

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY**

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Agro Industry & Fisheries whether, in regard to the on-going world food crisis, national food security and Genetically Modified Organisms, he will state -

- (a) the comparative figures for the local production of potatoes, onions, tomatoes, maize, meat, milk and fish for 2000, 2004 and 2007 indicating the new measures being taken to increase production thereof;
- (b) the potential for regional co-operation for the production of rice, wheat, maize, potatoes and pulses; and
- (c) when the Genetically Modified Organisms Act 2004 will be proclaimed, indicating the scope for local and regional production of genetically modified food.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I wish from the outset to highlight that food security is a question of national interest and I thank the Leader of the Opposition for providing me the opportunity to give a thorough review of our agricultural sector strategy and of our long-term food objectives. The days of cheap food are over. Food cost worldwide, over the last eighteen months, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, has risen by up to 200 per cent in some cases. This year what is becoming clearer is the impact of such a change on people's lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the world population has continued to grow while its food production has not. In the past 7 years, the world's population has consumed more grain than it has grown. World grain reserves last year were only 57 days down from 180 days a decade ago. It has also been noted that global warming is cutting into food production.

Mauritius, on account of its limited size, the absence of economies of scale and the high comparative advantage of sugar cane both in agro climatic, environmental and economic terms, is compelled to import all the key and essential food items, namely cereals, wheat/flour and rice, pulses, edible oil, meat and dairy products and spices. Inputs for the poultry and egg industries where Mauritius has attained self-sufficiency, for instance, maize, have to be imported. Mauritius also imports fruits, oranges, apples, grapes, as well as a fair proportion of its potato, onion, garlic and ginger needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it may be contended that Mauritius is not in the situation of Bangladesh, Lesotho or Chad and many of the LDCs as its economic development enables it to have the means to procure food. However, the island nature of Mauritius, its economic model and its very limited market are such that it is a country that has to ensure that its production/supply of food is secure and that it cannot afford any disruption in supply. In that sense, the urgent definition of a food security policy is imperative.

Economic conditions are such that at best Mauritius can move to enhanced production of vegetables and fruits locally, but will have to rely on the region or imports for the bulk of the food it consumes. Accordingly, Mauritius can only aspire for regional food self-sufficiency and up to a certain level.

Net export earnings from sugar sold to the EU under the Sugar Protocol and the Special Preferential Agreement enabled Mauritius till 2005 to cover the cost of its imports of food. Thus Mauritius, through its sugar exports, had the means to procure its food.

With regard to part (a) of the question, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will lay on the Table of the Assembly, the figures for production as from year 2000 up to 2007. But I will reply, specifically, to the question put by the hon. Leader of the Opposition. Local production in figures for potatoes, onions, tomatoes, maize, meat, milk and fish for the years 2000, 2004 and 2007 are as follows -

	2000	2004 (Tonnes)	2007
Potatoes	13,843	11,246	14,848
Onions	11,485	4,682	4,550(the reasons are obvious in respect of the heavy torrential rains).
Tomatoes	10,923	14,400	10,158
Maize	623	369	354
Meat	31,224	36,098	42,463
Milk	4,000 litres	4,000 litres	4,500 litres
Fish	9,405	10,927	7,086

Meat production comprises poultry, cattle, goat, sheep and pig and the production statistics by species are being circulated, unless the hon. Leader of the Opposition wants me to highlight the figures.

Mauritius, a small island economy, has always been a net food importing country. Food imports presently account for Rs18 billion equivalent to 18% of our total import bill. The major items imported include rice, wheat, oil & fats, meat and milk which represent 66% of all food imports. We are all aware that these items cannot be produced in Mauritius for economic and financial reasons. As stated earlier, we have achieved self-sufficiency in fresh vegetables, chicken and eggs.

Government has been laying emphasis on increased food production and agro processing to reduce our dependency on import. In this context, since April 2007, my Ministry has initiated action for the preparation of a comprehensive strategic document to enhance crop diversification and livestock development. Alongside, an Aquaculture Master Plan for the promotion on aquaculture development in Mauritius has also been elaborated. Both documents have been worked out by dedicated and competent teams of my Ministry and by specialists in the sectors. These documents have been drafted in consultation with all stakeholders through interactive workshops held in the months of April 2007 for aquaculture and August 2007 for crop and livestock development. The draft document for the crop and livestock sector was posted on the website of my Ministry for further inputs. On the other hand, following submission of the final document on aquaculture, the Aquatic Business Activities Bill has been finalised and will be presented in the National Assembly.

My Ministry has already taken a number of measures to address food security, namely, access to land, land preparation, irrigation, training, research and development and marketing. We are all aware that since year 2000, there has been an encroachment on prime agricultural land for property development which has become a sector in itself.

My Ministry, along with SIT, Mauritius Sugar Producers Association and Rose Belle Sugar Estate has already released some 1,300 acres of lands for crop diversification and livestock development. Furthermore, an additional 100 *arpents* of land at Côte d'Or will be released specially for potato cultivation and 14 acres at Plaisance and Richelieu Stations for onion seeds production.

Government is currently negotiating with the MSPA on the 2000 *arpents* of land for implementation of the Empowerment Programme which includes a social programme and agricultural projects. In the Multi-Annual Adaptation Strategy document, provision is made for agricultural diversification. It is believed that certain areas that are now under sugar cane will no longer be economically viable for sugar production. MSIRI has conducted a study and found that 4460 hectares in difficult areas fall into this category. It must be mentioned that not all of these lands would be suitable for food crop and livestock production. A large proportion will be devoted to sugar cane for soil conservation and biomass production. Lands that are rocky and sloppy will be put under forests. Hence only a small proportion could be made available for agricultural production.

In respect of training and clustering of planters and breeders, training being important, planters and breeders are being provided training by the Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) on good agricultural practices, agro-processing and animal husbandry respectively to enable them to adopt modern agricultural techniques for productivity improvement and also for minimising post harvest losses. AREU is working closely with the planters and breeders and is dispensing advice and training to them to address issues relating to crop production and animal rearing. The training programmes, in collaboration with IVTB are currently being run in four regional model farms. A Farmers Training School approved by MQA will be constructed shortly at Wooton and will become operational as from this year. With this additional facility, training needs of planters and breeders will be addressed in a more focussed and professional manner.

My Ministry is laying emphasis on clustering of producers to take advantage of economies of scale. A milk village at Nouvelle Découverte, a hydroponic village at Rose Belle and 15 fruit villages for 8 fruits across the island have been set up other than money which was earmarked to empower the milk producers which is going to be released by the Agricultural Marketing Board of a quantum of up to Rs5 m.

Marketing of non sugar commodities has been regulated to some extent by the Agricultural Marketing Board. Marketing of many vegetables has been characterised by price fluctuations. To address this issue, a national marketing information system is being put in place to allow producers to better plan their production and to avoid creation of gluts on the market.

Producers and other stakeholders will also be encouraged to practice better post handling management to minimise post harvest losses. Besides technical support, the stakeholders are being encouraged through the Agricultural Technology Diffusion Scheme to improve the product quality standards for domestic and tourist market and to prepare themselves for global gap certification.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in respect of research and development, I will not go through all the measures being taken nor in respect of projects concerning irrigation.

Let me now come to specific commodities – potatoes. We expect to reach a higher self-sufficiency for potato (currently at 50%) by year 2015 through the boost-up scheme by the Agricultural Marketing Board, adoption of new varieties from the MSIRI which has been released and a crop insurance scheme by the Small Planters Welfare Fund to mitigate the risk.

As the cost of potato seeds accounts for 60% of cost of production, the AMB advances the potato seeds to the planter and the latter undertakes to supply back to the AMB a minimum quantity of ware potatoes. The cost of the seeds is then deducted from the proceeds of the ware potato. If they have recourse to seeds which are produced locally, the cost is of Rs25,000 per ton compared to seeds imported and replicated locally which can be as high as Rs42,000 per ton.

- (ii) An extent of 625 hectare of land is under cultivation by sugar estate and small planters. Under the 500A scheme, the major bulk will be under potato production. An additional land of 100 A at Côte d'or has been recently released for production.
- (iii) Import of potato seeds is being liberalised which will allow operators to have control over the whole chain of activities.
- (iv) An increase in the floor price of potato as a measure to encourage production is currently under consideration at the AMB;
- (v) Agri Business Operators have been invited to take advantage of schemes under the DCP and empowerment programme. They will be assisted by AREU for their project write-ups;
- (v) AREU is dispensing training on production and post-harvest technology.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in respect of onions -

- (i) the floor price of onions has been increased from Rs9,700 per tonne to Rs17,000 per tonne as from November 2007;
- (ii) two new varieties namely Bella Rose and Francesca have been developed and released by AREU. Both varieties are high yielding, 25 tonnes per hectare;
- (iii) Government is encouraging planters to extend the harvest period by adopting the practice of seedling production under ATDS scheme;
- (iv) 14 Acres of land at Plaisance and Richelieu Stations have been released for the production of onion seeds;
- (v) irrigation is provided in major onion producing localities such as Belle Mare and La Chaumiere;
- (vi) a mechanisation unit at my Ministry is assisting planters in land preparation;
- (vii) AREU has already initiated action to train planters to undertake onion seed production;
- (viii) on value addition, AREU has developed seven protocols to onions products (dehydrated, pickle, powder, frozen slices and paste etc).

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in respect of milk sector, I know ...

(Interruptions)

Dr. Boolell: The hon. Leader of the Opposition has put a question and I have to reply.

In respect of milk sector, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, questions have been put to me in Parliament and I had replied lengthily. I can stick to all the measures taken to empower milk producers.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, if the hon. Minister will allow me, I think it is going to be the first time in the history of Parliament that a Minister replying does not manage to complete his reply within half an hour. If both sides are agreeable, can the Chair give us some extra time over half an hour?

The Deputy Speaker: The question is so vast that I can't ask the Minister to restrict himself, to give a short answer.

Mr Bérenger: I am not asking that!

The Deputy Speaker: We have a consensus on that matter and if the House is agreeable, we will see what can be done.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, a question has been put to me as to measures being taken ...

Mr Bérenger: New measures.

Dr. Boolell: These are new measures taken by the Government to reverse the trend.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Let the Minister answer now!

Dr. Boolell: I can circulate my reply. If hon. Leader of the Opposition wants me to go on, I'll do so, and I'll come to part (b).

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, regarding access to land in the neighbouring region to produce food crops to meet our local requirements has been prospected within the cross-border initiative. It is relevant to point out that a Mozambique Desk was set in 1998, but there has been no follow up action. During my visit to Mozambique in March last,..

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: I said order!

Dr. Boolell:I signed a Memorandum of Agreement for 5000 hectares of land for the production of potato, onion, maize and other vegetable crops. A Consortium comprising SIT, SIC, STC and Rose Belle SE is in the process of being set up to facilitate investment in Mozambique and a techno economic plan will be prepared. A fact finding visit to Mozambique is being fielded in the very near future to identify and characterize the block of 5000 hectares. A proposal will be made to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development to provide a scheme to facilitate and expedite launching.

Regarding Madagascar, the issue of land for food crop cultivation is still being negotiated with the relevant authorities. Negotiations for import of cattle from Madagascar have reached an advanced stage and an Memorandum of Understanding on sanitary conditions will be signed by the two countries in due course. Moreover, another Memorandum of Understanding on Phytosanitary Cooperation between our two countries

to facilitate trade in food crops will be signed this week. Possibilities will be explored with the Malagasy authorities for the production of rice, wheat and maize.

A series of consultations have been held with planters and breeders and they have agreed to fully participate and have requested for additional support to boost up their activities. Accordingly, a list of incentives and schemes has been submitted to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning & Development in the context of the new Budget. These include proposals for funds under MAAS to be earmarked for crops that will enhance food security, for fine land preparation, for research and a line of credit to DBM for agricultural loans at a better concessionary rate. Furthermore, the scope of Empowerment Programme will be broadened to include specific agricultural activities. Additional fiscal incentives on equipment, vehicles and various agricultural inputs have also been proposed.

I had a preliminary meeting in February last with the Chamber of Agriculture on crop diversification. I shall pursue the matter further with representatives of the corporate sector for their full participation in cross border initiatives and agricultural diversification to ensure food security in Mauritius.

In respect of part (c), Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, a Genetically Modified Organisms Act was passed in the National Assembly in April, 2004. Only sections 1 to 6(1)(a) and 6(1)(c) and Section 24 (on short title, interpretation, application of the Act, National Biosafety Committee, objects of the Committee and functions of the Committee) have been proclaimed and came into effect on 01 January, 2005. The National Biosafety Committee was constituted in April 2005.

The hon. Leader of Opposition is well aware that in order to fully enforce a piece of legislation, it is vital to have the required Regulations. At time of proclamation of part of the GMO Act, there were no regulations in place. A technical committee has now worked out these Regulations

The Committee comprised representatives of my Ministry, University of Mauritius, AREU, Sugar Research Institute, State Law Office, the Secretary General of ACIM and was chaired by the Chairperson of the National Biosafety Committee.

These regulations which relate to -

- (a) consignment in transit;
- (b) labelling of GMO's;
- (c) laboratory development of GMO's;
- (d) standards to which facilities dealing with GMO's should conform and,
- (e) containment facility requirement for GMO's have now been submitted to the State Law Office.

The major GM crops available and grown on a large scale are soya bean, maize, cotton and canola. In the region, only South Africa is growing GMO crops namely maize, soya bean and cotton on some 1.8 million hectare of land. It is presently ranked eighth in the world among countries growing GM crops.

As regards scope for local and regional production of GM foods, the only two possibilities are maize and soya beans for the time-being, especially for the region. But this will be subject to local regulations and favourable economics of production.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, for any GM crop to be used as food, it is imperative that safety evaluation of the product be carried out. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the House will recall that during the debates, in respect of the GMO Bill, a lot of emphasis was laid on the need for the precautionary principle to be adopted.

We have currently two projects on capacity building to end by year 2010, funded by UNEP/GEF on capacity building to establish a transparent and workable national bio-safety framework.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the whole issue of food security, I reiterate, is of national interest and, therefore, needs the active participation of all stakeholders.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the context of the ongoing world food crisis, the figures which the hon. Minister has given for local production, especially of onions, maize and potatoes, speak for themselves. Can I ask the hon. Minister whether he would be agreeable, before the strategic plan, called Strategy and Options in Crop and Livestock Sector 2007/2015, and the Aquaculture Master Plan that reference has been made to are finalized, to have a one, two or three days seminar at the University, involving Government, the Opposition, the private sector, planters, NGOs involved in food production and trade unions, not only to discuss, but also to mobilize the whole population in the right direction?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the strategic options in crop diversification and livestock sector has been on the website for more than eight months, also is the Master Plan on Aquaculture. Of course, we have invited inputs from all quarters. Let me also remind Members of the House that I am having a forceful interaction with all the stakeholders. We are willing, as a responsible Government, to exchange and analyse information, as and when the need is felt, with Members of the Opposition.

