GRAND'BAIE - EXPLOSION ON 25.07.04

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 that occurred at Grand'Baie in the morning of Sunday 25 July 2004, he will state -

(a) whether the inquiry to determine the cause thereof is completed;
(b) by whom was the inquiry conducted, and
(c) the conclusions, if any, reached.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker Sir, may I be allowed at the outset to renew the expression of my sympathy to the two bereaved families, and to all others who have been wounded in the incident.

I also extend my sympathy to all those who have had their property destroyed or damaged.

I also wish to put on record my appreciation of the work of the Police Force in general, and the Special Mobile Force and the Forensic Science Laboratory in particular, as well as that of officers of the Ministry of Health.

In regard to part (a), I wish to inform the House that the inquiry is not yet completed.

In regard to part (b), the inquiry is being conducted by the Major Crime Investigation Team, led by Superintendent of Police, Mr Parsad. The team is assisted by officers of the Northern Division, the Criminal Investigation Division, and other units such as the Scene of Crime Office. Police photographers, draughtsmen and scientific officers of the Forensic Science Laboratory are also actively involved.

I am advised by the Commissioner of Police that one officer of the United States Embassy who happens to reside some 300 yards away was at the site, but he has not been involved in any way whatsoever in the inquiry.
I wish to add that several friendly countries such as the United States of America, France, India and South Africa have offered to assist in the investigations.

Regarding part (c), at this stage all indications are that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident. Nevertheless, all possible causes of the incident are being fully investigated into.

I shall keep the House and the hon. Leader of the Opposition informed of developments.

We shall also review and strengthen provisions pertaining to storage and piping systems involving cooking and other gases.

Finally, the House may have taken note of the very irresponsible behaviour of some of the local radios in the wake of last Sunday's incident.

**Dr Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Opposition, I would like to join the hon. Prime Minister in presenting our deepest condolences to the parents and families of the two victims and our sympathy to those who have been wounded and also to those who have suffered material loss in this case.

I thank the hon. Prime Minister for his answer. It is not a long question, but we want to get more information. First of all, if the inquiry is not completed, may I ask him on what basis did the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure issue the communiqué which suggested that it was an accident caused by the explosion of a gas cylinder and that there was no other link?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition has heard my reply. Let me repeat: "At this stage, all indications are that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident". But I also said that "we shall also review and strengthen provisions pertaining to storage and piping systems involving cooking and other gases". As I said, nevertheless, all possible causes of the incident are being fully investigated into, but the possibility that the incident was caused by gas leakages remains the highest probability.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I have listened to the Prime Minister and I understand what he has said. But why should the Minister of Tourism come and say in a communiqué that it was an accident caused by the explosion of a gas cylinder? It is as if they know already! But what we have heard and
seen is that all the gas cylinders are intact. Perhaps the Prime Minister would be able to give us more information on that.

**The Prime Minister:** Sir, they can be intact with the gas having leaked out. I am not expert there. That is why I mentioned "cooking and other gases." At this stage, we are not excluding anything. Let the inquiry be completed. The possibility that different types of gases are involved also cannot, at this point in time, be put aside. I understand perfectly my colleague, the hon. Minister of Tourism. I am the Prime Minister, I am responsible for security and I am replying. The priority concerned of my colleague was to reassure tourists in general, the travel agencies and so on. I think he has done a great job of that, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I understand that Government wants to reassure, and we also, because this is a national tragedy, Mr Speaker, Sir. But the fact that a communiqué comes out from the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure saying that it is the explosion of a gas cylinder when the inquiry is not completed, in fact, can work the other way round, creating the impression that we are in a rush to show that there was nothing else. It creates suspicion for no reason whatsoever. It should not have been so!

*Interjections*

There is no such thing as preliminary report in a case like this! If the hon. Minister does not know, I am telling him! According to me, it should not have been! This is why I will ask the Prime Minister whether he would ensure that nobody issues communiqué, except with the strict authorisation of the Commissioner of Police or the Prime Minister's Office.

**The Prime Minister:** No, Mr Speaker, Sir. It is difficult to agree to what the hon. Leader of the Opposition has just said. When my colleague, the Minister of Public Infrastructure, turned up, he was questioned by the international and local press, and he gave a correct answer. By that time, the priority was to cool things down, to reassure the population, and my colleague, the Minister of Public Infrastructure did just that, and in the following hours, my colleague, the Minister of Tourism, did his part in reassuring the international tourists world. I think we should keep cool and
each Minister does his job; and the Prime Minister and the Police are doing theirs as well.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Here, I disagree with the Prime Minister. We might want to keep cool, but we should not create the perception that we are rushing to say that it is because of this and that when inquiries are not completed. I think that the Prime Minister's Office should ensure that nobody, as it was the case in the past, decides to issue a communiqué. The communiqué should go through the Commissioner of Police and the Prime Minister's Office. I will urge the Prime Minister to see to it that nobody else issues communiqué until the inquiry is completed.

