



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Debates of the House of Representatives

5th Session – 10th Parliament (Rep.) – Volume 36 – Number 41

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)**

THE HONOURABLE WADE MARK
SPEAKER

THE HONOURABLE NELA KHAN
DEPUTY SPEAKER

Wednesday 3rd June, 2015

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[*Mr. Speaker*] 399

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Wednesday, June 3, 2015*

The House met at 2.00 p.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Patrick Manning, Member of Parliament for San Fernando East, who has asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

PAPER LAID

Nomination of His Excellency, the President, in respect of the nomination of Mr. Dinanath Ramkissoon, for appointment as a Member of the Police Service Commission. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal)*]

URGENT QUESTIONS

**Patrol Vessels
(Final cost)**

Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: Could the Minister state the final cost of the six patrol vessels to be purchased by the Government and how the purchase would be financed?

The Minister of Finance and the Economy (Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai): I will answer the question, hon. Speaker, as I have the information. The cost plus all of the incidentals is approximately \$213.8 million and that includes cost of fuel and everything in bringing the vessels here. In total there are 12 vessels being purchased. I think it said six patrol vessels. In total it is 12 vessels, two utility vessels, four coastal patrol vessels and six interceptors. The total cost will be \$211.2 million and the other incidental costs would be \$2.5 million. In total, arriving at a cost of approximately \$213.8 million.

The financing will be from an export credit through an international financial organization. In this case, it is the ING Bank, and that would be in the amount of

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\$182.5 million and a commercial credit facility in the amount of US, and these figures are all in US, Mr. Speaker, \$31.3 million. The commercial credit facility will be financed locally.

Mr. Warner: The \$213 million, is that in US?

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: Yes.

Mr. Warner: Thank you.

Patrol Vessels (Inspection of)

Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Could the Minister indicate whether the six patrol vessels to be purchased by the Government were inspected by a team of local experts? And if yes, who were they?

The Minister of National Security (Sen. The Hon. Brig. Carlton Alfonso): Yes, Mr. Speaker, it is a local team that comprised of experts and they are all local.

Mr. Warner: I ask, and who were they?

Sen. The Hon. Brig. C. Alfonso: The team was headed by Commodore Anthony Franklin, who is a former member of the Coast Guard, a former Chief of the Defence Staff. It also comprised Capt. Hayden Pritchard who is the present Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard. There is also Dr. Sanjay Badri-Maharaj who is a naval and defence expert and Mr. Courtney Lange, Naval Architect.

Mr. Warner: Thank you.

CLICO Directors (Repayment)

Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Minister of Finance and the Economy: Could the Minister state the rationale for CLICO allocating \$48.5 million to repay former directors given that these said directors may have been culpable in the collapse of the company in 2009?

The Minister of Finance and the Economy (Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai): Mr. Speaker, the moneys that are due to all of the EFPA holders are out of the statutory fund of Clico, given the fact that Clico's Statutory Fund is now being made whole, if I could use the term of the technocrats. The statutory fund has now been made whole, therefore all of the liabilities can be paid.

The intention however, I should indicate, is that all those persons against all those related parties against whom legal action has been initiated will not be paid.

Those would be withheld. Please remember, and I would say to the Member, that the payments are being made out of Clico's assets after the Government's, and it will be after the assenting and non-assenting STIPs have been paid.

And in the case of the assenting STIPs, Government stands in the shoes of those assenting STIPs, because STIPs meaning Short Term Investment Products, and this will be the holders of the Short Term Investment Products, which will be the EFPAs. So the Government stands in the shoes of those persons and therefore Government will be paid as a result of the fact that the statutory fund has now been made whole.

**CLICO Third Party Policyholders
(Details of)**

Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Could the Minister indicate what plans exist for the payment of CLICO third-party policyholders and when can payment be expected?

The Minister of Finance and the Economy (Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai): Mr. Speaker, these payments will be made in three tranches, for the assenting holders of Short Term Investment Products, for the non-assenting and then eventually for the mutual fund holders. In the case of the non-assenting Short Term Investment Product holders or STIPs as we call them, those will be paid—85 per cent is due to be paid in the first tranche and the processing of that is now ongoing, and we expect the payments to be made in a relatively short period of time.

I have not received a confirmed date from the Central Bank as yet on that, but I know that they are working on it with a view to processing all of the paperwork to ensure that the payments are properly made. So this will be a first tranche of 85 per cent.