Mr Bérenger: I am sure the hon. Minister will agree with me that Madagascar which imports 200,000 tonnes of rice, that is, 10% of its production - the Minister of Agriculture says it everyday - plans to do away with importation this year, to be self-sufficient and, by next year, to start exporting. Can I know whether this has been discussed with the Malagasy authorities, especially the Minister of Agriculture and the *Observatoire pour le Riz à Madagascar*?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, all these issues have been raised and discussed at the highest political profile. In fact, the Prime Minister has taken up the matter and discussed it with the President of the Malagasy Republic. In fact, I recall that when I led a delegation of private/public sector to the Malagasy Republic, they promised that a special agricultural zone would be identified and, of course, which would be appropriate for cultivation of these commodities which have been mentioned by the

Leader of the Opposition. But we have to be fair and say that there are many issues that have to be addressed.

Firstly, there is *le bail emphytéolique*, the security of land tenure; secondly, there are many squatters squatting on land belonging to Government; thirdly, now that the Malagasy Government has developed strategy in respect of land to be leased to stakeholders, it is an opportunity, which is knocking, and, of course, we are going to grasp it. Hence, the reason as to why there have been other visits made by Ministers. My colleague, the Minister of Cooperatives went to Malagasy Republic and pledges have been made as to acreage of land that can be released specifically for the cultivation of crops which, of course, we need to import and crops which, unfortunately, we cannot grow locally. But, these issues are addressed. The SADC conference is an opportunity for us to raise the matter. In fact, it is a conference on poverty alleviation and food crisis situation today equate to poverty alleviation, because there is the possibility that another hundred million people may sink further down, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

Mr Bérenger: May I ask the hon. Minister whether he will agree with me that *coopération régionale* is first and foremost a question of *volonté politique* and that for things to move forward, we, as a nation, Government, Opposition, private sector, planters must move together? Will the Prime Minister of Mauritius be taking the lead to convince our Malagasy friends specially that we mean business in the long-term? Will such initiatives be considered?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Speaker, Sir, I recall in respect of Mozambique, had it not been for the Prime Minister there would have been no deal with Mozambique and the opportunities for our investors to move to Mozambique would not have been there. As I have stated, the Prime Minister has taken up the matter. We are going to raise it to the highest political level and I grant the Leader of the Opposition that we have to move in tandem on this issue, because we are talking of food security and we have every reason to say loud and clear that we need to harmonize policy in respect of regional corporate. In fact, let me quote what somebody, who is well-known and who has written a very good book on the Bottom Billion stated : “If we are to solve this global problem, we need more globalization and less sentimentality”.

But having said so, we have to take care of transnational cooperation, which is trying to make profits beyond the wildest dreams.

Mr Bérenger: Coming to the last part of the question on the genetically modified organisms, it is a long time since the Genetically Modified Organisms Act was passed in 2004. The hon. Minister will agree with me that the result is that out there, it is free for anybody - until section 7 be proclaimed – to import, sell without labeling, produce GMO goods without any control. Can I know, since now regulations are being prepared, when we can expect the section 7 and other sections of the legislation to be proclaimed so that the population be properly protected? I am sure the Minister agrees that there are GMO foods on sale now without labeling.

Dr. Boolell: I totally agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, although there is provision in the Food Act. I recall that when the Bill on the GMO was debated the former Minister of Health, hon. Jugnauth, made it a point to highlight the fact that, in respect of provision 3 (e) of Food Regulations, regulations are there, to see to it that the import of those agro-process products are properly labeled, but then enforcement is a different matter. We know that there are GMO products on our shelves. But this Government has wasted no time, the law was voted in April 2004. True that the year after there was election, but nothing stopped the then Government from setting up the National Bio-Safety Committee to allow the Chairman to do its work properly. Let me make it quite clear that once the new chairman was appointed, over the last nine months, he has been working very diligently. Two sub-committees have been set up, one chaired by an officer from the State Law Office, who has moved the process. The regulations that I have referred to have been worked out. The relevant papers are sent to the State Law Office and once clearance is obtained, the law would be proclaimed.

Mr Bérenger: We all agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that we have to take every precaution in the production, especially of GMO items. The hon. Minister mentioned a few products where he feels there is potential. But there is immense potential for rice - rice with all sorts of added vitamins being developed are about to be commercialized. There is an initiative for new rice for Africa. Therefore, can I ask the hon. Minister whether Government would consider turning the MSIRI into a larger agricultural research institute so that the expanded agricultural research institute would be able to work closely with the authorities in South Africa, and India specially, where they are way ahead in terms of GMO products?

Dr. Boolell: In fact, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I recall very well when we were first in Government in 1996, I saw to it that an expert on the matter travelled to Mauritius, Mr Clive James. We had enlisted his support - hon. Mrs Hanoomanjee would remember - and he came to help us prepare the document on bio-safety. Professor Sasson from UNESCO also came. Over and above, we interacted with a prominent biotech institute from India and we got Dr. Prakash to come over.

But in respect of the specific point raised by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, let me remind him that we have to err on the principle of precaution and it is imperative that safety evaluation of the product - I have in mind rice - be carried out. Let me read the information that has been relayed to me.

In respect of Golden Rice, this product is genetically modified and has been developed in 2002 to help control Vitamin A deficiency. However, according to the latest issue of the journal "Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety", it is still not been commercialised because of the safety of the gene and its products require characterisation because it has no history of safe use in humans.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I do grant the hon. Leader of the Opposition that these are issues that have to be addressed, but then Mauritius is a small country. If we have to conduct field trials, we have to make sure that we err on the principle of precaution, that

all the relevant precautions are taken because a slight mistake can be catastrophic. I grant the hon. Leader of the Opposition that there are provisions in the legislation, that we have to make sure that all the necessary precautions are taken; even before a permit is issued, it has to be thoroughly and carefully studied and then the Minister concerned has to come and make a statement in Parliament, etc.

Having said so, let me come specifically to MSIRI. MSIRI is a blue-chip Research Institute, highly praised the world over; and it is because of this, that 9 million euros out of the 13 million euros earmarked for research and development in sugar cane, has been allocated by EU Commission and streamlined to MSIRI. The proposal has been made and we are studying it, but we have to make sure that we don't lose sight of the efficiency and the competency of this Research Institute.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the Minister whether he would not agree with me that being given the context in which we are discussing on food security, we have no choice but to do a number of things at the same time and urgently –

- (i) to produce locally as much as we can of our food;
- (ii) to bank on regional cooperation with the political will - *la volonté politique nécessaire*;
- (iii) to use with every precaution the possibilities of GMO food, but also to prepare certain stocks of vital food, like rice and wheat, and
- (iv) to secure preferential markets with friendly countries.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I agree with him, but let me remind the hon. Leader of the Opposition that the previous Government took a firm undertaking at the Summit Conference organised by AU that a percentage of our economy should be allocated to the agricultural sector to enable the sector to have a growth of more than 6%. But we know what is the specificity of countries like Mauritius and Seychelles.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we are seeing to it that fertile land, even belonging to Government, be released for more and better remunerative purposes and that some of the objectives spelt out in the Strategic Development Plan be met. Over and above, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that we release fund for preparation of land and, whether we like it or not, over the years, there has been encroachment upon prime agricultural land despite the fact that there had been a report submitted by MSIRI and FAO. These are facts, I grant the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The property development is a sector that is booming, but we have to make sure that we strike the right balance –

- (i) in respect of land to be released for more and better agricultural purposes;
- (ii) certainly the will is there to move the process forward to enable us to conclude strategic partnership with our friends in Mozambique and Madagascar.

We pray to God that Zimbabwe achieves political stability because Mozambique, Madagascar and Zimbabwe can be the granary of the region, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. Whether we like it or not, lately the planters have been suffering undue hardship because of the constant increase in the price of agro input, but then we have to state another fact that at the World Trade Organisation the political will should be there to impress upon them that agriculture is different; it is sovereign as has been done in respect of medicine for those who suffer from AIDS, because of this specificity of agriculture. The suggestions made by the hon. Leader of the Opposition have been spelt out in the reply which I have given and the contents of the reply, of course, rest on those three pillars: land preparation, cross border initiative, research and development and market access, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

The Deputy Speaker: Time is over now! The Table has been advised that Parliamentary Questions B/225, B/235 and B/236 addressed to Dr. the hon. Prime Minister have been withdrawn.

CYCLONIC CONDITIONS - LEGISLATION

(No. B/222) Mr P. Jhugroo (Third Member for Port Louis North and Montagne Longue) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether he will state if consideration will be given for the introduction of relevant legislation so as to make it an offence for persons to venture outside when cyclonic conditions are prevailing.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in February this year, when heavy swells hit part of the island, despite repeated tidal waves warnings issued by the Meteorological Services and relayed by the Police, many swimmers, surfers, picnickers and other members of the public ignored those warnings and ventured at sea.

The Acting Commissioner of Police then recommended that appropriate legislation be passed by Government so that legal action can be taken against those persons who defy official warnings, not only for reasons of their own safety and security, but also because it resulted in unnecessary and costly Police actions.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, although such legislation has a number of implications, I believe the Acting Commissioner of Police is, on balance, right.

After all, next door to us, in Reunion Island, this is so if there is an “*Alerte Rouge*” during cyclonic conditions.

The advice of the Acting Commissioner of Police for a legal framework to be established is under active consideration along the same lines as the “*Alerte Rouge*” issued by the authorities of Réunion Island during cyclonic conditions.

I should also add, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as the House is aware, following the severe flooding of 26 March last, my Office had approached the World Meteorological Organisation for expert assistance with a view to strengthening national capacity in terms of mitigation, preparedness and response.

The World Meteorological Organisation has responded positively to our request and has agreed to field a mission of experts to Mauritius shortly. The experts are expected, among other things, to make recommendations pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of all organisations concerned within a multi-hazard approach.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will be asking the WMO team of experts to look into the recommendations of the Acting Commissioner of Police and to make appropriate recommendations so that we can incorporate them in the legislation.

POLICE HELICOPTERS – SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS

(No. B/223) Mr P. Jhugroo (Third Member for Port Louis North and Montagne Longue) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether in regard to cases of disappearance at sea, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Commissioner of Police, information as to the established protocols within the Police Force for the participation of the Police helicopters and the specialised units of the National Coast Guard in the search and rescue operations.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, according to section 12 of the National Coast Guard Act 1988, the National Coast Guard is responsible to undertake search and rescue operations in all situations of distress in the maritime zones of Mauritius.

There are established protocols, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, for the mobilisation and deployment of the different units of the Police Force, including the National Coast Guard in the search and rescue operations at sea.

The operational procedures and the deployment for search and rescue operations take into account the following factors -

- (i) determining the position, time of occurrence and nature of distress;
- (ii) determining the exact area to be searched based on the latest known position, the time that has elapsed since the occurrence of the incident, the prevailing ocean currents, winds and tidal streams in the area, the state of the vessel or person to be rescued and the drift rate as determined from reference tables/prediction modeling.
- (iii) deployment of aerial assets, namely aircrafts and helicopters depends on the distance of the search area from Mauritius and the prevailing weather conditions.

- (iv) deployment of surface assets, namely vessels and NCG boats depends on the distance of the search area from the base, weather condition and sea state, size of the area to be searched and the effectiveness of deploying different types of vessels and boats.

Currently, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the National Coast Guard deploys the following aerial and surface assets: two Dorniers and one Defender aircrafts, five helicopters, three NCG vessels and the NCG boats based at various posts in search and rescue operations at sea.

The Defender and Dornier aircrafts can cover a distance of 150 and 420 nautical miles from base, respectively.

Police helicopters are involved in inshore aerial search as they have limited speed and operational range. Normally, the services of helicopters are required for areas within 10 nautical miles from the coastline of Mauritius.

The three NCG vessels have a search capability ranging from 15 to 300 nautical miles from base.

For local incidents, for example, cases of drowning and persons and fishermen in distress, within the lagoon and up to 5 to 10 nautical miles from the coastline, NCG boats based at various NCG posts around the island and at the outer islands are then utilised for search and rescue in addition to the aerial search provided by the Police helicopters or the Dornier aircrafts, as the case may be.

Assistance is also sought from friendly countries namely, Reunion Island, Seychelles, India and Australia, to help the NCG in search and rescue operations, including sharing of vital information, when such need is felt.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I should add that, during my official visit to India in October 2005, I discussed with the Indian authorities about the acquisition of an advanced light helicopter and an offshore patrol vessel to enhance the capability of the Police Department in undertaking, amongst other things, search and rescue operations. The agreement between the Government of Mauritius and the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd for the purchase of the helicopter has already been finalised. The procurement of the offshore patrol vessel is currently being finalised with the Indian authorities. These two projects will be financed under the line of credit and grant totalling US\$100 m. obtained from the Government of India during that official visit.

Mr Jhugroo: M. le président, le Premier ministre pourrait-il nous dire pourquoi les services de la NCG et des hélicoptères n'ont pas été pas retenus ce mercredi 26 mars pour aller au secours des gens à Mon Goût ?

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that is not the case. They have actually been in service.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Prime Minister state whose authority is required whenever helicopters are needed for search and rescue operations?

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is a procedure depending where the phone call has been made, whether it has been made to a Police Station or to the Operations & Information Room of the Police. Then, they immediately get in touch with the SMF, the Commissioner of Police and the Helicopter Squad. It is up to the Commissioner of Police to give the green light.

Mr Barbier: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he has the number of persons who have disappeared at sea for the past five years in our territorial waters?

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, yes I can give the figures of people who have disappeared. In the year 2000, the number of persons who have remained missing is nine; in 2001, it is nine; in 2002, it is nine; in 2003, it is still nine; in 2004, it's six; in 2005, it's two; in 2006, it's 11, and in 2007, it's 22.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is the hon. Prime Minister aware that even the authority of the Secretary for Home Affairs is required? Je suis moi-même intervenue dans des cas de noyade à Flic en Flac, où on m'a informée qu'il fallait absolument avoir l'approbation du Secretary for Home Affairs.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, normally if he is informed, it is good, as he chairs the Disaster Committee. But, in fact, it's the Commissioner of Police who takes the decision.

Mr Jhugroo: M. le président, le Premier ministre pourrait-il nous dire si l'hélicoptère de la police a patrouillé la région de Mon Goût ce mercredi, et si oui, à quelle heure ?

The Deputy Speaker: Is the hon. Member referring to cases of disappearance at sea? Because the question, as it is, specifically pertains to disappearance at sea. We have to stick to the subject set out in the main question. It's the hon. Member who himself did put the original question!

Mr Bhagwan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I know from the hon. Prime Minister whether it is envisaged in the near future to provide Rodrigues with helicopter services for rescue purposes?

