science Laboratory and all our experts here. There is good collaboration between our Police and the FBI, but the chain of command remains firmly in Mauritian hands.

**Dr. Jeetah:** Mr Speaker, Sir, we all know that the presence of the FBI normally has very bad effects on the economy.

*(Interruptions)*
Whenever FBI comes in a country, this is well known. Mr Speaker, Sir, my question to the Prime Minister is….

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Jeetah: I would like to ask the Prime Minister what is the effect of the FBI on FDI.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member should be serious, getting FBI and FDI mixed up together, Mr Speaker, Sir!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: As I said, assistance was offered, assistance has been accepted, but, as I said, the chain of command remains firmly in Mauritian hands. Mr Speaker, Sir, the fact that the FBI is here, reassures if anything. No one is more touchy on terrorism than the United States. We have nothing to hide. It is clear that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident and it is good that the FBI is present when the inquiries are proceeding, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Dulloo: The fact that such a high profile is being given to the presence of the FBI these days, may I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether this will not have a contrary effect of leading not only the Mauritian population, but the international community to conclude that there is inquiry on terrorism which is directly linked with the terrorism prevailing in the United States?

The Prime Minister: Quite the opposite, Mr Speaker, Sir. I do hope that the final reports confirm that there is no terrorism dimension to the incident. So far, this is what we assess. Based on concrete facts, I do hope as a patriot and I am sure all of us - I am not too sure - should earnestly wish that the final conclusion confirms that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident. When that does take place, the fact that the FBI was with us all along, would give to such conclusions all possible credibility, Mr Speaker,
Sir. I hope that this is what happens; and things will have proved us totally right in the way we are going about this whole incident.

Mr Dulloo: People talking of lanate would not be unpatriotic for the Prime Minister, of course! Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether there was any consultation between him and the Minister of Tourism before the issue of the communiqué of 26 July and the consultation, if ever, was on the basis of which report submitted by whom?

The Prime Minister: I have replied, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Is the hon. Prime Minister still of the view that the Minister of Tourism has done a great job?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I repeat, the Minister of Tourism was on the spot at three in the morning. And if I am not mistaken, he phoned me at that time also. And you know this is Mauritius, he woke me up at three, briefed me, everything. The Commissioner of Police, of course, phoned me a few minutes later or before - I am not too sure. And do you know what happens? At six in the morning, a radio privée wakes me up. This is Mauritius, Mr Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: So, I have all praise for the Minister of Tourism who turned up on the spot at two in the morning and I repeat…

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please!

The Prime Minister: …the priority of priorities, at that point in time, was to make it clear on the basis of all the information we had that there was no terrorism dimension. Let's think a contrario, if there had been panic - there has not been one cancellation, not one, Mr Speaker, Sir - if the Minister, myself and others we had not created the mood - and I congratulate the population of Mauritius, the population of Grand' Baie, the families of the victims, the Police, the Forensic Science Laboratory, all of them they
have been superb in their behaviour, Mr Speaker, Sir, and I am totally satisfied that we did what was required to leave this terrorism dimension behind us, Mr Speaker, Sir. We have acted in the most patriotic, responsible and professional manner like our Police, like our officers, Mr Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I think it is wrong for the hon. Prime Minister to try to go down that line.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, if the hon. Minister gives a misleading statement in the hope that this will reassure people, and then you find that, now, the FSL is saying that they have found traces of explosives, etc., this can have the contrary effect. It is wrong for the hon. Prime Minister to say what he said. I would ask him to ensure that there is a structured response next time, if ever there is any calamity, and that it goes through the PMO and the Commissioner of Police.

The Prime Minister: I don't agree at all with the hon. Leader of the Opposition. Mr Speaker, Sir, I won't make comparisons between the way we have handled this crisis and the early 1999 handling of the situation!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, the country is there to appreciate; and I am sure that the whole country and the international community are making the difference. As we say, at that point in time, the indication was that the incident had been caused by gas leaks or other issues linked to the gas leaks. Today, it is the FBI expert who has come to the conclusion that the incident involved a gas explosion, not me, not Minister Gayan; it is the FBI expert in explosives who comes out with this opinion.
Mr Speaker, Sir, I don't think we should play about in an irresponsible and unpatriotic way with that issue as some Members - not all - in the Opposition are doing. We have two part reports; both inquiries are proceeding...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: We should appreciate the professionalism that everybody is showing, Mr Speaker, Sir. I appeal to all concerned, especially to the press and the radios, not to come out with sensational pieces of information that are not information, Mr Speaker, Sir. We have a duty towards our country. All of us have done a great job in the interest of the country; let's keep behaving in that way, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Last week, I asked the hon. Prime Minister whether there was a toxicology report on the cadavers of the post-mortem. Can he say, now, whether that report is final and does he have any conclusion on that?

The Prime Minister: We talked of preliminary or what have you, Mr Speaker, Sir. Two young people have died. There has been an autopsy; the report is there.

Mr Speaker: Hon. Members, I have been advised that PQ Nos. B/667 and B/668 will be replied by the hon. Prime Minister.