ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

NHDC HIGH-RISE HOUSING ESTATES – SEWERAGE, WATER INGRESS/LEAKAGES & WATER TANKS PROBLEMS

The Leader of the Opposition (By Private Notice) asked the Minister of Housing & Lands whether, in regard to the NHDC high rise housing estates, he is aware of the sewerage, water ingress/leakages and water tanks problems being encountered by their owners/occupiers and, if so, will he, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Company, information as to –

(a) the urgent remedial measures taken to address same;

(b) if an Action Plan for improving the living environment and conditions in and around those blocks will be implemented, and

(c) how the setting up and proper functioning of Syndics is being encouraged.

The Minister of Housing & Lands (Dr. A. Kasenally): Mr Speaker, Sir, I wish first of all to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for this Private Notice Question and for having raised an issue which has been high on my agenda since I have assumed Office as Minister of Housing & Lands in September last.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am perfectly aware of the problems being encountered by owners of NHDC high rise apartments.
As a matter of fact, one of the very first things I did was to carry out site visits in several housing estates across the island to personally take stock of the living conditions of the residents of those housing estates and the general conditions of the housing units, including high rise apartment blocks.

I wish to also point out that some of my colleagues have, *inter alios*, also undertaken similar exercises, namely hon. Dr. A Boolell and Dr. V. Bunwaree, who have been regularly holding one on a Sunday morning and the other one usually during the week.

My Ministry also received several representations from inhabitants of those housing estates concerning mainly sewerage, water ingress/leakages and defective water tanks. In fact, hon. Cuttaree also put a PQ which, unfortunately, was withdrawn, but I had given him the information.

I have requested the NHDC to undertake a complete survey of all NHDC Housing Estates and to submit a comprehensive report, including the estimated costs of all remedial actions to be taken.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I must inform the House that, on 10 April 2009, I received the report.

Mr Speaker, Sir, there are to date 100 NHDC Housing Estates, out of which 44 have a ‘*Règlements de Co-propriété*’. 33 of these Housing Estates are high rise apartment blocks. Construction of these apartments started as far back as 1992.

In normal course of things, it should rest with the purchasers/owners to set up their own Syndic to look into the management and maintenance of
these housing estates and common areas. Unfortunately, in most cases, Syndics have never been functioning properly since the very beginning.

I am informed that, due to the above, the NHDC has always had to intervene in emergency cases with a view to maintaining good living conditions of the inhabitants of these estates.

In this respect, I have been further informed that the NHDC has, over the years, been carrying out de-sludging of the sewerage system. Moreover, the NHDC has also undertaken repair and rehabilitation of electrical and water networks.

Coming back to the report, Mr Speaker, Sir, I understand that there is a series of repairs and rehabilitation works that need to be carried out. These include -

• water proofing works at La Caverne, Beau Vallon, La Tour Koenig, Camp Le Vieux, Vallée des Prêtres and Plaine Verte;
• repair to electrical installations at Camp Le Vieux and La Tour Koenig;
• repairs to common CEB meter cabins, which have been damaged due to vandalism and lack of maintenance in no less than 15 Housing Estates - I am laying on the Table of the House some pictures, which show evident vandalism that has caused tremendous prejudice to the inhabitants of these estates, Mr Speaker, Sir.
• reinforcement of concrete works mainly at Beau Vallon.

The estimated cost of undertaking all these rehabilitation and repair works is around Rs235 m.
The report has been thoroughly examined at the level of my Ministry, and we have prioritised works to be undertaken. The estimated cost would be around Rs70 m., and arrangements are being made for works to start soon.