**The Prime Minister:** I don’t agree with the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The Police and myself are under full control of the inquiry, which is not yet completed. My colleague, the Minister responsible for Tourism, had an urgent job to do, because unfortunately, as I mentioned, of the irresponsible behaviour of some of the local radios - it was also flashed in Reuters, AFP, that there had been explosion – and the rumour had it that there was a terrorism dimension to the incident. Therefore, the priority was to cool things down, not to damage our reputation as a tourist destination. This had to be done, and this has been done. As I said, the most likely explanation at this stage is gas leaks, but nothing is definite. What I am happy to have reported is that, at this stage, all indications are that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident.

**Mr Dulloo:** I think the population behaved marvellously and kept cool in the circumstances, especially the inhabitants of Grand’ Baie. This should be placed on record, and we should thank the whole population for their exemplary behaviour. But the communiqué of the Ministry of Tourism, after saying that around 12 others were slightly injured – around 12 others shows amateurism – says that preliminary inquiry suggests that it is an accident caused by the explosion of a gas cylinder and has no other link. Can the hon. Prime Minister say which preliminary inquiry was conducted that led to the suggestion, and whether it is the same inquiry as being conducted by the Police and which was referred to by him just now?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, Sir.
**Mr Hurnam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, in view of the magnitude of the explosion, did it occur to the hon. Prime Minister to institute a high powered committee at all?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course, not, Mr Speaker, Sir. In a case like that, I think it is perfectly proper for the Police inquiry to go on the way it has been going.

**Dr. Boolell:** Mr Speaker, Sir, since the main concern of any responsible Government is to make sure that doubt does not linger and no stone should be left unturned, may I ask the Prime Minister, as we don’t have the expertise and the technology, why is it that Government did not enlist the help of foreign experts?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not going to give all details and all the names of the officers concerned, as we are dealing with security matters. We are already getting foreign assistance as we do require. But I am very happy that the USA, France, India and South Africa have come forward very rapidly to offer assistance. We shall certainly turn to such assistance as and when required.

**Mr Duval:** On radio, this morning, someone from the American Embassy stated publicly that help has been offered by the American Embassy and accepted by the Mauritian Government for members of the FBI to come to Mauritius. Will the Prime Minister give this information to the House? It has already been on the radio this morning.

**The Prime Minister:** I don’t follow the bad example of radios, Mr Speaker, Sir. I do my duty as Prime Minister. As I said, we shall turn to foreign assistance as and when required, but I don’t consider it my duty to flash names or information. We have friends, and they have offered their assistance. We will turn to them as and when required, and with the proper discretion.

**Mr Duval:** This was the message given by the Public Affairs Officer of the American Embassy. It is not something that the radio has, in fact, itself reported, something that came out like this. Obviously, Government is trying to give the message that there is nothing to prove that this is anything else but an accident. Why, then, were there so many soldiers, armoured cars in Grand’ Baie all day long, when, in fact, this should have been dealt with
by the Police and other units and not give the impression to tourists and everybody that this is other than that?

(Interruptions)

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is being *digne de lui-même* as usual, Mr Speaker, Sir! I am not going to reply to that kind of childish comment. Shame!

Mr Duval: Mr Speaker, Sir, shame on the Government for giving the wrong message!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order, please!

(Interruptions)

Order! Hon. Minister of Health, please.

Mr Dulloo: Mr Speaker, Sir, we all have had the opportunity to express our sympathy to the bereaved families, the casualties and also to those who have suffered material loss. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister what is being done to support those families who have been seriously affected and more particularly those who suffered material loss and who have got to go back to their normal activities again?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have been on the spot to offer my sympathy and to see what we can do. Let the inquiry proceed and we stand to help whoever needs to be helped, in whatever way is available.

Dr. Chady: While replying to the questions, the Prime Minister did state a few times that certain radios have been acting irresponsibly. Could he state which radios and what did they say?