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have helicopters that can actually go. But, this is something that we have to look into.

CHILD A.J. – KIDNAPPING – SUSPECTS - DNA TESTS

(No.B/224) **Mrs S. Hanoomanjee (Second Member for Savanne & Black River)** asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the case of child A.J. who was raped and killed in July 2005, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Commissioner of Police, information as to if Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) tests have been carried out on the suspected perpetrators and, if so –

- (a) if these tests were carried out in Mauritius or abroad, and
- (b) the outcome thereof.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am informed that the Forensic Science Laboratory profiled five samples pertaining to the case of child A.J., including one control sample of blood and four other samples of swabs.

The laboratory further conducted DNA tests on blood samples from four suspects arrested in connection with this case. All these tests were carried out at the Forensic Science Laboratory at Réduit.

No DNA evidence was found on three suspects. However, the DNA profile obtained from the blood sample of the other suspect, that is, the fourth suspect, matched the DNA profile from the swab of the victim.

On receipt of the DNA evidence, the Police have arrested one Mr E.B. and he is remanded to jail. A bail motion for his release is fixed for 21 April 2008.

Two other suspects who had made confessions are presently released on bail because no DNA evidence had been found. There was a preliminary inquiry, and the DPP has asked for further inquiry.

The fourth suspect denied the charge, and he was not arrested in the absence of DNA and other evidence.

Relevant Police inquiry has been completed on the case and it has been referred to the DPP.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, there is now an increased awareness of the role and need for forensic science. In this regard, my Government is determined to provide an effective forensic service as a tool for investigation and prosecution of crime.

In this connection and at my request, a team from Staffordshire University was in Mauritius in November of last year to see what are the needs of the Forensic Science Laboratory and whether there are ways of improving things. Following their mission, the experts identified important fields in which training is required in the field of forensic science, namely –

- (i) forensic awareness;
- (ii) expert witness training, and
- (iii) training of the staff itself.

An expert team from the University will accordingly be in Mauritius from 23 August to 06 September of this year for the running of training programmes for officers of the Forensic Science Laboratory as well as the Police Department.

Furthermore, in October 2007, the British High Commission agreed to assist the Government of Mauritius in developing our forensic science capability through a contribution of £21,500 to cover fees associated with two studies by the UK Forensic Science Service as follows -

- a crime scene review by a Crime Scene Adviser, and
- a Scoping Study to develop a long-term strategy for the use and development of forensic science in Mauritius.

Subsequently, Mr Barrie Warburton, International Crime Scene Adviser, and Mr Malcolm Boots, Forensic Scientist, both from the UK Forensic Science Service, were in Mauritius from 28 January to 15 February of this year for the above assignment.

The objectives of the Crime Scene Review were as follows -

- training for scene of crime staff with a view to improving their awareness of opportunities to recover DNA from crime scenes;
- support to write protocols for crime scene management;
- review kits used and storage protocols for forensic material, and
- review of five unresolved crimes.

As for the Scoping Study, the objectives thereof were to –

- establish a user requirement for the laboratory;
- assess forensic science standards, and
- prepare a report on development issues for a long-term strategy for the use of forensic science.

The final reports of both experts are awaited.

Additionally, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, DNA legislation will be introduced so that DNA results can be made admissible in Court. The Bill is presently under active preparation.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether, in this particular case, the FSL took into consideration the fact that the dead body had been lying in water for two days and that it could have been contaminated, and that the DNA test could not have been conclusive?

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the body might have been in water – I am personally just speaking from knowledge – but that does not mean that there cannot be any kind of DNA evidence. I think they did find DNA evidence in one, but not in all of them.

Mr Ganoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I just heard the hon. Prime Minister saying that Government is intending to present DNA legislation before this House. As the hon. Prime Minister knows, as an evidentiary mechanism, DNA has raised a number of concerns in terms of increasing Police powers and in the context of human rights issues, and has generated a lot of conflict over the usefulness and reliability of this methodology in other countries. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether Government would be kind enough to see to it that a position paper is circulated to all stakeholders, so that people can voice their views, and that lawyers, NGOs have a chance to contribute before the Bill is circulated in the House?

The Prime Minister: In fact, I can have the Bill circulated a long time before so that people can make comments, because a circulation paper might involve details that might make things more confused. But maybe if I have the Bill circulated quite some time before that would be sufficient, I would think.

Mr Ganoo: In fact, Mr Speaker, Sir, we know there has been a lot of literature, for example, I have with me ‘U.S. Panel Seeking Restriction on use of DNA in Courts’. The National Academy of Science says that Courts should cease to admit DNA evidence. The Courts, particularly, in Canada and Australia, unless in the US, have shown some reticence in admitting the DNA evidence...

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member has already made his point. If he has got another question he can put it.

Mr Ganoo: I am quoting from all these literatures, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. The point that I am making is that there should be a position paper by the Law Reform Commission.

The Deputy Speaker: The point has been taken by the hon. Prime Minister.

Mr Ganoo: And have it circulated.

The Prime Minister: As the Deputy Speaker, Sir, said, the point has been taken, but I should add that there have been some reports about the DNA and even in UK there have been some fresh reports. On the other hand, in balance, we have seen a lot of positive things also. We will circulate the report.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Prime Minister say on what criteria the Commissioner of Police or the authorities concerned base themselves to determine as to whether a DNA test should be carried out locally or abroad?

The Prime Minister: I think they try to do it locally but, sometimes the families themselves demand that the samples be sent abroad. I think these are the kind of criteria they use but, first of all, they do it locally. This is what I am aware of.

Mr Jhugroo: Can the hon. Prime Minister inform the House how much does it cost to undergo a DNA test abroad?

The Prime Minister: I know it is expensive, but I don't know exactly how much it costs.

POLICE – SUSPECTS – INQUIRY

(No. B/225) Mr Y. Varma (First Member for Mahebourg and Plaine Magnien) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the current Police practice of lodging a provisional information against a suspect, prior to the completion of an inquiry, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Commissioner of Police, information as to if consideration will now be given for the review thereof and, if not, why not.

(Withdrawn)

EUROPEAN UNION - ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

(No. B/226) Mr M. Dowarkasing (Third Member for Curepipe and Midlands) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether he will state if Government has signed an Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union and, if so, will he indicate the main axes thereof.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, Mauritius initialed an Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), within the Eastern and Southern African configuration on 04 December 2007. Negotiations for the full EPA could not be completed as scheduled by 31 December 2007.

The Interim Agreement covers three main axes, namely –

- (i) trade in goods;
- (ii) fisheries, and
- (iii) development cooperation.

The Interim Agreement also comprises a clause listing the issues including agriculture, trade in services, trade-related issues, with a view to concluding a full EPA by the end of 2008.

The Interim Agreement provides full duty free and quota free market access for all Mauritian products on the EU market, except for rice and sugar which will have a short transition period up to 2015. Rules of origin, especially for textiles and clothing have been significantly improved and is equivalent to the AGOA provisions on third country fabrics to be provided on a contractual basis. This is a significant improvement over the previous Cotonou Agreement, in terms of improved market access.

In addition to the duty-free quota free market access on the EU market, and single transformation for textiles and clothing at the initiative of Mauritius, the ESA region has obtained an automatic derogation of 8,000 tons for canned tuna and 2,000 tonnes for tuna loins. This will be shared among the tuna exporting countries of those ESA countries that have initialed the Agreement, namely Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar for canned tuna and Mauritius and Seychelles for tuna loins.

Regarding sugar, the ACP countries have been provided duty-free access, which is subject to the application of a safeguard clause, if exports exceed 3.5 million tonnes at all ACP level. Within the ESA region, our present Sugar Protocol quantity will be preserved.

The Interim Agreement also contains a comprehensive development chapter including a generic development matrix, with projects of key interests for the development of the region. A detailed costed matrix and development benchmarks are expected to be finalised in the context of the full EPA.

The Interim Agreement is to be signed and ratified by all the signatories, before it enters into force. However, the date of signature is yet to be agreed upon by the parties. An advanced provisional application of the duty and quota free access and the improved rules of origin have been adopted by the EU, pending signature, ratification and entry into force of the Interim Agreement.

My Government is committed to conclude a comprehensive and ambitious EPA as soon as possible. In the meantime, through the Interim EPA, we have managed to avoid any trade disruption on 01 January 2008 as both the WTO Derogation for the Cotonou Agreement and preferential trade regimes were to expire on 31 December 2007.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, insofar as removal of duties are concerned which, I think, is part of the Agreement, that is, removal of duties on certain imports from European countries, has a certain list been stopped and what imports will be derogated from duties?

The Prime Minister: I will circulate the information.

Mr Dowarkasing: Can the hon. Prime Minister confirm - I did not catch him well - whether we have discussed EPAs as a region or there has been bilateral negotiations on this issue?

The Prime Minister: We have discussed it as a region. In fact, there are some countries who wanted to do it bilaterally, but they seem to have changed their mind.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister what is holding on the signature of the Interim Agreement? Which countries are raising what points, what is the problem?

The Prime Minister: I think it's a matter of procedure. I know some countries are taking longer than they should have. I don't know whether it is just procedure. I can say, for example, out of 50 ESA countries, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it includes Tanzania. Tanzania had initially decided to negotiate an EPA within the SADC EPM configuration and then later it seems it has changed its mind. I suppose it will be signed soon. I think it is just procedures in these countries.

Mr Cuttaree: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he agrees that the Interim Agreement is just an agreement for market access and the net reason of which is that the EU has been able to have market access on the reciprocal basis? But, the main issue of EPAs is that there are two things: the development dimension and the regional integration dimension. The development dimension, the financing, how this is going to be done has not been touched. For regional integration, it is the same thing. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether, at the level of the ACP, there is concerted action to ensure that the European Union moves on these two aspects? Because what I fear is that we might never have a full agreement.

The Prime Minister: This is not the feeling we have, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. I think we are moving towards a full agreement. As I explained, we had to do this, as you know, because Mauritius does not benefit from the Everything but Arms Agreement whereas some countries do benefit. We had to sign the Interim Agreement so that our economic interests could be preserved. But the feeling generally is that we will move towards a full agreement.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the Lisbon Summit many African countries have rejected the idea of EPAs. Can we know what stand Mauritius took in that meeting?

The Prime Minister: Mauritius took the stand that our economic interests have to be defended. We do not benefit from the Everything but Arms deal and, therefore, we have to look at our economic interests and that is the position that we took.

Mr Bérenger: As has just been said, there are divisions within the larger ACP group. Is there any move to have a Summit Meeting - there have been Summits in the past on the suggestion of Mauritius - of the ACP countries to harmonise positions as far as the economic partnership agreement is concerned?

The Prime Minister: I remember that discussion, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, and then some countries decided to break ranks and wanted to negotiate bilaterally. We have tried to express our concern about this; I think we should negotiate as a group and I believe everybody is looking at that position more positively. South Africa had taken a different direction and President Mbeki is not too happy with that situation. He mentioned it to me when he was here at the last official visit in March, but they are studying the matter.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I know from the hon. Prime Minister whether a certain key concession has been reached on the tariffs of imported goods from Europe to be expanded over a decade? Have we reached any agreement on this issue?

The Prime Minister: That is the whole basis of the discussion.

Mr Bodha: Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister when is the next round of discussion due between the European Union and the EPA region?

The Prime Minister: I know there was a Ministerial meeting, if I am not mistaken, in Lusaka last month and then we have to co-ordinate our position first.

RECOMAP PROJECT – AMOUNT EARMARKED, LIST OF PROJECTS, ETC.

(No. B/227) Mr M. Dowarkasing (Third Member for Curepipe & Midlands) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the Recomap Project, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Indian Ocean Commission, information as to -

- (a) the amount earmarked for Mauritius, and
- (b) the amount spent as at to date, together with the details thereof and a list of the projects identified.

The Prime Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Regional Coastal Management Programme (Recomap) is implemented by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) under funding from the 9th European Development Fund (EDF) to the tune of €18.0 million. It started in August 2006 and is expected to be completed by July 2011.

The programme covers seven countries namely - Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Somalia, Seychelles, Tanzania and Mauritius. The overall objective is to enhance the sustainable management and conservation of natural coastal resources, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation amongst the coastal population of Southern Western Indian Ocean.

I am informed that, as per the Financing Agreement, funds are not allocated country-wise as is the case in all regional programmes.

Regarding part (b) of the question, I am informed that as at to date, the overall programme expenditure amounts to € 825,887.58.

The main components of the programme are -

- (i) enhancing Monitoring, conservation, valorisation and sustainable management of coastal and marine biodiversity and natural resources of the south west Indian ocean coastal zones;
- (ii) developing and adapting training capacity for coastal and marine technicians in the region, through Regional Centres of Excellence;
- (iii) strengthening Sensitisation on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) issues amongst decision makers, the private sector, NGOs and the civil society;
- (iv) drafting and adopting National ICZM plans;
- (v) improving capabilities of countries to adopt proactive positions on marine and coastal resources in multilateral negotiations and reporting on Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs);
- (vi) improving the active involvement of non-state actors in implementing the action plans. (This result to be implemented through Calls for Proposals);
- (vii) improving regional policy consensus on sustainable coastal and marine management and exchanging information and experience on marine and coastal resources at the regional level, and
- (viii) activities to achieve the above seven results, including technical assistance, operational costs, equipment, furniture, support to the National Focal Points, mission expenses, project management committees, etc.

Mauritius, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is actively participating in the programme and the Ministry of Environment and National Development Unit is the national focal point.

I am circulating a paper on the progress of implementation of the programme in Mauritius. (**Appendix I**)

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Prime Minister for this answer. Will the hon. Prime Minister concur with me that this is a very essential and vital project that has been launched and it is being conducted mostly by NGOs and the civil society? How is Government going to monitor that all these projects fall under the National Environment Strategic Plan and it is part of the National Environment Action Plan?

The Prime Minister: I should say, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that we have looked at the possibility of how we should monitor it, and an international expert, a consultant, visited Mauritius in 2007 to evaluate some of the projects and to see how the monitoring can be done. As I said, the focal point will be the Ministry of Environment and the NDU.

Mr Dowarkasing: Do we understand from the hon. Prime Minister that the Minister of Environment will set up a monitoring committee to monitor specifically these projects?

The Prime Minister: Basically, the answer is yes; it has already been done.

The Deputy Speaker: Time is over. The Table has further been advised that PQ Nos. B/254, B/255, B/256, B/260, B/266, B/291 and B/292 have been withdrawn.

RIVERS & CANALS – ILLEGAL CONSTRUCTION

(No. B/237) **Mr M. Jhugroo (Third Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue)** asked the Minister of Local Government whether, in regard to the rivers and canals, he will state if cases of illegal construction on the banks thereof have been reported and, if so, the remedial actions that have been taken, if any.