Subsequently, a further tranche of 15 per cent will be paid, and this will be conditional on the sale of certain assets which Clico holds now and which are in the process of being sold. Then a third tranche will be made for—a third distribution will be made for persons who are the mutual fund holders to the extent that after all of the payments for those who rank as holders of EFPAs or STIPs, as well as the Government, have been settled to the extent that the mutual fund holders could be settled. This will be done also.

Mr. Warner: Minister, with regard to the second tranche, you say after Clico assets have been sold, can you tell me what are some of those assets?

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: Principally, it is actually one asset which is the Methanol Holdings International Limited, which is the overseas subsidiary of

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MHTL which itself has already been sold. And that is the one that is in Oman, and that is the one that they are now in the process of trying to dispose of and the funds from that will be used to liquidate the remainder of the amounts due to the assenting and non-assenting STIPs.

Mr. Warner: If it is, of course, confidential I do not have to know, but do you have any idea what kind of ballpark figure you are talking about?

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: Mr. Speaker, I do not have that number just off the top of my head. I remember a figure, but in any event I am not quite sure of its accuracy, so I do not want to put it on the record. But they are in the process of doing another valuation at the moment prior to entering into negotiations with respect to, and doing some kind of RFP with respect to the sale of that particular asset.

Mr. Warner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Agricultural Development Bank (Board Members)

119. Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*) on behalf of Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*) asked the hon. Minister of Food Production:

Who are the Members of the Board of Directors of the Agricultural Development Bank as well as their academic qualifications, over the period 2010 to 2014?

The Minister of Food Production (Sen. The Hon. Devant Maharaj): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I shall call the names of the member of the board and their qualification and the period in which they served:

Mr. Rudy Maharaj, November 2010 to April 2013: Society of Management Accountants of Canada, CMA.

Mr. Nirvan Maharaj, November 2010 to January 2012: special courses and awards in 2007—trained as a trainer by the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs; computer literacy; awarded prize for most outstanding student of labour studies; awarded prize for most outstanding labour studies thesis; bronze medal for certificate of standard of the President's award.

Dr. Bibi Ali, November 2010 to October 2012: MBA with a specialization in Entrepreneurship innovation in the UK; PhD Insect Pathology; MSc Crop Protection; BSc. Agronomy.

Mr. Bisnath Ramrattan, November 2010 to April 2013: BA Economics, Financial Management and Accounting, Management Development Centre; Financial Management and Credit Administration; Project Preparation and Appraisal; Economic Evaluation of Agricultural Project.

Mr. Winston Rudder, November 2010 to March 2011: Fellow of The Economic Development Institute, World Bank; Agricultural and Rural Development Project Analysis; MSc Agricultural Economics, University of Manitoba; BSc Agriculture, University of the West Indies.

Ms. Liesel-Maria Williams, November 2010 to March 2011: BA in Economics; Purchasing Workshop, Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business; Effective Management Workshop, Leadership and Management; Regional Credit, Courts Barbados; Marketing/Cross-selling Banking Operations; International Trade and Finance.

Mr. Norris Deonarine, November 2010—I do not have when he demitted office but he died in office. He was a businessman and an agriculturalist.

Mr. Ramdath Doobraj, July 2011 to October 2012: Certificate in Social Security Management, Arthur Lok Jack Business School, Postgraduate Diploma in Business Management by Heriot-Watt University; Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry, Centeno, Diploma in Agriculture.

Dr. Lynda Dolores Wickham-Villaruel, July 2011 to July 2012: B.Sc. in Agriculture; PhD in Agriculture; 1981 Fulbright Post-Doctoral Fellowship; Sabbatical study leave for BP award, and sundry other courses at the University of the West Indies.

Mr. Glen Ramjag, July 2011 to November 2012: Diploma in Agricultural and Rural Development; Executive training programme.

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Mr. Christopher Charran, November 2012 to February 2014: Project Management Professional; University of Hertfordshire in Computer Science; CISCO Telepresence Training.

Miss Rayan Ramoutar, November 2012 to December 2013: National Technician Diploma; Bachelor of Science in Agriculture; Masters of Science in Food, Science and Technology; Graduate Degree; Certified Quality Manager Certificate; Certificate in Management; Certificate in Master Trainer, and was currently pursuing a Doctorate in Business Administration at Arthur Lok Jack.

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Miss Raquel Hall, November 2012 to March 2014: Diploma in Project Management; degree in Government with minor in International Relations; degree in Tourism Management.

