

# Debate No. 38

## Answers to Private Notice Questions - 28 October 2003

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#### ABATTOIR ROAD, ROCHE BOIS – FIRE OUTBREAK

**The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam)** (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Home Affairs and Minister of External Communications whether, in regard to the fire which destroyed a house at Abattoir Road, Roche Bois, in the early hours of the 25 October 2003, he will state –

number of children who died and the number of people injured;

circumstances which led to the fire;

the house was supplied with electricity and water, and

time of the fire outbreak and the arrival of the fire brigade, the Police and SAMU at the site.

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, first of all, I should like to renew the expression of my sympathy to the bereaved family afflicted by the tragic accident which occurred in the early hours of Saturday 25 October.

The information provided to me by the Commissioner of Police is as follows –

With regard to part (a) of the question, two small children aged one and two perished in the fire and six persons were injured. The injured were conveyed by SAMU to Dr. Jeetoo Hospital. Thereafter the father and his child were transferred to the Burns Unit of PMOC. Their state of health is reported to be serious. The other injured persons were discharged from hospital after treatment on the same day. The family members are being kept regularly informed of the state of health of both the father and the child.

With regards part (b), at about 0025 hours on 25 October, a male caller informed the Police Information Room at Line Barracks that a house at Abattoir Road, Roche Bois was on fire. Immediately, the Police Information Room alerted the main control room of Government Fire Services, the Emergency Response Service, Roche Bois Police Station and Police Operations Room of Port Louis North.

Port Louis Fire Brigade under the charge of the duty Station Officer arrived on the spot at 0036 hours and fire was subdued at 0110 hours. Immediately after, a search was carried out by the Fire Services assisted by Police and two charred bodies were found.

SAMU was alerted at 0039 hours and it reached the spot at 0057 hours.

Post mortem performed by Police Medical Officers attributed the cause of death to shock due to extensive burns.

According to an interim report from Forensic Science Laboratory, the fire may have been caused by a lighted candle.

With regard to part (c), the house was not provided with either electricity or water. The family was receiving water from their neighbour and they were using candle at night. The Fire Services had no problem with water supply to put out the fire. They had come with four containers but used only one.

regards part (d), I have just provided the information requested.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I should like to assure the House that prompt action was taken by all parties concerned to subdue the fire and rescue the occupants of the house. It was very unfortunate that there has been loss of life.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Fire Services left Roche Bois at 0235 hours and reached their main station at Port Louis at 0250 hours. At 0510 hours, on the same day, fire broke out inside Jumbo Score Hypermarket, Terre Rouge. The Fire Services were called at 0515 hours and reached the scene of fire at 0523 hours. Fire was subdued at around 0755 hours. Once again the Fire Services were prompt in their intervention. The General Manager of the hypermarket has even congratulated the Fire Services for their good work. I wish to avail myself of this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to all those who were involved in both operations.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Prime Minister for the answer. I wish, on the part of the Opposition, to join the Prime Minister in conveying our condolences to the mother, the father and the family of the victims. This is a tragic and sad event. We have asked this question, in fact, to draw the attention of the Prime Minister to the fact that the poor are getting poorer and to the conditions in which they are living. Can I ask the Prime Minister how many people were occupying the premises?

**The Prime Minister:** Apart from the two young children who died and who, obviously, were living in that house, I am informed that the other occupants of the house were: Eddy George Carré, 39 years; Mrs Evelyne Nanou, 54 years; Mrs Micheline Moutou, the mother, 22 years; Mr Emanuel Sonahi, 25 years; Master Juliano Sonahi, 6 months, and Mr Joseph Jacques Bégué, 30 years.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I take it that there were eight people occupying the house. Can the Prime Minister state the reason as to why there were no electricity and water in the house?

**The Prime Minister:** That is how it was. I understand from what I have read that these poor people had started renting the premises some months back without water or electricity being available. I have not had time to check whether a request was made to the CEB and the CWA, but it would seem not.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I would be grateful if the Prime Minister could check that, because we always get different types of information. It appears that they tried to be connected, but the previous owner had debts. Therefore, the CEB would now allow the connection to be made if there are debts. Maybe, that is a policy that perhaps the Government could look into, because if there are huge debts and somebody rents a house, then it is difficult for that person or that family to go and pay the debts of the previous owner. I don't know whether the Prime Minister could tell us if that would be possible.

**The Prime Minister:** I will certainly inquire, but I am not in presence of any information to that effect. I must say that the Minister of Social Security and other elected Members, whose constituency it is, as well as others, took great care of the family concerned, but no such information reached me.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** What about the water supply? Could the Prime Minister say whether it is the same situation again? Was it disconnected or was there no water supply at all there?

**The Prime Minister:** I am informed by the CWA that there is no water supply in Roche Bois between 2100 hours up to 0400 hours everyday. I have just been informed of that. I was waiting for my colleague to reach us here, to try and find more about it. I must say that the elected members and the Minister of Social Security have never received any

representation concerning that information which I received from the CWA. We will certainly look into that.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** What I wanted to know is not whether water supply is cut off in that area, but whether that house ever had water supply cut off.