The Minister of Information Technology & Telecommunications (Mr E. Sinatambou): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the information requested by the hon. Member is being compiled and will be placed in the Library of the National Assembly in due course.

Mr Jhugroo: Le ministre est-il au courant qu'avec ces constructions illégales au bord des rivières, beaucoup de ces rivières sont devenues des canaux ?

Mr Sinatambou : I am not aware, Sir.

The Deputy Speaker: Emperically, yes! But I do not think that the Minister would be able to give an answer.

Mr Jhugroo: Le ministre compte-t-il agir le plus vite possible pour rémédier à ces fracas causés par des gens irresponsables ?

Mr Sinatambou: Let me remind the hon. Member that the Rivers and Canals Act dates back to 1863 and therefore the disaster that there has been goes back to more than 150 years. However, I am quite sure that the substantive Minister has been doing the needful and, as I said, the information requested is being compiled and will be placed in the Library in due course.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether, following the recent torrential rains, any remedial measures have been taken during the past two weeks to ensure that in case there is *pluie diluvienne* again on the island, the same type of problems does not arise again?

Mr Sinatambou: I am quite sure the needful must have been done by the substantive Minister, but I for one, will need notice of the question.

Mr Jhugroo: Je fais un appel au ministre car il y a une construction illégale sur la rivière Boundary de Terre Rouge ainsi que sur Canal Dayot, près du pont Roussel. Le ministre peut-il faire le nécessaire car cela cause des problèmes aux personnes.

Mr Sinatambou : I am very thankful to the hon. Member, but I will suggest that he meets me after the sitting and give me more details. I'll be very happy to look into the matter.

GOODS (IMPORTED) –PRICE

(No. B/238) Mrs L.D. Dookun-Luchoomun (Third Member for La Caverne & Phoenix) asked the Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development, Family Welfare & Consumer Protection whether, in regard to imported goods, she will state the measures that are being taken by her Ministry to ensure that customers benefit from the fall in the prices thereof, following the appreciation of the Mauritian rupee *vis-à-vis* foreign currencies.

Mrs Seebun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, following the appreciation of the Mauritian rupee *vis-à-vis* foreign currencies, the prices of a number of commodities have been revised downwards by traders, importers and retailers.

As an immediate measure, I have set up a Price Monitoring Committee to assess the impact of rising world prices, fluctuations in the foreign exchange rate and freight charges on the price of imported goods. This Committee will also help in ensuring that there is a continuous dialogue among importers, retailers, Consumer Associations and my Ministry so that consumers benefit from the appreciation of the Mauritian rupee.

At the first meeting of the Price Monitoring Committee held on 31 March 2008, it was noted that the majority of the members of the public was not aware that the prices of a number of commodities have decreased. I therefore made an appeal to the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry for its members to publish in the press the list of products where prices have been reduced so that consumers can make informed purchase decisions. Some of the traders have also started to publish in the press the new list of prices and I am informed that the others will follow soon.

I would also like to highlight that since the appreciation of the Mauritian rupee, the Consumer Protection Unit of my Ministry has intensified its consumer education programmes islandwide, to educate consumers on how to buy intelligently.

At the second meeting held on 09 April 2008, it was decided that the two consumer associations namely l'ACIM and ICP should also play their roles accordingly in informing the members of the public of the decrease in prices. I have already written a letter to the MBC for the allocation of a time slot of around 5 minutes daily for this purpose.

Moreover, the Consumer Protection Unit is closely monitoring the prices of both controlled and non controlled items. Special emphasis is being placed on the affixing of prices on items offered for sale and those found not complying with the provisions of the law are being contravened.

I strongly believe, that if prices recommended by importers are published and communicated to the public, this will act as a deterrent and retailers will refrain from charging higher prices than those recommended.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister how many contraventions have been given till now to retailers?

Mrs Seebun: For the month of March the number of inspections amounted to 828 and the number of retailers booked is 8. Only from the 01 of April to 11 of April, there have been 161 inspections and 40 retailers have been booked.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister whether she is aware of the difficulty being faced by consumers and customers in general due to the fact that the prices are continuously rising and there is nowhere for them to turn when they have to pay excessively for commodities with controlled and uncontrolled prices?

Mrs Seebun: As the House is aware, there has recently been an unprecedented rise in world prices of food items. The PNQ of this morning has highly enlightened the House, however, the appreciation in the Mauritian rupee is helping in mitigating the effect.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: As the hon. Minister has mentioned the rupee has appreciated, customers are expecting prices to go down, but they are not going down, when will the prices go down?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this is why we have set up the Monitoring Committee to ensure that the effect is positively felt by all consumers.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister whether she can confirm that the Monitoring Committee has not yet given results?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mrs Seebun: The number of inspections carried out and the number of contraventions given - which is five times more already - show that the Monitoring Committee is giving results.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, contraventions are not making the life of people easier. Till now, we have not observed a fall in prices of basic commodities. May I ask the hon. Minister whether she plans to have a new policy to control prices for basic commodities, at least, for some time, awaiting for the situation to become better?

Mrs Seebun: As Minister responsible for consumer protection, this is my major concern, and this can be envisaged.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister what she intends to do to convert her concern into remedial work?

Mrs Seebun: Can the hon. Member repeat the question?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I was just asking the Minister whether her concern can be converted into actual actions.

Mrs Seebun: The committee has been set up so that we can show actions. It is an implementation committee; it is not only a committee.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister whether she is satisfied with the result that has been given up to now?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to be very frank, the committee has just been set up and we have to wait for a few months to see the positive impact. But the initiative is there, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. The hon. Member has to recognise...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! How can I give a ruling if I don't hear?

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Minister how many items have seen their price fall after the appreciation of the rupee? Can the hon. Minister name a few?

Mrs Seebun: According to the monitoring done by the CPU, we have noticed a fall in price on 26 items so far, but we are monitoring closely so as to get a wider number in the interest of consumers. I am tabling the information.

Mr Bodha: Can I ask the hon. Minister how is she going to enforce so that the fall in prices should benefit the consumer?

Mrs Seebun: The question itself is quite clear. The fall in prices, especially on food items, goes to the benefit of the consumers. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have set up this Monitoring Committee so as we can enforce.

(Interruptions)

Mrs Martin: I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether, among those 26 items whose prices have decreased, there is any basic commodity which most Mauritians use?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mrs Seebun: There is quite a number of basic items like butter, cheese, fish and so on.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister when did the price of butter go down?

Mrs Seebun: It should be the appreciation of the rupee which has caused this positive effect.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: When was the effect felt on the prices of butter in particular?

Mrs Seebun: Recently the price of cheese was R52 and now it is Rs46; for butter, it was Rs42 and now it is Rs36.

At 1.00 p.m. the sitting was suspended.

On resuming at 2.35 p.m. with the Deputy Speaker in the Chair

UPSEE/GOVERNMENT – AGREEMENTS

(No. B/239) Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun (Third Member for La Caverne and Phoenix) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether, in regard to the agreements signed between Government and the Union of Private Secondary Education Employees in 1983, he will state if his Ministry has decided to override same.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of misunderstandings about the agreements that exist between the Government and the Union of Private Secondary Education Employees (UPSEE). I welcome the opportunity of this question to enlighten the House and the public at large about the essence of these agreements because in fact, there are two: one signed in February 1983 and the other, in May 2000, and the position of my Ministry on same.

First of all, these agreements have to be placed in context. With regard to the first one signed in February 1983, it has to be borne in mind that at that time, a large number of private secondary schools had closed down and were in the process of being closed down. The country was going through a difficult economic situation and unemployment was high. Job opportunities were limited. Around 200 employees were facing the threat of being laid off as a result of the closing down of the schools and because of the social dimension of the problem in the then socio-economic context, Government decided to take “*all appropriate measures for the protection of employment of employees concerned and to do everything within its authority, prerogative and jurisdiction to redeploy any employee who may become redundant*”. That agreement was meant to address the situation of employees concerned at that time as well as that of those who could have become redundant immediately after because it was then foreseen that the colleges would be closing down one after the other. Therefore, the Agreement of 1983 was never meant to be of an open ended nature to be applicable to all future cases irrespective of when or how they might occur. Nowhere is it stated that the agreement would apply *ad infinitum*.

It is precisely because the 1983 agreement was not meant to apply *ad infinitum* that the need was felt in May 2000 to sign another agreement to address possible cases of redundancy that could have arisen at that time. Again the Agreement of 2000 was not meant to be of an open ended nature. That agreement was meant to address the situation of employees concerned at that time as well as that of those who could have become redundant immediately after.

Admittedly, on account of the fact that the education sector was expanding and more particularly as from 2002 when many secondary schools were constructed, it was still possible to ensure the redeployment of employees of private secondary schools. However, now that the situation has stabilised and that the possibility of automatic absorption are few and far apart, and also there are now attractive alternative employment opportunities in various sectors of our economy with possibility of earning higher income, the practice of redeployment *in toto*, as it existed in the past, is no longer viable and sustainable.

Furthermore, it is also the Ministry's view that in a spirit of equity to recruit qualified job seekers in the labour market, automatic redeployment may be fraught with serious legal implications with respect to equal opportunities considerations. As regards the question of as to whether my Ministry has overridden the agreements, it does not arise. In fact, my Ministry is still upholding the spirit of these agreements and as indicated in reply to PQs B/49 and B/50 at our sitting of 25 March 2008, on account of existing vacancies in non-teaching positions, my Ministry has managed to redeploy all the redundant employees *albeit* not in the same position but without loss of salary and other related benefits notwithstanding the rather awkward situation whereby salary and other benefits are not commensurate with work performed.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I must say that I am rather confused by the hon. Minister's answer. When he says that he has not overridden this agreement, does he mean that it still stands good?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have explained the situation as it was in 1983 and 2000. It has now evolved. All I am saying is that the spirit of the agreement is being maintained and that we cannot predict, with precision, what is going to happen in future. Therefore, I cannot give a blanket guarantee that redeployment will take place *in toto*.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has just mentioned that he believes that this agreement was no longer sustainable, and now, he is saying that he still abides by the spirit of the agreement. Therefore, I take it that the agreement is still applicable and sustainable because as he has just mentioned, he had managed to redeploy all the teachers in spite of the fact that he kept mentioning that he is not going to keep this agreement.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have explained that the economic situation and the situation in the education sector are evolving and I have put the two agreements in their particular context. As I said, I cannot, at this stage, give a blanket guarantee that redeployment will take place as it has been the case in the past, but the spirit of the agreement is maintained, that is, to ensure that where schools are closed down, people will find alternative employment. And this is where the Ministry, as I said in my previous PQs, will help these people to find alternative employment.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, therefore, will the Ministry not take the responsibility of finding alternative employment for the teachers?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am very clear. The Ministry will assist, and, as I said in my previous PQs, we have the reskilling programme and other possibilities exist. The other thing, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is that the education sector is very dynamic. It would be a paradox that we would try to maintain security of employment, a job for a life time in a sector which is supposed to be engaged in lifelong learning and employability. I think this should be a paradox.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would like the hon. Minister to be clearer. Either we maintain the agreement or we do not! Can I know from the hon. Minister whether it is being maintained?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have given the answer and the hon. Member is free to make her own interpretation of my answer.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I then ask the hon. Minister what will happen to teachers who are in employment in schools which have not closed down yet and which ...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: This question is hypothetical.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: I am going to rephrase it, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. May I ask the hon. Minister whether, when schools become overstaffed and teachers are declared redundant, the Ministry then considers redeploying these redundant teachers in spite of the fact that the school is still operating?

Mr Gokhool: This is a hypothetical situation, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to mention to the hon. Lady that problems like these are, normally, in the first instance, dealt with by the PSSA whose Chairman is Mr Naga and whose Director is Mr Luchoomun. All I am trying to say is that whenever there are problems, they are first dealt with by the PSSA and thereafter they are referred to the Ministry according to law.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am asking the hon. Minister a simple question on the policy. Will he mention whether he is going to consider teachers in schools who have not closed down yet to be redundant when the schools become overstaffed?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: This question is hypothetical. The hon. Member ought to ask the hon. Minister what he is going to do actually with regards to schools where teachers are redundant. But he cannot foresee which schools are going to close down and how many teachers are going to be redundant. Can the hon. Member rephrase her question again?

(Interruptions)

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am addressing the question, through you, to the hon. Minister of Education and I am expecting an answer from the hon. Minister of Education and not from the hon. Minister of Finance! To start with, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir - my question is simple - there are teachers presently working in schools which have not closed down and who are being declared redundant. Can I know from the hon. Minister what will be the policy of the Ministry in such cases?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have already answered to this question because, apart from the three colleges which have closed down, there are other colleges that closed down. And this has been dealt with in the arrangements which have been made recently. This is a hypothetical situation. As I said ...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: I do believe that the hon. Member has asked a specific question about colleges that are still operational, but where teachers have been declared to be redundant. That is the point that the hon. Member has made. Is it the case?

Mr Gokhool: I am not aware of cases, unless the hon. Lady is better informed than the Minister!

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, the Minister has, a number of times, in this very Assembly, mentioned that I, being a teacher, should know certain things and I would like to state ..

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Both the Minister and the hon. Member should not make things too personal. Because this is something which has to do with education. The issue is simply about education; it has nothing to do either with the Minister or with the hon. Member. That is my ruling.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, being a member of the Union, I have information that there are cases of teachers who are becoming redundant due to overstaffing. May I ask the Minister what his Ministry's policy is in such cases?

Mr Gokhool: I said, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that I do not have the information which the hon. lady has. How can I answer on the basis of something which I am not aware of?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Last question!

Mr Lauthan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on both occasions in this context, the hon. Minister mentioned the difficult economic situation of our time to explain the compassionate attitude of the Government. Does he not think that today the situation is still more difficult and there is more need than ever to be compassionate towards these teachers?

Mr Gokhool: I will answer the hon. Member by just repeating what I said. The economic situation is evolving. There are better opportunities in many sectors and, in particular, in the education sector where we are promoting lifelong learning and employability. We will help these people to go and find other jobs.

Mr Jhugroo: M le président, le ministre peut-il confirmer si les *managers* des écoles privées veulent sa démission ?

Mr Gokhool : It's just becoming a joke! Either the hon. Member is a joker!

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! Next question!

NATIONAL COLLEGES – ADMISSION EXERCISE

(No. B/240) Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun (Third Member for La Caverne and Phoenix) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether, in regard to the National Schools, he will state if –

- (a) the vacant seats at Form I level thereat have been filled and,
- (b) he will give the names and the examination results of the students who have been admitted in the second admission exercise.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, all vacancies in Form I of National Colleges were filled by the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate in accordance with the provision of Regulation 10 (5) of the Education Regulations 1957, that is, on the basis of specified criteria and merit.