In regard to parts (b) and (c) of the Question, taken together, I believe, Sir, it is most pertinent to remind and emphasise in no uncertain terms that all NHDC apartment blocks are co-owned property, with “parties communes” and “parties privatives” in accordance with standard “règlement de copropriété”. As such, it is legally the sole and entire responsibility of co-owners to ensure that the living environment and conditions in and around those blocks, as well as those in the “parties privatives” of their apartments, are overall and always immaculately salubrious, and “où il fait vraiment bon de vivre”. It is also entirely and essentially co-owners’ responsibility to elect a Syndic, as well as an advisory “Conseil Syndical”; and the hon. Leader of the Opposition is himself aware of the difficulties in the appointment of a Syndic and in the provision of Syndic Services. I understand that, when he was Prime Minister, he personally presided over several meetings to find solutions to the problems caused by the absence of, or by the ineffectiveness and the inefficiency of the Syndic and Syndic services. I also understand that he had stated the following, or words to the same effect, with my apology if I have misquoted him -

"Syndic is the toughest nut I have had to crack."

Sir, irrespective of the lacunas and difficulties, and of the legal responsibilities and liabilities of co-owners, themselves, this Government
shall unflinchingly continue to come to the assistance of those of our citizens who are really in need of such assistance. The NHDC is a case in point.

**Mr Bérenger:** May I thank the hon. Minister for the details provided and the intentions declared! He says that he is perfectly aware of the situation on these high-rise apartment blocks housing estates and that he has carried out site visits. Therefore, Mr Speaker, Sir, he must be aware that things have been deteriorating terribly and the quality of life on these housing estates is unbearable. I thank him for the action that is being envisaged. But, Sir, can I start with sewerage which is the most serious problem, because of health hazards and the terrible conditions in which the owners/occupiers are living? Can I ask him whether he is aware that, as in Dagotière recently, regularly the health of these occupiers is hurt because of old pipes and water pipes – older still – causing pollution of drinking water? There have been hospital cases in Dagotière recently. The septic tanks are too small. They are placed too near to the blocks and, in some cases, less than ten metres away, and we can imagine the smell that all this generates. In most cases, most of those septic tanks are not being serviced since we’ll come back to that later – there are no syndics to take care of these. Will he and his colleague, the Minister of Health, give the assurance that urgent action is being taken in collaboration with both the Wastewater Authority and the Central Water Authority?

**Dr. Kasenally:** Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, as regards the sewerage, I understand, and I appreciate fully, that if the sewerage is not working in any home for that matter, life is hell. It is for this reason that procedures have already started all over the sewerage system in the NHDC estates to be
undertaken by the WMA, which is the competent authority and has the necessary expertise for the sewerage system.

I must also point out, Mr Speaker, Sir, that, unfortunately, in some of these housing estates, people have also been trying to divert grey water into these sewer tanks which, as has been said, are not meant for that and, in fact, this is part of the problem. Also, part of the problem is the infrastructural work done at the time these housing estates were built in 1991.

Mr Bérenger: If I can move on to the second most urgent and biggest problem, that is, water leakages and problems with water tanks? I am sure the hon. Minister is concerned that in quite a number of these high-rise estates, water is leaking into the rooms, especially the highest storey. There is, in fact, the danger of loss of life through electrocution, especially at Camp Levieux, but I will also add La Tour Koenig, Cité La Cure and elsewhere. There is danger to life in that situation, apart from the terrible situation in which they are living, with water in the rooms and it keeps on leaking to the lower floors, Mr Speaker, Sir. Can I ask the hon. Minister whether we are going to look at the possibility of removing those wrecked water tanks on top of these blocks, because they are regularly out of use, you have problems, it leaks and so on? Whether consideration is going to be given to building towers next to the blocks of apartments – dedicated towers if I can call it - with the water tanks separate from the main building, placed on those dedicated towers?

Dr. Kasenally: Mr Speaker, Sir, the technicians and engineers of the NHDC is looking at all the problems. As far as ingress of water is concerned, I am sorry to say that it is very unfortunate that when reroofing has been done, some of the inhabitants have been drilling holes to set up
television antenna and, invariably, it damages the roof and, with time, there is a bit of crack which causes water leakage. This is my main concern; that is why we have given this as a priority, to attend to these cracks to prevent ingress. There has also been another problem where the pipes coming down have been fractured and this also causes water to get in. We are getting top priority to that, because, I understand also, first about the safety as this may cause electrocution. Electrocutio is more dangerous with all these metre cabins which have been damaged and you can see the bare wires. That is why when I was at the Ministry of Public Utilities arrangements had been made to isolate all these.