**The Prime Minister:** I have replied to that. According to information I have, there was neither water supply nor electricity supply to the house that caught fire. As I said, our information is that that poor family was getting water from a neighbour.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I insisted because I wanted to know from the Prime Minister whether, actually, there was water supply that was cut off or there was no water supply ever available to them.

**The Prime Minister:** My information is that there was no water supply ever to that house.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can we know why water is cut off from 2100 hours to 0400 hours?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that my colleague, the Minister for Social Security, is very active - *c'est un homme de terrain* - but I took him by surprise. And I am surprised that he is surprised, because if the information of the CWA is correct, it seems it does not disturb the people of the area, which is rather surprising. As I said, this information from the CWA has just reached me. We will check on that, and we will also check why, if that is the case, things are so quiet. I think Members are aware that we still have water problems in Port Louis. Elsewhere, with the developments of new dams, it is a thing of the past. We still have water problems in Port Louis, especially at certain points in time, but this also, in the months to come, will be a thing of the past with new developments, including Bagatelle Dam that will feed a good part of Plaines Wilhems and Port Louis.

**Mr Duval:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I am sure the hon. Prime Minister will not deny that there are thousands of families living without electricity. May I ask him whether he will not agree that the CEB should now be asked to provide slot type meters, so that people will pay as they use? People who don't have money to pay for the whole month can pay as they go along, either electronically or by slotting money into these meters. This will provide them the chance to get electricity for, at least, some hours of the day.

**The Prime Minister:** That's a totally different subject, which we are prepared to look into. I will request my colleague, the Minister concerned, to look into the issue. But, I must say we have no evidence that, in that case, there was a request for electricity or water to be supplied to that house. I shall add that, in poverty cases, the Trust Fund for the Alleviation of Poverty and against exclusion does step in when required.

**Mr Speaker:** I would like to draw the attention of the House to the fact that this question is very specific to the incident at Abattoir Road, Roche Bois. The scope is, therefore, very limited. So, I'll request hon. Members to stick to the main question. We are not going to open the question.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he can say which of these three were on the spot first? Was it the Police, the SAMU or the Fire Brigade?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, the Line Barracks Police were the first to react as soon as they got a call from a male informer at about 0025 hours. I say about, because it takes a few minutes to do this and that, and record the exact time. So, they got going first and, as I said earlier on, they informed the main control room of Government Fire Services, the Emergency Response Service, Roche Bois Police Station and the Police Operations Room of Port Louis North. I am informed that the personnel of Roche Bois Police Station reached the spot at 0035 hours. Therefore, they reached there one minute before the Fire Brigade.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can I ask the Prime Minister whether he can confirm if there were some incidents at the scene of the fire, due to perceived delays, understaffing in the emergency services?

**The Prime Minister:** No. Certain statements were made in the press or rather reported to have been made in the press. But, the facts are there, as far as provided to me and, as I said, going by those facts, both the Fire Services and the SAMU – the health people concerned - did a good job. I think that is why I congratulated and thanked them.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I said "perceived", because 'Le Mauricien' of the 25<sup>th</sup> said there was a beginning of a riot. I take it that this is, therefore, not true.

**The Prime Minister:** I have no report to that effect, Mr Speaker, Sir.

**Mr Duval:** May I ask the hon. Prime Minister what sort of assistance, psychological – we know that purely medical assistance is being provided – or financial, has been offered to the survivors?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't think it would be proper for me to give the details of the financial help already extended. The coincidence has it that the Minister of Social Security is a Member of that constituency. So, he is seeing to it, and already quite a number of different sums have been disbursed, apart from psychological help and the personal involvement of the Minister and the officers. The Opposition can rest assured that we have done, and will keep on doing, everything that is required in that very sad case.

**Dr. Boolell:** Mr Speaker, Sir, since there is an increasing number of poor people living in similar circumstances in that depressed area of Roche Bois, I would like to know from the Prime Minister what measures are being taken, to ensure that there is no similar occurrence.

**Mr Speaker:** This question is not relevant.

**Mr Dulloo:** May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether this house in question is situated within the area that has been identified by the Trust Fund for Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups for special action?

**The Prime Minister:** This concerns the Minister of Finance. As Minister of Finance, I was responsible for the Trust Fund for Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups. It is the Minister of Finance who is in charge of the Trust Fund. As far as I know, the Trust Fund does not identify areas, unlike the education set-up, but helps family cases or individual cases on a case to case basis in Mauritius and Rodrigues.

**Mr Dulloo:** I understand that one of the members of the family is a fisherman or a person based at Agalega for a certain time and that he has moved there. May I know whether this type of person would qualify under this Trust Fund?