(Interruptions)

This is very important, and we would like to know whether action would be taken against them if they had been so irresponsible, to the extent that they might have said that the cause could be other than accidental.
**The Prime Minister:** I don’t think that on a solemn occasion like that is the moment to say what this kind of irresponsible behaviour from some of the local radios might lead us to take action. We will come back to that on another occasion. But, on this solemn occasion, I don’t want to go into that, and I am sure that the hon. Member, like anyone of us, has been listening to all the different radios since that very sad incident.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, if we have assistance from the USA and other friendly countries, like India, South Africa, etc, we welcome it. The Prime Minister said that we would ask for assistance as and when required. In fact, if he wants to get assistance, I urge him to get it early on, because if the clues are lost – and this is the danger that happens every time – it is very difficult to find out all the evidence. Will he consider that?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, but let us not downgrade our Police Force, our officers. They are doing a great job, Mr Speaker, Sir, protecting the site. That is why soldiers were there, of course. Any child knows that it was required to have all the SMF and everybody concerned to do the best job possible; and that is what has taken place, Mr Speaker, Sir. The United States Embassy does its work the way it chooses to do it; I do mine the way I choose to do it. Whatever statement has come from the United States Embassy is their responsibility. Foreign assistance is already here in Mauritius, but I am not going to give details. Let the inquiry proceed. All I can tell the House is that every precaution has been professionally taken for the inquiry to be conducted as rapidly as possible, but in the best circumstances possible.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** When I went there, it was clear that the Police are doing a proper job. I talked to the Assistant Commissioner of Police who was there at that time and he had sanitised the area and cordoned it off. This is a national issue and not a question of party politics. I think that mistakes were already made at the beginning. For example, they should never have asked the Prime Minister and Minister Jeeha to walk around at the site. First of all, for security itself, it was not good and second, contamination was occurring. It is a fact! There is no point for the Prime Minister to shake his head! It is a fact that, once people go on the site, there is contamination. The Prime Minister should not shake his head!
The Prime Minister: Apparently the hon. Leader of the Opposition, former Prime Minister, is an expert! He knows that I move fast.

(Interruptions)

Listen, before reacting!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, he should have asked himself why, whereas the incident took place at two in the morning, I waited until half past twelve to be on the spot. There was a reason for that. I gave time for everything that needed to be done be done. When I turned up, a restricted number of people were allowed, under the control of the Commissioner of Police and his officers, to be on site. Every precaution was taken, Mr Speaker, Sir. I repeat that, if I turned up at half past twelve whereas the incident took place at two in the morning, there was reason for that. No mistakes were made either at the beginning or as the inquiry proceeded.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I quite agree that it was right not to turn up early in the morning even though he moves fast. But the point is that, once you get into an area which is supposed to be sanitised, cordoned off and not to be contaminated, nobody should be walking around in that area. That is what I am saying.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, every precaution has been taken. There has been no mistake, no faux pas at the beginning or as the inquiry has proceeded, and we will carry on the same way. I repeat that we should not downgrade our local Police Officers and other local experts. They are doing a great job, and I am very proud that so rapidly we have been able to bring to light all indications to the effect that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident. It is very good that foreign countries have come to offer assistance. Of course, I am sure the hon. Leader of the Opposition and the other Members will have understood that I referred to different countries in chronological order, and not in alphabetical order, that they offered assistance. That’s the only reason that these friendly countries are listed in my reply.
Dr. Ramgoolam: Mr Speaker, Sir, I see that some materials have been taken out and debris have been removed. Can I ask, for example, whether the glass pieces have been collected and kept somewhere or have they been swept away?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I am not an expert and neither is the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The experts are handling the whole situation, including the Forensic Experts. They are taking care of everything and I do not interfere. I trust those officers, the Commissioner of Police, the top officers, the Forensic Experts and so on and I am sure that they are doing all that must be done.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can we know whether it has been established where the explosion took place at all or is it too early to say?

The Prime Minister: We think it has been established, but not in a definitive way. We think that it has been established that *le foyer* of the explosion was on the first floor in a given spot, but it is not definitive.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am saying this, Sir, because - it is not that we claim to be experts - it is important that evidence is not removed and then contaminated. For example, we have seen the collapse of Terminal E at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris four months ago, yet everything is still there as people are still analysing on the spot. That is why I am wondering whether by removing things we are not already contaminating them and losing evidence. That is why I am asking the question.

The Prime Minister: I'll ask again reassurance from the Commissioner of Police that everything is being done as it should be done professionally. I confirmed with the Commissioner of Police this morning again that the inquiry is on target, is proceeding as it should, but I'll confirm further and report to the House.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Is the hon. Prime Minister aware that the people who supplied the gas there - apart from the cylinders being intact - are confirming that there has been no leakage of gas. Can he confirm that?