As far as water is concerned, the tanks have been there, but the technicians and engineers will have to find a way to see whether to have a tank at ground level and use a pump to pump the water. Because, Mr Speaker, Sir, some of the roofs may not be able to withstand - as the hon. Leader of the Opposition has pointed out - such a mass, when the water tank is full. In fact, the problem is that water sometimes does not go up or we have already put water pumps which sometimes are ineffective. Anyway, this is being looked at carefully because it is imperative and this Government will ensure that everybody in this country, in fact, gets adequate water, maybe, not 24-hr a day but, at least, for a good period of time because it is essential for life and good sanitation.

Mr Bérenger: I have just raised the two main problems: the sewerage problem and water leakages, dangers to life itself. These are the two main and most urgent problems. But is the hon. Minister aware of the other problems that arise because of non-functioning syndic or non-existent syndic, and I’ll come to these later on? Is he aware that the common areas
are in a terrible state, because no one takes care of them? Each one takes care of his apartment; no one takes care of the common areas. Rats are a real problem, the cutting of grass and so on with mosquitoes and other nuisances coming up and even drains, which are not really within the syndic, but drains problems also add up to the water problems and to the sewerage problems? Is the hon. Minister aware of all these and will his plan of actions - if I can call it like that, and I’ll come back to that later on – take care of those aspects of things also?

**Dr. Kasenally:** Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, on my site visit, I noticed this sorry state of affairs. In fact, I had the opportunity of getting the help of my colleague, the Minister of Environment, and also I impressed upon and asked the Municipalities and the District Councils to help out. But there is also one thing, I must say, that while we are trying to do our best, we have also met the inhabitants and ask them to cooperate and some of them have cooperated; but where there is no cooperation, sometimes they throw the bins everywhere. And another thing which I have noticed is that some of them have illegally built garages on car parks, causing tremendous difficulties to the other inhabitants. I have impressed upon them to remove these, failing which, legal action may be undertaken by the NHDC. I approached the NHDC to that effect, but they tell me this concerns the syndic. So, you can see the difficulty, these are the people who are proprietors. But, we will try to find a solution. As far as the salubrity of the environment is concerned, although it is there, we have enlisted the support of the local authorities to do that and the NHDC has also, on a few occasions, had to get in and clean it, because we could not accept that sorry state of affairs.
Mr Bérenger: The hon. Minister quoted what I had said years ago because this question of syndic is the toughest nut for any Government, for all of us to crack and, as Prime Minister, I really had a go at it. I think, Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister will agree with me that high-rise apartments are relatively new things in Mauritius. People are not used to that, and syndic is completely new. Is the hon. Minister aware that some years back – I won’t dwell into the past – one Government when conditions were laid for repaying back the loans put in it Rs200 for syndic purposes. A following Government, out of sheer demagogy, got that out and that literally killed the syndic and they won’t see the end of those troubles with the best goodwill on Government and Opposition side without syndic really being set up and working. Can I request, therefore, the Minister whether Government is looking at ways of setting up syndic where they are not in existence and improving their operations where they are in existence - and in a very few cases? Can we, for example - because we are dealing with poverty, with environment, there are funds available - at least, on a temporary basis, for a number of years envisage a grant paid per block for setting up syndic purposes and the functioning of syndics, at least, on a temporary basis because the issue is basically financial? It is also a question of not being used to syndics and so on, but the issue is basically financial.

Dr. Kasenally: As the hon. Leader of the Opposition says, it is a tough nut to crack. So, I am going to have another go at it and see what can be done. I agree that all options are open and I think we have to instill it into les moeurs of these co-proprietors that their salut is to get together and if
there is need for any financial incentive, certainly we will consider that. I think we have to get them going and launch it and once they are airborne, probably then we can gradually withdraw, but I think a big effort will have to be made and I have already had working sessions with my officers at the Ministry and with the NHDC. It is very important that we get the people; it is a question of communication and education because in the long run it will be in the interest of the proprietors and of the children especially who are vulnerable if we do not have proper sanitation and good environment.