**The Prime Minister:** I have read references to Agalega also, Mr Speaker, Sir. I have checked, and I am told that the only thing on record is the fact that, in September 2002, one lady called Ivy Nanon, apparently mother-in-law of Mr Sonahi, victim in that sad incident, had submitted the names of the following persons, with a view to proceeding to Agalega for employment –

Mrs Ivy Nanon – Agalega born

Mr Eddy Carré

Mr Emmanuel Sonahi

Mrs Micheline Moutou

Master Julio Sonahi

Master Julien Sonahi

Master Juliano Sonahi

I am informed that the request was not entertained for two reasons –

there was no vacancy on the establishment of the Outer Islands Development Corporation, which manages the two islands of Agalega, and

there is no accommodation available to house such a large family.

**Dr. Boolell:** Mr Speaker, Sir, since the house has been completely destroyed by fire and there has been loss of lives, I would like to know what measure has been taken by Government to re-house the family.

**The Prime Minister:** As I said everything that can be done and is humanly possible is being done. The hon. Member can rest assured that the elected Members, the Government Ministers who are directly concerned as well as the Municipality of Port Louis will do everything that can be done to help that family.

**Dr. Boolell:** I have asked a specific question, I want a specific reply as to whether a house has been identified to rehouse this family. Where has it been identified?

**The Prime Minister:** I have replied, Sir.

**Mr Duval:** Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Prime Minister what is being done to avoid such further tragedies in the future?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, the priority of this Government is the fight against poverty. This is clearly a case where there was a family living in real poverty. Generally speaking, it is one of our priorities to combat poverty as poverty alleviation is a priority of this Government. We do that in a different number of ways and we keep on doing it, Sir.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I think all Governments agree that we cannot have people who are so poor that they cannot afford electricity and water. Is the Prime Minister aware of the last report of the UNDP? They said that although the Trust Fund was a good idea, they are not getting results; in fact, the results are not there on the ground. Is he aware of that?

**The Prime Minister:** I am satisfied that we are progressing well in the four corners of the island, including Rodrigues and Agalega in terms of poverty alleviation. I am satisfied that we are progressing well. A word of caution is that I have no evidence, at this stage, that the family concerned did not have water and electricity, because it was too poor to afford same. I cannot say, maybe that was the case, but the owner was somebody else. Maybe, this was a temporary arrangement, maybe the owner never applied for electricity or water. I am sure my colleague is looking into all this, but we should not jump to the conclusion that the family concerned, living in very poor conditions, was too poor to pay and that being the reason. Maybe it is not the reason.

**Mr Duval:** Sir, with regard to poverty alleviation, special attention should be given to the supply of electricity and water, because without electricity the kids cannot study with the result that they cannot attend school and achieve a reasonable standard of living. So, this has a multiplier effect when the electricity supply is cut; in previous answers the Minister of Public Utilities had said that some 4,000 electrical connections were cut monthly by the CEB.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, whenever the request comes in from poor families for the supply of electricity, priority of consideration is given. My colleague gives me a piece of information which I'll provide to the House. I am informed that that poor family had been living on those premises without paying any rent as it does not even know who is the owner of those premises.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** In fact, at the end of the day, it probably makes it worse. Is he saying that these people just walked into the house and the owner did not do anything?

**The Prime Minister:** Maybe that would explain why there was no electricity or water. But anyway one family is being deeply hurt. We are doing all that we can to help them to get a decent housing and so on. We will do all we can.

**Dr. Boolell:** Sir, what is equally true and what has become very tragic to this family can happen to any other family in similar circumstances. This is why I asked that there should be a survey properly conducted to assess the number of families who are in a similar situation and what measures are going to be taken by Government to address the problem in a very forceful manner.

**The Prime Minister:** Government addresses the problem of poverty *en permanence*, Sir. But there are all sorts of cases. Sometimes there are old people that you can feel are abandoned, but when you inquire further, they rather remain in the very difficult conditions in which they live and so on. My colleague is a social worker as much as he is a Minister and whenever such cases are brought to our attention, we act as promptly as we can within the means of the Trust Fund or the Ministry and other bodies.

**Dr. Boolell:** Government cannot act in an isolated manner, in an ad hoc manner! I would like to know whether it has a clear, coherent policy to wage war on poverty as when we look at poverty it is on the increase...

*(Interruptions)*

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, this Government is spending more than any previous Government on poverty alleviation. The effort to combat poverty, the amount of money we put in very low-cost housing, rehousing of squatters, the efforts in education, in health, all these form part of our massive, continuous, permanent and non *ad hoc* effort to combat poverty and exclusion..

**Mr Speaker:** The rule about questions is that you can move from the general to the specific and not from the specific to the general. I have given you a lot of leeway and now you have changed the subject altogether.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Just to follow up on this - I know you have said that we should keep it specific - we need to have a proper survey to see how many people cannot afford electricity or clean water. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he will look also into the good suggestion made by my colleague, hon. Duval, and that these people do not have to pay automatically the MBC licence? If they cannot afford electricity and water, I do not see why they should pay for the MBC licence which they are not using obviously.

**The Prime Minister:** I think all this is a long way from the question that we are dealing with. We are prepared to listen to all suggestions, but on this very sad occasion, we cannot look at all the issues around the island.

**Mr Speaker:** We move on to the next item. I have been advised that PQ Nos. B/681 and B/682 will be replied by the hon. Attorney-General at the end of Question Time.