Out of a total of 1670 available seats 1702 seats have been allocated by MES with 854 of the boys' side and 848 on the girls' side. Therefore, more seats were allocated than originally provided for because of ties.

The last part of the question does not arise as there has not been any second admission exercise in National Colleges by MES.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that is the very reason for the question. The MES has proceeded with the first exercise and then vacancies were filled. I would like to know what was the mechanism put up to fill the vacancies in National Colleges?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have given a very simple and clear answer. There was only one exercise that was carried out by MES and my answer is very simple. There were 1676 seats, but more seats were allocated because of ties. There was no second exercise. If the hon. lady has prepared a question in anticipation of an answer which I have not given, that is not my problem.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Minister has just mentioned that there were more seats made available due to ties. I would like to know in which cases and in which colleges such a situation arose and again if they were ties, the number of such ties that have been taken on board.

Mr Gokhool: This is a matter which is dealt with by the MES concerning admission in Form I. They forecast a number of seats and when there are ties, these are accommodated. If the hon. lady wants specific answers as to which colleges these ties.....

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Next question, hon. Perrier!

CORPORATE TAX – REVENUE TO GOVERNMENT

(No. B/241) Mrs D. Perrier (Fourth Member for Savanne and Black River) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development whether he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Mauritius Revenue Authority, information as to the reduction in revenue to Government since July 2007 to date as a result of the reduction of the corporate tax from 22% to 15%.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development (Mr R. Sithanen): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, there has been no reduction in revenue to Government as a result of the reduction in corporate tax rate. On the contrary, receipts are on the increase.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have to examine the issue of taxation in a holistic manner. As is clearly borne out by the results achieved in such a short span of time, reform is additive and it is the overall programme that needs evaluation. Nevertheless, one of the most significant reforms that has unlocked growth with equity is the reduction of income tax and corporate tax to a single rate of 15 percent together with a simplification of the system so that everyone now pays his fair share of taxes at a low rate.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I have stressed in this House on various occasions, our low and transparent tax regime coupled with business facilitation and openness has been the cornerstone of our renewed ability to compete in the global economy where the trend is for a lowering of corporate taxation rates. Our package of reforms has returned our economy to robust and balanced growth and we are well on the way to full employment.

The low tax rate has enabled us to remove the various exemptions and incentives in the systems which were leading to inequity, inefficiency and a depressed tax base. By so doing, we have removed the discrimination inherent in the old system against international firms, innovators, new entrants and small and medium-sized enterprises that did not have the appetite or the resources to apply for special treatment via tax incentives. Indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, much of the newly found dynamism in our SMEs reflects the equalising of the tax rate downwards. We have widened the circle of opportunities for many small and medium tax payers such as wholesalers, retailers, import/export agents, travel agents, brokers, professionals/consultants and those offering maintenance and repairs services, refuse disposal services and transport services who were all paying 30% before. All these economic operators were disadvantaged in the old system.

Second, under the previous regime, many of the largest and best performing firms including hotels, manufacturing and export enterprises, sugar milling companies, companies offering financial services, leasing companies and agro-based companies were already paying 15 percent due to various incentive schemes. In fact, many of these firms now face a slightly higher tax rate as we have consolidated and removed various exemptions. In addition, we are ensuring that everyone pays his fair share of taxes at a low rate via the special levy on all profitable firms in the tourism and banking sectors.

Third and more importantly, taxation, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is never a mathematical equation. Doubling tax rates never leads to twice the tax collection because taxpayers and firms always respond to the changed incentive framework. This is why a lowering and simplification of taxes can result in more revenue – and, indeed, in the case of Mauritius, it has.

Good economic policy means a good understanding of how the world actually works and how to craft a package that delivers more growth and employment and results in a larger tax base that more than offsets any decline in the lowering of rates.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have secured impressive gains from economic reforms and from the simplification and reduction of taxation. In line with established international experience, our move to a fair and transparent system based on a unification of rates at a low rate of 15 percent has, in fact, resulted in more tax revenue.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the low tax rate embedded in a transparent regime has generated more economic activity, i.e. increased compliance and enlarged the tax base leading to higher tax buoyancy. Indeed, we earlier estimated that receipts from corporate tax would rise from Rs4.9 billion in 2006/07 to Rs5.5 billion in 2007/2008 - a 10% increase. However, I am informed by the MRA that our reforms are delivering even better results than anticipated as collection from corporate tax is now estimated at well over Rs6 billion. As a matter of fact, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have almost doubled receipt from corporate tax in three years: from Rs3.2 billion in 2004/2005 to over Rs6 billion in 2007/2008.

Mrs Perrier: Instead of a reduction, the hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance mentioned an increase in revenue. Can we know why the Minister took the decision to targeting such an important sector as education?

Mr Sithanen: I don't know whether there is any targeting, unless our definition of targeting is different, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. Primary, secondary and tertiary education are provided free of charge

The Deputy Speaker: Where is the objective of asking this question?

Mr Sithanen: Let me explain to the hon. lady. There is a campaign to try to demonstrate that receipts from corporate tax has decreased. This is not true, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. I have explained that it has increased, because *on a eu ce que les Français appellent la cagnote fiscale*. As a result of reform, economic activities have increased significantly. Everybody knows that corporate tax increases when there are more business activities; and as a result of reform, there have been more business activities. I have explained very clearly the second reason, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, namely that before the taxes were at 15% and, on top of that, there were many generous allowances and deductions. We all know that only the big companies had the resources and their inventiveness, probably, to take advantage of these deductions. We have clawed back some of these exemptions. In fact, if we look at the result, it is the bigger companies that are contributing more to corporate tax. The effective rate of taxation for large companies has increased. Third, there is also an element of psychology in taxation, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. When taxation comes down, the propensity for people to avoid and evade taxes diminishes and people are more willing to pay at 15% than of 30%. And last, but not least, there has been better administration of taxation which has resulted in higher proceeds. We did not know by how much at the beginning, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. We thought that we were going to get 10% more and we are getting at least 20% more than the previous year.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has mentioned a few times that there has been an increase in receipts for the year 2007/2008. Can I know from the hon. Minister how does it compare with 2004 and 2005? And if we were to do away with corporate tax and income tax, as being proposed by certain people, how would we increase or raise revenue?

The Deputy Speaker: This is hypothetical.

(Interruptions)

Let the hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance answer to the first part of the question! Order!

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in 2004/2005, the corporate tax was Rs3.2 billion and, this year, it will be about Rs6 billion. There is a doubling of corporate tax receipts over a period of three years.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I must say that I am flabbergasted when I hear people say that it is possible to bring corporate tax and personal tax to zero and still raise revenue.

(Interruptions)

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I don't know where this is taught! When I studied Mathematics at CPE, I learned that any number multiplied by zero gives the figure of zero, Mr Speaker, Sir!

(Interruptions)

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance whether he can confirm that in the budget of 2007/2008, corporate tax was reduced from 22% to 15%?

Mr Sithanen: If the hon. Member had read the question, this is what it says. Let me read the question!

(Interruptions)

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I hope the hon. lady understands the difference between tax rate and tax receipt. Tax rate has fallen, but tax receipt has increased.

(Interruptions)

There is no *manque à gagner!* Again, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, some people pretend not to understand simple Economics. When you reduce taxation, economic activities grow. Because economic activities have grown tax receipts have risen.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! Order, I said! I said order!

Mr Jhugroo: Can the hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance confirm that with the reduction of the corporate tax from 22% to 15%, the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer?

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, let me try to enlighten the House. I have explained that, in fact,...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! I said order!

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have explained that, in fact, the effective rate of taxation has increased. The big companies are paying more. Before, they were paying 15% and, on top of that, they were getting deductions and allowances. Most of the exemptions and deductions of allowances were going to the big companies, whereas today the effective rate of taxation has increased; and it is precisely because the effective rate of taxation has increased that we are collecting more tax revenue.

Secondly – I have said it again – Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is about the broadening of the tax base. When you broaden the tax base, there is more business.

(Interruptions)

When there is more business, people make more profit and when there is more profit, Government collects more taxes, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

If hon. Soodhun does not want to understand this, I am sorry.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Soodhun! I am on my feet now! The hon. Member has to stop now! That is the last time. The hon. Member has to stop right now.

Mr Ganoo: The hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has given a list of companies that were already paying the rate of 15%. Do the IPPs fall within that group or were they paying more than 15%?

Mr Sithanen: I am not sure about the IPPs because there is a long list. As a matter of fact, most of the big companies - and I am sure the IPPs are included - were paying 15% before the introduction of the flat rate of 15%. In fact, all those companies that I have mentioned here, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, were penalised before. The taxation had an anti-export bias; the taxation was against the small and medium enterprises. In order to broaden the circle of opportunities, Government has leveled the playing field and has made sure that the small and medium enterprises that were paying 30% before, now pay 15%. As a result of this, there has been a surge in the SME sector.

(Interruptions)

Some are contained in the schedule. I think there are about 40 companies. I could not list all the 40 companies; I have selected some that were already paying 15% and, against that, I have also indicated many that were not paying 15%, but 30% and that were disadvantaged, especially in the export sector, small and medium enterprises and some are micro enterprises.

The Deputy Speaker: A last question, hon. Bodha!

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the Deputy Prime Minister what would have been the receipts for corporate tax if there had not been the cut from 22.5% to 15%? How many more billions would have been collected and whether those billions would have allowed him to “Put People First” as they said in 2005?

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, let me explain. I don’t understand the former Leader of the Opposition. We have tracked, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on a constant tax basis what is tax receipts. This year, as a result of the broadening of the tax base, better administration and our effective rate of taxation is higher. We are getting more. In fact, if we had kept it the same, revenue would have been lower. It is so simple, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

We have explained that. If Members don’t understand, there is nothing I can do! But, then, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would want them to show me how by making it ‘zero’, they can increase tax revenue.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: *M. le président, le ministre est en train de noyer le poisson.* I am asking a direct question. Can the hon. Minister say, in absolute terms, what would have been the amount of money collected from corporate tax if it were 22% and what it is when it is 15%?

Mr Sithanen: Mr Speaker, Sir, one of the greatest pitfalls that people make is to do static analysis.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

(Interruptions)

Mr Sithanen: You should listen to me! Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have explained very clearly that taxation is not a mathematical equation.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, some people seem to suggest, if at 30% you get 10, at 60% you get 20 and at 90% you get 30. This is absolute nonsense.

(Interruptions)

This is mad economics, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir!

The Deputy Speaker: I am sorry! Hon. Mrs Hanoomanjee, I have allowed you to ask a question though I had already said that it would be the last question. Now that you have been able to put the question, you are shouting like hell. Why is it so? You should listen to the answer!

(Interruptions)

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, ...

Mr Soodhun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on a point of order. The Minister is always provoking with all sorts of words.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, I said! Order! First of all, that is not a point of order. And secondly, if you feel that you have to come with a point of order, do it in the proper way, please. This is not a point of order; this is just a kind of explanation.

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, let me conclude on this. If my hon. friend on that side of the Opposition wants to make some political mileage out of it, I have no problem, but the truth and the facts are different from the fiction and the propaganda of the Opposition. The truth and the fact are that corporate taxes has increased as a result of a drop in rate to 15%; and this is the history of what is happening elsewhere, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir - in Ireland, Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai. This is the trend. But if they want to score politically, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will concede it, but these are not the facts and figures.

BAIE DU CAP – PUBLIC BEACH – DUMPING

(No. B/242) Mrs D. Perrier (Fourth Member for Savanne and Black River) asked the Minister of Environment and National Development Unit whether he is aware that there has been illegal dumping of building materials on the public beach of Baie du Cap and, if so, will he, for the benefit of the House, obtain information as to if the *Police de l'Environnement* has received complaints from the inhabitants of the region, indicating where matters stand.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have been informed that no complaint with regard to dumping of building materials on the public beach of Baie du Cap has been registered either at the *Police de l'Environnement* or the Department of Environment. A site inspection carried out by the *Police de l'Environnement* on 27 March 2008 has, besides, confirmed that there was no dumping of waste on the public beach of Baie du Cap.

Mrs Perrier: M. le président, je crois que le ministre a de mauvaises informations parce qu'il y a eu une visite de la Police de l'Environnement au mois de mars qui a demandé au contrevenant de retirer les *building materials* qui avaient été jetés sur la plage publique de Baie du Cap. Au lieu d'avoir retiré ces matériaux, il a loué un camion à benne - dont j'ai l'immatriculation si cela peut intéresser le ministre - et il a fouillé la plage et les a enterrés. Il y a des fers qui sont encore visibles et qui représentent un réel danger pour le public.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the question asked has been on the dumping of building materials on the public beach of Baie du Cap, but the information that I have is that on 15 January 2008, a complaint was reported for illegal dumping at Royal Road, Baie du Cap, near Macondé Fast Food. A site inspection had been carried out by the *Police de l'Environnement* and construction debris was found deposited by the side of the fast food on a private land by one Mr Soorianand Kadaree. The latter was sensitised and eventually he removed all the debris. Moreover, the Black River District Council confirmed to my Ministry on 28 March 2008 that following notice served to Mr Soorianand Kadaree, the latter removed the debris.

At the same time, the Beach Authority informed my Ministry that the plot of land being subject of illegal dumping at Baie du Cap is neither a public nor a popular beach and therefore does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Beach Authority. That is the information that I have.

Mrs Perrier: M. le président, le ministre vient de dire qu'effectivement il y avait eu une plainte et que la Police de l'Environnement était venue. Mon information - je l'ai vu de mes yeux - est qu'au lieu de retirer le *building material waste* après la visite de la Police de l'Environnement, ils ont fouillé la plage pour enfouir les matériaux et, aujourd'hui, cela représente un danger.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I'll look into the issue because I have just received the information from the hon. Member.

BANK OF MAURITIUS – GOVERNOR – CAR PURCHASE

(No. B/243) Mrs D. Perrier (Fourth Member for Savanne and Black River) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development whether, in regard to the purchase by the Bank of Mauritius of a car for use by the Governor, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Bank, information as to –

- (a) the date of the purchase;
- (b) the type;
- (c) the cost, and
- (d) the amount for which it has been insured.

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as the House is aware, the Bank of Mauritius is an autonomous and independent body governed by the provisions of the Bank of Mauritius Act of 2004.

Section 3(3) of the Bank of Mauritius Act 2004 provides that the Bank shall perform its functions independently. Section 12(3) of the Act also provides that in the exercise of its functions, the Board shall not be subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority.

As per section 12(1) of the Bank of Mauritius Act 2004, the general policy of the affairs and business of the Bank, other than the formulation and determination of monetary policy, is subject to the Act, entrusted to a Board of Directors.

In terms of section 13(3) of the Act the Governor as the principal representative of the Bank is responsible for the execution of the policy of the Board and the general supervision of the Bank.

The Bank in that regard is seen as an institution operating with its own degree of autonomy.