The Prime Minister: Not at all! And I do not think this piece of information is correct at all. As I said earlier on I am no expert, but I put it
in the plural for a given reason, I mentioned cooking gas and other gases. We are not excluding anything, because air conditioning gas might be involved or gas that is used in night-clubs to create an atmosphere and so on. As I said, Sir, all possible causes of the incident are being fully investigated into.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Sir, since we are talking about other possibility of other gases, I take it that blood samples from the post mortem cadavers must have been taken. Can the hon. Prime Minister give us any indication as to whether any gas was found in those blood samples?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not have this information. I'll ask for the information, but I am sure that the Police authorities and the medical officers involved in post mortem, in autopsy and so on have done all that is necessary to be done.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can we know the cause of death? I see in the paper that it was skull and multiple injuries. Is it possible to know what has caused the death?

**The Prime Minister:** The information is available in regard to the very sad fact that two young persons lost their lives.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can he say whether there were crushed or blast injuries?

**The Prime Minister:** I have not looked at the details, but I am sure it must have been both. The details are contained in the autopsy reports.

**Mr Gungah:** May I ask the Prime Minister whether he can inform the House on the measures taken by the Police immediately after the incident took place in order to ensure security in the region?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, everybody is aware of that. The Police moved very fast and as I said it is not without reason that I congratulated the Police; and I agree with hon. Dulloo that not only the people of Grand'Baie, but even the tourists who were in the vicinity deserve to be congratulated. The Police cordoned off what needed to be so, organised very rapidly the follow up to such a tragedy.
Dr. Ramgoolam: It is important that we get the results urgently. Can he indicate to us when does he expect to have a full report?

The Prime Minister: As soon as possible. I am sure we are all eager to see the inquiry completed, but it will take the time needed. We do not want to leave anything aside. So, it will be as soon as possible and a complete inquiry.

Mr Dulloo: To a supplementary question I asked earlier on, the hon. Prime Minister confirmed that the preliminary inquiry being referred to in the communiqué of the Ministry of Tourism is the same one as being conducted by the Police. The communiqué specifically says that it was an accident caused by an explosion of a gas cylinder and that there has no other link. Therefore may I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether the inquiry conducted by the Police has actually excluded all other possibilities except gas cylinder and there is no other link whatsoever? Has the conclusion already been arrived at by the Police?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I repeat that although, at this stage, all indications are that there is no terrorism dimension to this incident and although the highest probability is gas leaks, all possible causes of the incident are being fully investigated into.

Mr Gungah: Sir, there was a supermarket on the first floor of the building and there are frozen goods which are going to melt. May I ask the Prime Minister whether he can liaise with the authorities concerned so that inhabitants are not inconvenienced by the emanation of foul smell and so on?

The Prime Minister: I admit that the frozen food in that supermarket or anywhere around was not my priority. I'll ask the Police, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Commerce and Co-operatives to look into what is left of the frozen food by now.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Sir, can we know whether the commercial buildings around the prime site of the explosion - I mean a bit further away from the explosion - are actually safe for people to walk around?

The Prime Minister: As I said, Sir, I am no expert, but I know that the Police has cordoned off not only for investigative purposes, but also to
provide for the security of the public. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has been there, it looks quite shaky and I would not invite him or anybody to go walking about, but the Police is taking every precaution for members of the public or tourists for that matter to be kept at a safe distance from the damaged building.

**Dr. Chady:** Mr Speaker, Sir, if I am not mistaken, I heard the Prime Minister say that regulations concerning gas cylinders for both domestic and industrial purposes will be reviewed. So far, we have had a few accidents with domestic gas cylinders. Can the Prime Minister tell us whether regulations will be brought and laws will be amended as fast as possible with regard to the transportation and storage of gas for domestic and industrial purposes and also for public places?

**The Prime Minister:** Worldwide and in Mauritius also, we see incidents involving cooking gas mainly, but also other types of gases, especially in cold countries. Regulations already exist and they provide for different situations. After this tragedy, what we have in mind are public places like restaurants and nightclubs which probably need additional provisions. What is provided for in the law for residential quarters and so on is one thing, but here we have in mind a tightening of regulations that might be necessary for public places like restaurants and nightclubs.

**Dr. Chady:** With regard to residential ones, although there are regulations, in most houses, we find that the gas is next to the cooker. Is not it high time that regulations should be brought to the effect that gas should be put somewhere outside the kitchen? In fact leakages are within the kitchen.

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, as I said, I don't think this is the occasion, after this kind of tragedy to go into the provisions pertaining to residential buildings, but it is a very good point. I would request the Minister of Commerce and Co-operatives as well as the Minister of Public Infrastructure to look into it. Whether regulations have to be tightened and if regulations do not have to be tightened, that the proper message, through television and so on, should be put across to increase the safety as far as cooking gas is concerned.