Mr Dayal: Mr Speaker, Sir, the problem at NHDC complex of Dagotière has already been identified. The pump there is defective and is leaking in the houses of several people. Therefore, I would like to ask the hon. Minister if he could provide the necessary remedial action there.

Dr. Kasenally: In fact, action has been initiated and it is being given top priority as a matter of fact. The hon. Member has phoned so many times to the Ministry and to myself. We will look into that.

Mr Jhugroo: Mr Speaker, Sir, as the hon. Minister is well aware that the syndic is not functioning as it should be, would he consider to get rid of all these syndics and replace them by a special unit to look after all these NHDC housing estates?

Dr. Kasenally: Mr Speaker, Sir, the co-proprietors and syndic are regulated by law. It is not my power or that of the NHDC to get rid of that. We have opened dialogue and tried them to come to reason and I think by asking this question it will raise awareness in the community and we’ll have to find a solution. In fact, if there is no syndic, we cannot dissolve anything. But it is a question of getting communication with these people. Quite rightly, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has said that it is a tough nut to
crack, but we must not give up, I will not give up and this Government will not give up, and with the help with all the Members of Parliament, we must be able to try to find a long-term solution, but, in the meantime, a short-term solution will be found to ensure proper living, good sanitation and good water supply.

Mr Jugnauth: I am sure the hon. Minister is aware that with regard to the case of Dagotière both the CWA and the waste water pipes burst and probably there might have been contamination. I am told that these pipes are so old that the occurrence of bursting is likely to happen again. Would the hon. Minister use his authority to look at this problem and see to it that those pipes are replaced because this is not connected with the problem of the syndic?

Dr. Kasenally: Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, all the infrastructure should be under the aegis of the syndic. However, sewerage is very important and we also realise that these were built in 1991 and it should have lasted much longer. I think the problem is also that at the time it was built, whether there were proper inspections, but be as it may be, I have already been told that WMA is looking into it and I think probably I’ll ask them to expedite things because we cannot leave sewerage and water together. I can give the assurance to this House that I will personally look into it again. It is being looked but you will have to apply some accelerator.

Mr Speaker: I would like to have short answers.

Mr Cuttaree: Can I ask the hon. Minister, pending the priority repairs which are going to be undertaken, whether he could do something regarding immediate works and this can be done by getting a coordination with all the institutions involved. For example, at Camp Levieux - these
problems have been highlighted by the Leader of the Opposition - there are problems with CWA pipes which are broken for a long time and seeping water is creating pools where grass has already grown up with mosquitoes and people have got their windows opening on these pools. I want to entreat the hon. Minister to have a team going there immediately to try to sort out the problem of the environment in that area.

Dr. Kasenally: Mr Speaker, Sir, I shall.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for your collaboration.

Miss Deerpalsing: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister, in one of his answers, just mentioned the collaboration of the district councils and the municipalities. May I ask him, for example, in the NHDC Palma, every two weeks we have to run after X, Y and Z to cut grass. We talk about *Maurice Ile Durable*, can the hon. Minister, with the help of the NHDC, make sure that there is a permanent agreement between the NHDC and the Municipality of Quatre Bornes, for example, to go and cut that grass because there are people in the Municipality of Quatre Bornes, they can go and cut the grass, but they say they do not have the permission because NHDC is a private property. It is always passing the buck around, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Kasenally: We will have the bucks to be stopped to be passed and I will, in fact, liaise with the NHDC to have this done.

Mr Guimbeau: Mr Speaker, Sir, one of the biggest problems of the residents of the NHDC high-rise is when there are mortalities on the second or third floors where families cannot even have the coffin in their house. What I would like to propose to the Minister, Mr Speaker, Sir, is that…
Mr Speaker: I am sorry, this is a question dealing with the environment, not dealing with a specific case. The hon. Member can come with a specific question, then the Minister can answer it. This deals with the environment.