Further, section 26 of the Act prohibits any Director, officer or employee of the Bank or any person appointed by the Bank pursuant to the banking laws, during and after his relationship with the Bank, to disclose directly or indirectly to any person any information relating to the affairs of the Bank, of any other bank or financial institution or any of its customers, which he has acquired in the performance of his duties or the exercise of his functions.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the light of the above it would not be in order for the information to be disclosed to the House.

However, I am informed that with respect to the purchase of the car, the Bank of Mauritius has followed all the procedures in the acquisition of a car for use by the Governor.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether the car is a bulletproof car?

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have said that all the procedures as spelt out in the legislation have been met.

POINTE AUX PIMENTS PUBLIC BEACH - DEPROCLAMATION

(No. B/244) **Mr G. Lesjongard (Second Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue)** asked the Minister of Housing & Lands whether, in regard to the Pointe aux Piments public beach, he will state –

- (a) if he has received a request from a promoter for the development of a waterfront thereat and, if so, indicate –
 - (i) the name of the promoter;
 - (ii) the date the request was submitted, and

- (b) if the Beach Authority has submitted an application for the deproclamation of part thereof, indicating the date of the application.

Mr Dulull: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with regard to part (a)(i) and (ii) of the question, records indicate that an application was received on 05 December 2006 from ESC Construction Ltd for the grant of a State land of an extent of 5 *arpents* at Pointe aux Piments for the setting up of a waterfront. However, the company was informed on 06 November 2007 that its request was not acceded to.

With regard to part (b) of the question, there are no records of any application as such from the Beach Authority for the deproclamation of part of the public beach for the said project. Records only indicate that, on 31 January 2008, the Beach Authority referred to my Ministry for consideration an application from Balaclava Waterfront Co. Ltd for the development of a waterfront project at Pointe aux Piments. Any request for the deproclamation of any public beach needs to be carefully examined to ensure that the public is not unduly penalised. Further, the project needs also to be socially and economically beneficial to the local community and the public at large.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister where matters stand with regard to the deproclamation of the public beach?

Mr Dulull: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I said, the Beach Authority referred the application to my Ministry for consideration, and it is being considered. As I mentioned, the project needs to be socially and economically beneficial to the local community and the public at large.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister confirm whether the promoter of that waterfront is the same one who has been granted a lease on Ilot Gabriel?

Mr Dulull: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I cannot confirm whether it is the same promoter. Anyhow, the information is available to the public, being given it is a registered company.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with regard to deproclamation of beaches, can I ask the hon. Minister what is the general policy of his Ministry? Secondly, can he state the extent of public beaches having been deproclaimed in the past?

Mr Dulull: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, Government policy is to see whether the project is beneficial to the community. In the past, from 2000 to 2005, around ten public beaches have been deproclaimed to the extent of more than 50,000 metre square, even at Flic en Flac for restaurant projects, in the South, at St. Felix, and from North to South...

The Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. Minister knows what the question is all about!

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, since the hon. Minister said that there has been a request from the Beach Authority for the deproclamation of Pointe aux Piments public beach, does it mean that there has also been a request for land for the same project? Will he be able to table the letter requesting land for the development stated in my question?

Mr Dulull: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned in my reply, we had a request from the Beach Authority which is under consideration.

RUISSEAU TERRE ROUGE – REHABILITATION WORKS

(No. B/245) Mr G. Lesjongard (Second Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue) asked the Minister of Environment and National Development Unit whether, in regard to the rehabilitation works along the Ruisseau Terre Rouge, he will state –

- (a) the reasons as to why the works have stopped;
- (b) if he has received complaints from the inhabitants of Ste Croix in connection therewith;
- (c) the amount of money paid to the contractor as at to date, and
- (d) when works are likely to be completed.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, a works order for a sum of Rs22,899,826 was issued to Allied Builders/Laxmanbhai Co. Ltd on 07 June 2005 for upgrading works at Ruisseau Terre Rouge.

Works stopped because the contractor abandoned the site and, on the advice of the State Law Office, the contract was terminated on 19 March 2007.

As for part (b) of the question, complaints have been received from inhabitants of Ste Croix, Terre Rouge. Following heavy rainfall recently, representations have again been made about the problem of flooding at Ruisseau Terre Rouge.

Regarding part (c), an amount of Rs2,511,148.15 has been paid to the contractor.

With respect to part (d) of the question, I would like to inform the House that the contract of the project is expected to be awarded within a few weeks.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, since the hon. Minister stated that the contractor abandoned the site, may we know exactly when he did so?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the contractor abandoned the site around March 2007. I don't have the exact date with me.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, since the hon. Minister said that around March 2007 the contractor abandoned the site, may I ask him what percentage of works was already carried out at that time?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is difficult for me to exactly quantify the amount of work which has been carried out. But, according to the available notes that I have before me, the performance of the consultant was very poor, he has put inadequate resources, as a result of which the contractor himself abandoned the site. I am informed that the quality of the work was not good.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this is a very serious matter. With regard to the sum of Rs2 m. that has been paid to the contractor, is the Minister willing to table the work certificate regarding the works that have been carried out?

Mr Bachoo: I will do so, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE – FY 2007-2008

(No. B/246) Mrs S. Hanoomanjee (Second Member for Savanne & Black River) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development whether, in regard to capital expenditure for the financial year 2007-2008, he will state the amount of money spent as to date.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Economic Development (Mr R. Sithanen): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I need to explain that, contrary to the Recurrent Budget, expenditure on capital projects is not evenly spread over the months during the financial year. The monthly expenditure profile, especially for construction projects, depends on the stage the project has reached during the project cycle.

Capital projects, once approved in the Budget, have to undergo a number of different stages namely design, tendering, construction and commissioning. Consequently, project implementation generally spans over two to three financial years and sometimes even more depending on project size and complexity. As such, for projects that have started in previous years and that are still in progress, payments for works and supplies are being made in the current financial year. It is also to be noted that the bulk of disbursement of funds on these projects generally occurs during the construction phase. As at end March 2008, disbursements made on a cash flow basis during the financial year in respect of these projects, and those that have started amounts to Rs3.3 billion as recorded by the Treasury.

However, there is often a time-lag between physical progress in project execution and disbursement of funds as all works have to be properly certified prior to any payment being effected by the Ministry. These outstanding payments will be captured by the Treasury that will add on to the Rs3.3 billion I mentioned.

In addition to the foregoing amount, there is some Rs2 billion of firm expenditure commitments that have been taken in respect of some ongoing capital projects likely to be implemented -

(i)	Wastewater Projects	-	Rs650 m.
(ii)	Education Projects	-	Rs372 m.
(iii)	Health Projects	-	Rs150 m.
(iv)	Road Projects	-	Rs283 m.
(v)	Local Authorities	-	Rs250 m.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, for the current financial year, there is a number of other major infrastructure projects that are still at tendering stage. It is worth noting that the Central Procurement Board has, since its setting up in mid January 2008, approved the award of contracts for projects worth Rs1.2 billion. Payments to be effected for works executed in respect of these projects will obviously increase the level of total capital expenditure in the months to come and be reflected in the accounts by the end of the current financial year.

I also wish to add that, to improve the management of the capital investment programme, a Technical Committee headed by the Financial Secretary and reporting to a Ministerial Committee chaired by my colleague, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport & Shipping, has been set up to look into all issues relating to implementation of capital projects, including legal, procedural, management and co-ordination. Appropriate remedial measures are also being taken to iron out bottlenecks that have been identified, so as to accelerate project implementation.

In addition, following a review of progress on capital projects in early January, funds have been reallocated from projects facing delays to other projects that may be implemented on a fast track basis.

Though there has been, as in previous financial years, a general pattern of under spending in the Capital Budget, we believe that capital expenditure will pick up during the fourth quarter, thus allowing us to close the gap between the provision contained in the Capital Budget and the sum actually spent.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Minister has said that usually there is a time lag. I agree with it. But, capital expenditure voted for the financial year was Rs10 billion. Out of this, up to now, only an amount of R3.3 billion has been spent. Can the hon. Minister confirm that – I have got the figures – at least, for the past 20 years, this has never happened? I mean expenditure, there has been underspending from Capital Budget, but not to that extent.

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the only difference I will make from what the hon. lady has said is that when she said it's money spent, it is not, it's money paid. Let me again explain to the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, because...

(Interruptions)

There is a difference between spent and paid, let me explain!

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member has asked a question, let the hon. Minister explain!

(Interruptions)

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, first, because we do the Budget on a cash basis there are many works that have been completed, but their bill is in the pipeline and it will be approved and the money will be paid. Second, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we always have a rush in the last quarter. I have the figures since 2001. There have always been underspending. The hon. lady is right that there is slightly more underspending because there has been a transition period also. The new Public Procurement Act has been proclaimed and the system is now working. My friend, the Minister responsible for the Public Utilities, knows what happens in some circumstances. We want the money to be spent, but when people lose a bid, they lodge a case in the Supreme Court and everything is blocked. Everybody knows, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that one of the most important items of expenditure in the Capital Budget is for the wastewater. About 10% of the Capital Budget has been earmarked for wastewater. We have had a problem because there has been litigation. When people lose their bid, they go to the Court and everything is held up. That's why in the new Public Procurement Act, we have made provisions for fast tracking cases where people are not happy about the award of contract.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister say whether he is aware that the private sector have made an analysis of the situation? If you allow me I will quote what they said –

“Considering apparent delays observed in the indication of planned public investment projects, as indicated by the disbursements from July to December of only 17% of capital expenditure earmarked for financial year 2007/2008, a proportion well below trends observed in previous years. It is feared that physical capacity deficiencies, if unaddressed, will hamper operations in various sectors and act as a break to investment.”

Can I get the Minister's comments on that?

The Deputy Speaker: I don't think the hon. Member can ask the hon. Minister to comment on that.

(Interruptions)

Mr Sithanen: Of course, I'll explain!

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the point is taken. I have explained what are the problems that we are facing. There is also a process of reallocation that has taken place and in the process of reallocation, additional money would be disbursed. But, we all recognise that there is a problem of capacity in order to implement projects and that's why Government has set up a committee which is chaired by no less a person than the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Public Infrastructure, to look at how to impose the system. Very often, the same people who criticise us for being slow in disbursing are the same who say that there is no transparency and no accountability when we fast track the process. We are loaded with a system, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. Let me give you an example.

I think my friends, on the other side, when they were in Government, they had all the honourable design when they set up a PPP. The way the PPP has been set up, there has not been a single project funded by the PPP.

(Interruptions)

There will never be, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir!

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Jhugroo, Order!

Mr Sithanen: It is because the way the system functions. We want more accountability, more transparency. Who is going to work on a project for one year, spend money and then give it to the PPP of Government? Then we will have to advertise it and he runs the risk of not getting it. That's why since the PPP has been enacted, there has been not a single major project that has been funded under PPP. What do we do, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir? So, we have a real problem and we are trying under extreme difficult circumstances to make sure that we spend in infrastructure in spite of the fact that we are constrained by the system, by the process, by the procedure and by the legislation.

Mr Nancy: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, does the hon. Deputy Prime Minister have the approximate figure disbursed for the RRA in Rodrigues?

Mr Sithanen: If the hon. Member comes with a substantive question, I will give the answer. But even in the case of Rodrigues - I speak under correction - we were discussing the Budget for Rodrigues for 2008/2009, they present their Budget earlier than we do. In fact, there has been some under expenditure and I agreed to reallocate the amounts that have been under utilised for road construction and for some other investments in public infrastructure. I have already signed the warrant to make sure that the money is ploughed back into Rodrigues for infrastructure.

Mr Soodhun: For the sake of transparency, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Deputy Prime Minister whether he can table the list of projects constituency-wise which had been approved by the Central Procurement Board?

The Deputy Speaker: This is a question which, I think, should be put to the Minister of Environment.

Mr Sithanen: I don't know whether this is a corollary of the question, but if the hon. Member comes with a substantive question either to me or to my colleague, the Minister responsible for NDU, we will provide the figures, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Mungur: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, according to the Budget of 2007/2008, the overall deficit budget was equivalent to 3.8% of GDP, as there has been underspending, as he has just said, does the figure remain the same?

Mr Sithanen: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we all know that there are many adjustments that have to be made. We have not completed the financial year yet. In fact, even when we present the Budget we only have an estimate, because the Budget will be presented probably in the second or third week of June and we still have 15 days to go before we complete the financial year. We all know that we need to complete the exercise three months after the end of the financial year. The exact figure will be known only in September 2008. But, in all likelihood, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, if the trend continues - that's what I have said at the end of the response that I have given to the question of the hon. lady - we are trying to close the gap between the provision that has been voted in Parliament and the amount that will be actually spent, because there is a lot of items that remain to be funded, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. We are looking at ways and means of ensuring that these commitments are met from the proceeds of this year.

ETHANOL/GASOLINE MIX – STUDY

(No. B/247) Mrs S. Hanoomanjee (Second Member for Savanne and Black River) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport and Shipping whether, in regard to the study which was to be carried out for the use of an ethanol/gasoline mix by motor vehicles, in view of the rising price of fuel on the world market, he will state where matters stand.

The Minister of Industry, Small and Medium Enterprises, Commerce & Cooperatives (Dr. R. Jeetah): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the hon. Member for her Parliamentary Question, as this will allow me to put in its proper context actions taken with regard to rising price of fuel.

I wish to inform the hon. Member that the rising price of fuel on the world market is a matter of concern. As the House may be aware, the price of one barrel of oil has increased from an average of 40 USD in 2005 to around 110 USD in recent days.

It is precisely in this context that, as far back as October 2005, Mauritius and India, at the highest political level, had discussed the issue of supply of petroleum products to Mauritius. In 2006, the State Trading Corporation signed a one-year agreement...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, sit down! Even if the Chair has said more often than not that we don't have any control over the answers given by Ministers, replies must, however, be pertinent. The hon. Minister's answer has to be relevant to the question that has been asked.

(Interruptions)

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we are talking about a strategic commodity and you don't want to hear the answer...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister is moving into other considerations which have nothing to do with the question as it has been put. Does the hon. Minister have an answer to the question?

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister reply to my question about the study? I have asked: 'in regard to the study which was to be carried out for the use of ethanol/gasoline mix'. Can he tell me where matters stand with regard to that study?

Dr. Jeetah: If you allow me to answer, I will do so.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Minister have an answer?

Dr. Jeetah: I have, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. But you have to allow me to answer. You don't even know what I have to say.

(Interruptions)

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Je regrette, M. le président, mais le ministre est en train de passer à côté de la question.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, the ruling of the Chair is that there is a specific question and you will have to give a specific answer which is related to the question.

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will give a specific answer to the specific question and if I am given a chance to answer, I shall do so.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister should answer.

Dr. Jeetah: As I said, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we were in a situation where price of petrol went up from 40 USD to 110 USD. What this Government did was to sign a contract to secure energy security and the security of supply. This is where I was getting at. This Government took the measures at the highest level, ...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: I said order!

(Interruptions)

Order, I said! Hon. Minister, carry on!

Dr. Jeetah: If you would allow me to continue. We did make a three-year agreement following a one-year agreement where we mutually satisfied both parties. A three-year agreement was signed last year between STC and MRPL and this has resulted - and this is what you don't want to hear - in net savings of Rs1.4 billion

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mr Bérenger: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, you've said that it's about ethanol and he goes on and on with the contract that has allowed him to save! Is he going to talk on flour then?

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! Order, I said! Order, I said! I am on my feet!

(Interruptions)

Order, I said! Hon. Minister, if you have got the answer for that question, you come with the answer, otherwise I won't allow you to continue. That is my ruling.

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with this initiative, energy security and security of supply for the country have been assured. Again, in view of the rising price of fuel, Government has approved on 17 February 2006, the pilot project submitted by Alcodis Ltd. and Total (Mtius) Ltd., for the testing of engine performance using 90% gasoline and we need to get this 90% gasoline - this is what we have to understand...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair, please!

Dr. Jeetah: ...and 10% ethanol mix. A biofuel committee is working on this issue. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to facilitate the task of the hon. Minister, let me remind him that last year, he replied to a Parliamentary Question saying that Government has set up a biofuel committee. Can he say where matters stand with respect to that biofuel committee?

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this biofuel committee has to look into a number of aspects, for example, this business of mixing ethanol and Mogas; and one of the constraints in this exercise is to advise on fiscal and economic alternative pricing mechanism...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order! Hon. Bhagwan, order! I can't hear anything. Order!

(Interruptions)

Hon. Bhagwan, please!

(Interruptions)

Dr. Jeetah: One of the major difficulties is to look at the pricing mechanism and this is what is being looked at.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in view of the extremely difficult situation which the Minister himself has mentioned, can he say what has been the conclusion of trials on the use of a mix of ethanol and petrol?

Dr. Jeetah: As I did say, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have ensured the security of energy till 2010, but with regard to these tests, there has been a number of tests that has been done and it has been conclusive. Total and STC are proposing to do that on a wider scale, just to make sure that they do not get any difficulty in the implementation stage.

The Deputy Speaker: In fact, this is the answer that was expected.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the Minister whether he is aware that such projects have been carried out elsewhere in the world and whether he did not think about benchmarking on that particular issue?

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, if the hon. lady knows better than Total, she could perhaps work as a consultant!

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, order! I have said order! Hon. Lesjongard, please! I have said on so many occasions that it is the privilege of hon. Members to ask questions, however irritated hon. Ministers might feel about that!

(Interruptions)

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the Minister say whether he is aware that Alcodis is already exporting around 20 million litres of ethanol each year and can he say whether a plan has been drawn up for the setting up of other factories to produce ethanol and, if so, what is the time frame?

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am aware that Alcodis proposes to export 17 million litres of alcohol “surfin” this year and it is not the same product that we are talking about here. We are talking about the dehydrated alcohol which is not the same as alcohol “surfin”.

(Interruptions)

CARAVANES DE SANTÉ

(No. B/248) Mrs S. Hanoomanjee (Second Member for Savanne & Black River) asked the Minister of Health & Quality of Life whether, in regard to the *Caravanes de Santé*, he will state if they are operational and, if so, if the services thereof are being provided islandwise.

Mr Faugoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the reply is yes.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Can the hon. Minister say how many times a week *la Caravane de Santé* visits places where there are no Community Health Centres?

Mr Faugoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the *Caravane de Santé* in the year 2007 only visited 301 work sites where 20,000 employees were screened. For the same period, 164 visits were effected in colleges where more than 25,000 students were screened. They also visited 43 outreached regions where there are no area health centres or community health centres whereby 6,000 persons were screened for NCDs.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Can the Minister say whether he can consider visiting places like Le Morne where the nearest Community Health Centre is at La Gaulette and people have to travel to go there and the *Caravane de Santé* in a locality like Le Morne would have been of extreme importance to the inhabitants?

Mr Faugoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is a national programme. I am sure Le Morne must be in the list to be visited.

SUGAR INVESTMENT TRUST - PROJECTS

(No. B/249) Mr S. Soodhun (Fifth Member for La Caverne & Phoenix) asked the Minister of Agro Industry & Fisheries whether, in regard to the Sugar Investment Trust, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Trust, information as to –

- (a) the projects implemented since July 2005 to date, and
- (b) if there is any new project.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the information sought is being placed in the Library.

Mr Soodhun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister inform the House when the project of Morcellement Rose Belle was started?

Dr. Boolell: The SIT is coming up with a new residential/commercial morcellement project over an extent of 38 arpents acquired through a bid exercise in 2007 from Rose Belle Sugar Estate. The EIA licence has already been obtained, the letter of intent is awaited from the Morcellement Board. The reservation of plots is expected to start in August 2008.

Mr Soodhun: Can the Minister inform the House when the project will be started?

Dr. Boolell: I have answered, Sir.

Mr Soodun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, is the Minister aware that there is an adverse report on the CEO of SIT to the effect that there has been no project initiated by SIT?

Dr. Boolell: The CEO is doing a good job. If there is any shareholder who feels aggrieved, he can always take up the matter at the annual meeting.

Mr Soodun: Can the hon. Minister inform the House why then the few members of SIT have just resigned from the Board?

Dr. Boolell: No member has resigned, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

MAURITIUS/RODRIGUES – AIR MAURITIUS FLIGHTS

(No. B/250) **Mr J. R. Spéville (Second Member for Rodrigues)** asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Tourism, Leisure and External Communications whether, in regard to the Air Mauritius flights, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain information as to the number of times, for the period 01 October 2007 to 31 January 2008 –

- (a) the Air Mauritius flights from Mauritius to Rodrigues and from Rodrigues to Mauritius have been cancelled, and
- (b) the ATR 72 planes serving Rodrigues and Mauritius have encountered difficulties in landing and taking off in Rodrigues.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Tourism, Leisure and External Communications (Mr X. L. Duval):

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would like to apologise once again for the confusion which arose over this question when it was last put.

I am informed by Air Mauritius that some 422 flights were planned for operation to Rodrigues during the five months from 01 October 2007 to 31 January 2008.

However, during the same period, eleven flights were cancelled for commercial reasons due to low loads and for which advance notice was given to the travelling passengers; another seven flights were cancelled for technical reasons, and nine more flights due to bad weather conditions.

As regards part (b) of the question, I am informed that a few flights encountered disruption in Rodrigues as follows -

- (i) four flights made air turn back to Mauritius after take-off from SSR International Airport, of which one for technical reasons and the remainder experienced bad weather conditions such as strong winds upon approach at Rodrigues, and
- (ii) two flights experienced night-stops at Sir Gaëtan Duval Airport due to technical problems. These flights were operated normally the following day to Mauritius.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am further informed by Air Mauritius that whenever flights were cancelled for technical reasons, arrangements were promptly made to transfer the passengers on other flights. Similarly, whenever flights were cancelled due to bad weather conditions, supplementary flights were operated to accommodate all affected passengers.

Mr Lesjongard: The hon. Minister mentioned technical reasons. May we have an indication what were those technical reasons?

Mr Duval: I don't know; it is said mechanical reasons.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mr Duval: I don't mind answering. I don't know which particular technical problem.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, I said! Hon. Jhugroo!

Mr Jhugroo: Can I ask the hon. Deputy Prime Minister how old are these ATR 72 planes? Are they in good running condition?

Mr Duval: The planes are five years old and eight years old respectively; and I am told that, according to the reliability rate of the ATRs, which also effect flights to Reunion Island, they are, in fact, according to norms.

Mr Spéville: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, during the peak period, we have encountered so many problems with ATR 72. Has the hon. Minister been in touch with Air Mauritius with a view to replace or put a new airplane on the line Rodrigues/Mauritius?

Mr Duval: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am told that there are two issues. Firstly, it is fairly a small plane, therefore, it is more subject to bad weather; secondly, it is a turbo prop plane and that is also sometimes less reliable than a jet. The obvious answer is to find ways of having a bigger plane to serve the line; and that is the issue concerning the construction of a new airstrip for a bigger plane.

Mr Spéville: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether the issue of buying of a bigger plane will not cost more money? The more so that during the low season the plane is not full. We don't really see the reason as to why we should buy a bigger plane. My question is: what is really needed for Rodrigues is to consolidate the ATR 72 which, from my point of view, is more safe and more reliable in terms of frequency to Rodrigues?

Mr Duval: These are commercial and technical reasons which concern Air Mauritius, but my view is to have a longer airfield, a bigger plane for it to be *désenclavé*, to support the tourism and local industry thereby allowing fares to remain at a reasonable level.

MAURITAS – PRIVATE LABORATORIES – ACCREDITATION

(No. B/252) **Mr L. Bundhoo (Second Member for Montagne Blanche and GRSE)** asked the Minister of Industry, Small & Medium Enterprises, Commerce and Co-operatives whether, in regard to the accreditation of private laboratories with MAURITAS, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from MAURITAS, information as to the number of laboratories which –

- (a) have applied for accreditation, and
- (b) have been accredited as at to date.

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, accreditation of labs is a very important national issue. The House will be surprised to note that till the recent past no lab was accredited. Accreditation means that labs will henceforth have to operate under a regime of structured guidelines and international standards.

I wish to inform the House that, by December this year, medical labs will only be able to operate upon being accredited by the Mauritius Accreditation Service, that is, MAURITAS.

As regards part (a) of the question, as at todate, MAURITAS has received 16 applications from labs seeking accreditation. Three of these applications were from private labs and the rest from public labs. Out of the 16 labs that have already applied and undergone the document review and pre-assessment, four of them have already undergone the final assessment by a team of MAURITAS/SANAS assessors in 2007.

As regards part (b) of the question, the first MAURITAS accreditation certificate was granted to the Mauritius Turf Club laboratory, a private lab, on the 19 February 2008. Application of the lab of the Assay Office, which is a public lab, has been positively considered by the Accreditation Committee on the 02 April 2008. Certificate will be awarded to the lab shortly.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister what is the number of accreditations given, compared to 2005?

Dr. Jeetah: As I said, there was no accreditation given before.

Mr Bundhoo: What is the reason behind this?

Dr. Jeetah: It is a question of priority, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. As it was previously mentioned, they were busy deproclaiming public beaches.

(Interruptions)

SMEs – BOOSTER LOAN SCHEME

(No. B/253) Mr L. Bundhoo (Second Member for Montagne Blanche and GRSE) asked the Minister of Industry, Small & Medium Enterprises, Commerce and Co-operatives whether, in regard to the Booster Loan Scheme for small and medium enterprises, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Small Enterprises Handicraft Development Authority, information as to –

- (a) the eligibility criteria;
- (b) the number of beneficiaries thereof, and
- (c) if he proposes to review same.

Dr. Jeetah: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, during the past two years, the country has witnessed a real upsurge of new entrepreneurs. Compared to 428 registered SMEs prior to July 2005, that is, between 2000 and 2005, the number has increased to 1024. The Business Facilitation Act and access to finance, amongst other initiatives, have given a big boost to the SME sector.

Regarding the DBM Booster Loan, the House may wish to note that this Scheme was introduced in July 2005 and the amount was increased from Rs50,000 to Rs75,000. Under this scheme, a person who wants to set up an enterprise can borrow an amount of up to Rs75,000. The scheme is eligible to –

- (i) entrepreneurs registered with SEHDA, AREU, IVTB and the Tourism Authority;
- (ii) women entrepreneurs registered with National Women Entrepreneur Council;
- (iii) laid-off workers in the EPZ sector;
- (iv) retrenched workers in the sugar sector;
- (v) any other micro/small entrepreneurs holding a Business Registration Card and having a viable project, and
- (vi) existing value-added activities requiring working capital.

As at February 2008, 336 applications for disbursement of Rs14.5 m. have been approved and Rs11.5m. have been disbursed. Up to now, this scheme was available to enterprises involved in transformation, that is, manufacturing only. I am pleased to inform the House that the Ministry of Finance has decided to extend the outreach of the Booster Loan Scheme to cover the several other areas such as

- manufacturing,
- agriculture & agro-processing,
- livestock breeding on a small scale,
- handicraft,
- setting up of plant nurseries,
- cultivation of vegetables, fruits and flowers on a small scale,
- setting up of kindergartens,
- working capital for manufacturing/processing/handicraft operations up to a ceiling of Rs50,000,
- small trades excluding hawkers,
- ICT,
- services, etc.

It is felt that with the broadening of the scope of this scheme, a larger number of potential entrepreneurs will be able to benefit.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in view of the present situation with regard to food supply, can I ask the hon. Minister whether he intends to liaise with this department in order to create a fast track for agro industries with regard to small and medium size?

Dr. Jeetah: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we would take this into consideration. But with the coming up of the Business Facilitation Act, today it is possible to start business straight away. It is a question of days as opposed to weeks and months as it used to be before.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I, therefore, ask the hon. Minister what is the amount of money earmarked specifically for agro industries?

Dr. Jeetah: I do not have the specific answer, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, but I can certainly find out. That is a question of first come first serve, but we can certainly work out a plan for this particular sector. If I may add Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, there is a wide range of activities for the agro processing industry and animal husbandry, etc. There are schemes where up to Rs40,000 are given to cow breeders and up to Rs300,000 etc. for animal rearing. We will have to look at the whole package and I can give more information if the hon. Member comes with a substantive question.

COUNCIL OF LEGAL EDUCATION - COURSES

(No. B/254) Mr Y. Varma (First Member for Mahebourg and Plaine Magnien) asked the Attorney-General, Minister of Justice & Human Rights whether, in regard to the reviewing of the courses offered by the Council of Legal Education, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Council, information as to where matters stand.

(Withdrawn)

TROIS BOUTIQUES VILLAGE – VILLAGE COUNCIL

(No. B/255) Mr Y. Varma (First Member for Mahebourg and Plaine Magnien) asked the Minister of Local Government whether, in regard to the Trois Boutiques Village, he will state if it is proposed to redefine its area, with a view to putting up an additional village council at Camp Carol and, if so, when and, if not, why not.

(Withdrawn)

KENYA, CAMP CAROL – STATE LAND - OCCUPIERS

(No. B/256) Mr Y. Varma (First Member for Mahebourg and Plaine Magnien) asked the Minister of Housing and Lands whether, in regard to the occupiers of State land at Kenya, Camp Carol, in Constituency No. 12, he is aware of the difficulties they are encountering to obtain their title deeds in respect thereof and, if so, will he state the remedial measures that will be taken.