Mr Bhagwan: Mr Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Minister whether he can see with the NHDC to set up a system to attend to emergencies? One of the main problems is sewerage and people complain to the Waste Water Authority to attend to emergencies. Can the hon. Minister see with the Waste Water Authority and the Ministry responsible to have a hot line and, at least, give a delay to attend to the problems on the same day within a certain number of hours?

Dr. Kasenally: I think I’ll get a dedicated team after discussion with the Ministry of Public Utilities to attend to sewerage problems promptly.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the hon. Minister and ask him what he is going to do as all these houses do not have any emergency exit and they should have had emergency exits according to construction norms.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Dowarkasing: Can I know from the hon. Minister whether he will consider the possibility of relooking at the whole structure of the NHDC?

Dr. Kasenally: Emergency exits should have been done at the time of construction, but we will look into the problem because we don’t want to let anybody get stuck.
Mr Ganoo: I will come back to this question of sewerage, Mr Speaker, Sir. Is the hon. Minister aware that when the septic tanks are full, they have to be emptied? And unfortunately now it is the inhabitants who have to bear the cost of these cesspits emptiers. One trip costs about Rs5,000 and you will use 2 or 3 trips. Can the hon. Ministry of Housing and Lands bear the cost when these lorries - because they are run by private entrepreneurs now - come to empty the septic tanks?

Dr. Kasenally: One trip actually costs Rs500 and not Rs5,000. There is always the question of who is going to foot the bill eventually. I think these cesspits have to be rehabilitated so as we do not have these problems.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Speaker, Sir, I believe the hon. Minister is aware that on certain of these housing estates, facilities like community centres or nurseries have been built, but have been abandoned because of lack of syndic on those housing estates, and have turned out, unfortunately, to be des refuges pour les drogués. Can we know what the Ministries are envisaging regarding those facilities which have been abandoned?

Dr. Kasenally: In fact, I am looking at all these facilities. Some of them have been taken by the Ministry of Women’s Rights, Child Development & Family Welfare. As far as the drogués are concerned, I have to get the Police to look into that. I, personally, cannot go and chase the drogués. There is a problem of security in that, but we have to look at it in a very global way. There are certain areas which are prone to that - it is not proper for me to mention it - but I think I shall ask the authorities, especially the Police, to look into the matter because we do not want drugs to spread into these NHDC estates.
Mr Barbier: Mr Speaker, Sir, during the last general election campaign, in my constituency, it was promised to the people of the NHDC high-rise building at La Tour Koenig that Government will install elevators in all the NHDC blocks …

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, this question relates to sewerage water leakages and water tanks problem. These are the three things which concern the question.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, some years back NHDC was envisaging the setting up of a separate entity to take in lieu of syndic. May I ask the hon. Minister whether he is aware of this plan or whether it has been submitted to his Ministry?

Dr. Kasenally: Mr Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned earlier there is a legal provision for these. I think the NHDC cannot, by law, take over the syndic. We have to work out a sort of modus operandi. But, thus the proprietors must be party to it.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, we have been informed by the hon. Minister that recently a comprehensive survey has been carried out but he has received, very recently, a full report and that we are now in presence of what I would call a Plan of Action with priorities established and that would cost more than Rs200 m. I have happy not to have heard the hon. Minister say that there are financial problems because these are urgencies and there are different funds dealing with property, environment and so on available. Will the hon. Minister agree with me that after what we have discussed today, what is now required is la volonté politique and a sustained effort, not
a one-off expression of interest and intention, *la volonté politique* and a sustained effort?

**Dr. Kasenally:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the effort is being sustained. In fact, as I said it will cost Rs70 m. in the immediate. And we are sure to get our funds, funds will not be a problem although we are in a very deep problem, it is credit crunch and so on. But I can assure the House and all the Members of this august Assembly that we will leave no stone unturned. I am getting the support of the Prime Minister to do all these things and I am sure we can, at least, start tackling the problem because sewage, water, I think, must be dealt with as far as possible promptly.

**Mr Speaker:** Time is over! Questions addressed to Dr. the hon. Prime Minister! Hon. Hanoomanjee!