(Withdrawn)

NATIONAL LAND DRAINAGE COMMITTEE - MEETING

(No. B/257) **Mr M Dowarkasing (Third Member for Curepipe and Midlands)** asked the Minister of Environment and National Development Unit whether, in regard to the National Land Drainage Committee, he will state when it last met, giving details thereof.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on 18 July 2003 Government agreed to the setting-up of a National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee (LDCC) placed under the chairmanship of the National Development Unit of the Ministry of Environment and National Development Unit and comprising of representatives of the Ministry of Public Utilities, Ministry of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport and Shipping, Environment Division of my Ministry, the Road Development Authority (RDA) and Local Authorities.

The last meeting of the LDCC took place on 21 March 2008 and the Committee took stock of the drain projects to be implemented following approval obtained from the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development.

Following the heavy rainfall a list of emergency priority projects has also been cleared and implementation will soon start.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister who is chairing the Technical Committee of this National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is the Permanent Secretary of my Ministry.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, normally, before the National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee was being chaired by an engineer who has the technical know-how of all these requests that are being channelled to that committee. I am not discrediting anybody, but does the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry has the capacity to analyse those requests coming from different Local Authorities?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in fact, the committee is chaired by the Permanent Secretary of my Ministry. But that committee also includes the Engineers of my Ministry and the Project Co-ordinator. I don't have any problem as far as this aspect is concerned.

Mr Gunness: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee and the Technical Committee, if I understand, are chaired by the same Permanent Secretary. Can I know from the hon. Minister whether it is normal that the two bodies are chaired by the same person?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, being given that all these drain projects are undertaken by my Ministry, I don't find any problem so far as they are doing their work well.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I know from the hon. Minister whether he has a list of all the projects that have been earmarked for the Constituency of Curepipe and Midlands which is a flood prone area?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have got a list of projects for Constituency No. 17 and I am tabling it.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister when the National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee had its last meeting and whether they considered the problem of Bel Air that has been raised twice over the last three weeks in the National Assembly?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have mentioned that the Committee sat last time on 21 March. But, in fact, after that there have been Ministerial meetings also looking into the drain problems, and the issue of Bel Air has already been raised. I am pleased to announce the hon. Member that work will start soon.

Mr Jhugroo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister inform the House how much money has been spent for the construction of drains in Constituency No. 4 since July 2005?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will request the hon. Member to come with a substantive question and I will give the answer.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I know from the hon. Minister when the works at Bel Air will start and what is the sum earmarked?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have just mentioned that I can't say in the days to come, but work will start very soon.

(Interruptions)

As for the sum earmarked, I don't have it in mind and I can't say. It all depends on the amount of work that will be undertaken.

Dr. Mungur: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to address the ordeal of flood, in the last Budget, a sum of Rs115 m. has been earmarked for 180 projects. Can I know from the hon. Minister how much money has been spent and how many projects have been executed?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I can only add up that the hon. Minister of Finance has been very kind towards us and he has increased the sum. Secondly, we had a problem of consultant and that explains the delay in the implementation of the projects.

Mr Bhagwan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Minister whether it is still the policy of the Ministry to have recourse to Grade A contractors in respect of the quality of work because there are lots of problems which we are witnessing, especially in my constituency at Coromandel, near *Chapelle Emmaüs*?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we have Grade A contractors for construction purposes of big companies and they undertake the drain works. We have got the drain contractors Grade A that undertake that type of work.

Mr Bhagwan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister inform the House what is the position concerning the drain project at Coromandel, near *Chapelle Emmaüs*, where we have a lot of press articles and people will come to the office very soon?

Mr Bachoo: I would only request the hon. Member, at least, to bear with me and to give me some time, because ...

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Order!

Mr Bachoo: ... I have explained earlier, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that we had a problem of consultant and that explained the delay in the implementation of the projects. I am not responsible for the appointment of consultants. That is beyond our responsibility. But I can assure the hon. Member that I am looking into it.

Mr Dowarkasing: A last question, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I know from the hon. Minister, since July 2005, how many times the LDCC has met? Can he give a brief report of the work accomplished so far?

Mr Bachoo: The National Land Drainage Co-ordination Committee meets often. I don't have the exact figure in my mind. I have already mentioned the last meeting, but they do meet regularly.

CITE ST LUC, FOREST SIDE – POLLUTION

(No. B/258) Mr M. Dowarkasing (Third Member for Curepipe and Midlands) asked the Minister of Environment and National Development Unit whether, in regard to air, noise and other forms of pollution prevailing in Cité St Luc, Forest Side, and emanating from the Consolidated Ltd., Ferney Spinning Mills, he will state if copy of the reports of the studies carried out by his Ministry will be tabled.

Mr Bachoo: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the answer is in the affirmative.

PSSA – BOARD MEETING - WALKOUT

(No. B/259) **Mrs F. Labelle (Third Member for Vacoas and Floreal)** asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Private Secondary Schools Authority, information as to if, at its meeting of 02 April 2008, some members of the Board effected a walkout and, if so, the reasons therefor.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I shall answer to both PQs B/259 and B/278 together as they relate to the same issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I was informed that at the last meeting of the Board of the Private Secondary School Authority held on 02 April 2008, a few members effected a walkout as a sign of protest relating to the following issues -

- (a) the recording of the discussions at the Board level;
- (b) adjustment of salaries of supervisors at the PSSA, and
- (c) approval for Private Secondary Schools to run HSC classes.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is not uncommon for members of Boards of parastatal bodies and companies to have diverging views on issues under consideration and as the proceedings of the Boards of the parastatal bodies are regulated by themselves, there are set procedures which are inbuilt in these Board proceedings to resolve diverging views.

It is, therefore, imperative for Board Members, in the context of good governance, to adhere to the procedures and ensure that there is no conflict of interest between their individual role as either a trade unionist or a School Manager or on the basis of personal equations and their corporate responsibilities as a Board Member.

In the circumstance, a walkout serves no useful purpose and on the contrary adversely affects the smooth running of the Authority in that decisions are delayed. I am informed by the PSSA that another Board meeting has been scheduled for tomorrow Wednesday 16 April, 2008 and the issues at stake can be addressed at that meeting of the Board.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether the members of the Board were protesting against the fact that decisions of the Board have been altered or overruled.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I sated, when the Minutes are presented, if there are representations to be made about the Minutes, these should be raised at the level of the Board. There are procedures to handle such situations at the Board level.

Mr Jugnauth: Can I know from the Minister whether it is not the truth that the Board having taken decisions on two occasions not to grant certain things to certain

persons or institutions, the Minister, without informing the Board, himself has overruled the Board's decision and granted the request to the institution or to a particular person?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the PSSA Board Act is clear with regard to the powers of the Minister and I would read the relevant section to the powers of the Minister which the Minister is expected to exercise in certain circumstances.

“Section 9 – powers of the Minister

The Minister may, in relation to the exercise of his functions by the Board give such directions to the Board as he considers necessary in the public interest and the Board shall comply with those directions.”

Mr Jugnauth: The Minister accepts that the reasons for the walkout of the Board members were as a result of the overturning of the decisions by the hon. Minister of the decision that the Board had taken. Is that the correct feeling?

Mr Gokhool: There might be misinterpretation. Because when the Board has its deliberations, matters are referred to the Ministry and to the Minister for approval. I cannot just sign without verifying that everything is being done in order. I am exercising the powers which are vested upon me by the law.

Mr Jugnauth: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Minister, during the last few months, how many Board's decisions he has overruled?

Mr Gokhool: I think that these powers cannot be exercised indiscriminately. I cannot remember how many occasions, but I know that I have to exercise these powers when it is justified. In such cases where they are justified, I am going to use my powers.

Mr Bhagwan: Can the Minister confirm the House that a majority of the Board members effected a walkout and that there was no quorum after they have left?

Mr Gokhool: If there is no quorum, the meeting will stop. It is as simple as that.

Mr Bhagwan: Will the hon. Minister confirm that it is the majority of the members left the Board meeting.

Mr Gokhool: There was a walkout and the meeting did not continue. As far as quorum is concerned, I have to check. But the meeting did not continue after the walkout.

Mr Lesjongard: Mr Deputy Speaker, from what I heard from the hon. Minister, may I understand that the Minister is selective in using his powers as per the law and that he has chosen not to act when we have torrential rains in this country?

The Deputy Speaker: That has nothing to do with the question!

SCHOOLS - TORRENTIAL RAINS– 26.04.08

(No. B/260) Mrs F. Labelle (Third Member for Vacoas and Floreal) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources whether he will state if his Ministry has sent a letter to the heads of the primary and secondary schools who had released their respective pupils on Wednesday 26 March 2008, before the issue of the torrential rains warning, asking them to state the reasons why they had taken that decision.

(Withdrawn)

TOBACCO CROP - PERMITS

(No. B/261) Mr R. Bhagwan (First member for Beau Bassin and Petite Rivière) asked the Minister of Agro Industry and Fisheries whether, in regard to the permits issued in relation to tobacco crop by the Tobacco Board, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain from the Board, information as to –

- (a) the number of the –
 - (i) permit holders as at to date and
 - (ii) permits issued since January 2001 to date, and
- (b) an updated list of the permit holders, indicating their addresses.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I am circulating the answer. (Appendix II).

Mr Bhagwan: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I ask the Minister whether he is aware that a person very close to the Chairperson has been given permits and that even ICAC has been involved in matters concerning these permits? Has this matter recently been brought to his attention?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am aware that production has dropped. In fact, applicants have been invited to submit their application to have permits in respect of Air-cured and Flue-cured.

Mr Bhagwan: Is the Minister aware that there have cases of conflict of interests where the Chairperson, Members of the Board and Senior Officials of the Tobacco Board have given permits to persons closed to them and they form part in the committee of allocation?

Dr. Boolell: In fact, we were inviting people to submit applications because the number of applicants is low; anybody can take advantage of this opportunity. It is an opportunity which is knocking irrespective of whether one is closed to a member of the Board.

RODRIGUES – AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

(No. B/262) **Mr J. R. Spéville (Second Member for Rodrigues)** asked the Minister of Agro Industry and Fisheries whether, in regard to the imminent crisis of food scarcity in the world, he will state –

- (a) the immediate actions Government proposes to take in the short and medium term, and
- (b) if consideration will be given to revitalize the agricultural sector in Rodrigues.

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I have already provided information to part (a) of the question in the context of the PNQ. I am going to reply to part (b).

My Ministry will give all necessary support and assistance for the development of agriculture in Rodrigues. We are, in fact, working in close collaboration with the Commission for Agriculture, Natural Resources, Rehabilitation and Water Resources of the Rodrigues Regional Assembly to give a new boost to agricultural development. In that context, a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation on matters relating to agriculture and forestry was signed by the Commissioner for Agriculture and myself in November 2007.

Other MoUs have also been signed by the Commission for Agriculture with the Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) and MSIRI. AREU has assisted the Commission to draft a Strategic Paper for Agricultural Development in Rodrigues. Several training sessions have been organized by AREU for Rodriguan entrepreneurs especially in respect of agro processing.

It is relevant to mention that my Ministry has provided a number of pigs and cattle to help in the relaunching of breeding activities in Rodrigues. Technical Officers of the Agricultural Services of the Ministry also proceed regularly to Rodrigues as and when required, to dispense technical advice and assistance to the farming community. In the context of the relaunching of pig breeding activities in Mauritius, we propose to import piglets from Rodrigues to regenerate the pig population.

I am advised by the Commission for Agriculture that the new orientation of the agricultural sector is already returning satisfactory results as follows -

- (a) onion production has increased by 70 per cent;
- (b) introduction of new animal species has resulted in the increase in piglets for sale to the public and milk production has resumed at St Gabriel Station;
- (c) maize production for the period January to April 2008 was over 170 hectares as compared to 157 hectares for the whole year 2004, and
- (d) in respect of agro processing, especially the '*ti piment*' this has revived and now seeds are on sale to planters.

Mr Spéville: Mr Deputy Speaker, in Rodrigues we have about 1,500 hectares of agricultural land. The hon. Minister has just mentioned that about 170 hectares are actually under cultivation. In the eventuality of a food crisis, will the hon. Minister consider giving a food security grant to farmers and planters in Rodrigues and Mauritius?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, if my good friend had listened with great care he would have known that I stated very clearly that 170 hectares of land had been put under maize cultivation. Of course, if land is available, we'll have to make sure that it is used for more remunerative purposes. Certain crops have been identified, technical assistance is being dispensed and a strategic plan has been prepared. I take it for granted that, in respect of technical assistance, financial assistance will be made available and the fact that there is keen interest being shown by planters in Rodrigues to grow, because there is a market which is constantly growing with the number of tourists traveling to Rodrigues, the opportunities are there for our friends to take advantage of and the hon. Member can rest assured that we are here to do what is humanely possible to empower our friends from Rodrigues.

The Deputy Speaker: This issue relates to part (b) of the question and it concerns Rodrigues.

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. In a spirit of fairness, can the hon. Minister say whether he is aware that in 2003 there was a strategic plan which was launched by the then Minister of Agriculture wherein a whole chapter concerns the revitalization of the Rodriguan sector? Is he prepared to take into consideration the recommendations which have been made therein since they are still up to date and won't need any updating?

Dr. Boolell: I do concur with that. In fact, the recommendations made are being taken on board. I recall that when we had this workshop at the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre, this issue was raised and taken up, because we had the Commissioner for Agriculture who attended that workshop. We want to make sure that the document which is being prepared is more user-friendly in the light of the advantage to be grasped with the opportunities being created from the Empowerment Programme.

Mr Leopold: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, one of the reasons for the very low cultivation in Rodrigues is the very bad state of the land due to very serious erosion. Does the hon. Minister intend to extend the derocking scheme to Rodrigues as a measure to reinvigorate the agricultural sector?

Dr. Boolell: In fact, the services of the Ministry have been enlisted and we have sent equipment to prepare the land. I must say that the land in Rodrigues is easier to be prepared than in Mauritius and, if need be, we will put in more effort and make sure that the resources are going to be made available.

Mr Nancy: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I don't know whether the hon. Minister is aware of the displacement of the Tobacco Board to Rodrigues in view of the project of tobacco plantation there. As a measure to reinforce the increase of food production in Rodrigues, could the hon. Minister kindly advise the Tobacco Board not to go in this direction?

Dr. Boolell: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Prime Minister did reply to this question this morning. If tobacco is a cash crop, we cannot deny this opportunity to the farmers. They can use the revenue and invest it in the agricultural sector for other crop diversification.

Dr. Mungur: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in view of the surge in the price of rice, may I ask the hon. Minister whether the Government has any plan to increase our stock in rice just as Philippines did?

The Deputy Speaker: Is this question about Rodrigues? I want to make it clear that part (a) of the question was elucidated in the PNQ of this morning. We will stick to questions relating to part (b) of the Parliamentary Question. Time is over!