Mr. Selwyn Luces: Mr. Luces has a long list of accomplishments. I will start from 2007: Certificate of Participation—Project and Contract Management, 2007; Certificate, Fire and Safety Extinguisher, 2007; Public Sector Investment Programme; Implementation Programme of the Ministry of Public Administration & Information, Public Service Academy; Certificate in Travel Agency Management; Certificate in OSHA at Sital's College of Tertiary Education; Certificate in Mediation; Compliance Strategies for Occupational Safety and Health; Project Monitoring and Evaluation; Contract Safety Management; Bachelor in Business Administration; Major in Management, to name a few.

Mr. Yasid Gilbert: In-Progress—Society of Actuaries; Candidate for Fellowship Designation. In Progress—Society of Actuaries; Candidate for Chartered Enterprise Designation. George Brown College, accelerated Post Graduate Diploma, Business Management. University of Waterloo, Canada: Bachelor of Mathematics.

Miss Saira Lakhan: University of the West Indies; Cave Hill Campus, Barbados—Bachelor of Laws degree, graduate with Honours; 2008—2011, Hugh Wooding Law School, Legal Education Certificate. Graduated on the Principal Roll of Honours; Criminal Law Clinic.

Mr. Hershael Ramesar, October 2013 to March 2014: Currently pursuing MSc in Food, Science and Technology; BSc in Human Nutrition and Dietetics.

Miss Wendy-Ann Lee Yuen: October 2013 to February 2014. BSc in Agriculture.

Miss Lisa-Marie Daniel, March 2014: BSc, Chemistry and Management; Heriot-Watt University, Master of Business Administration.

Mr. Kelly Badal, March 2014. He is a farmer and a graduate of the Nariva High School.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Mr. Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Mr. Speaker, week after week I come here and I make a plea to you for 12 written questions I have on the Order Paper, some as early as March 07, and, Mr. Speaker, each time I ask, I get a flippancy answer—where I was detained; where I was not detained; what time I leave and so on. So I ask you today again,

and people will judge. Mr. Speaker, I have 12 questions here. This Parliament will be dissolved in a matter of weeks. Since March, not a single one has been answered and there is no answer with the staff of the Parliament. There is no answer.

Mr. Speaker: Leader of Government Business, you want to respond to that?

Dr. Moonilal: No.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER
Electrification Programme
(Establishment of)

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Utilities. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Nizam Baksh): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker I am pleased to inform this honourable House of the establishment of yet another policy initiative by this Government to bring relief to the low income and vulnerable groups in society.

Mr. Speaker, when this Government took office in 2010, our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, indicated that for the first time in this country an era of caring had begun and, indeed, we have seen the full demonstration of this approach for the past five years and continuing.

In August 2014, the Government agreed to the establishment of an Electrification Programme to be implemented by T&TEC with oversight by the Ministry of Public Utilities. The programme is a three-year programme established under the PSIP for the period 2015 to 2017 and a total of \$25 million has been allocated to facilitate the implementation of the first year of the programme.

The objective of the programme is to provide a level of subsidization to aid persons and/or communities who are least able to afford electricity connection costs. Mr. Speaker, under the existing system of electricity connections, when a customer makes a request for electrical connections to their homes, T&TEC will conduct an assessment of the cost involved and issue a statement of capital contributions to the intended customer. The level of this capital contribution will vary, depending on the extent of materials needed to lay down the necessary infrastructure in the form of poles and power lines, as well as the cost of labour. Generally, these contributions have been seen to range from as low as \$10,000 to as high as over \$100,000. It is the reality in our society that many persons simply cannot afford to meet these capital contributions, and faced with such dilemma, continue to exist in a relatively primitive state without the benefit of electricity for themselves and their families.

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The records at T&TEC show that some hundreds of persons have applications pending due to their inability to meet the capital contribution. It is this consideration which has informed the introduction of the Electrification Programme. This programme will therefore accelerate the provision of an adequate supply of electricity in a safe, economic and reliable manner to households and communities not currently served by T&TEC. Its aim is to improve the social and economic welfare of the less fortunate sectors of the population.

Now, through the system of subsidization, T&TEC will be able to proceed to install the poles and other electrical infrastructure required to facilitate households or communities requesting electrification but who, hitherto, could not have met the cost.

It is envisaged that some of the main benefits of this programme will be combating poverty, stimulating employment and equality of opportunity, fostering urban/rural equity, significantly improving the quality of life of citizens, especially the vulnerable by its positive impact on health and living standards, providing access to telecommunication services, including high-speed Internet service which would allow students to make use of the free laptops provided for them to support their educational goals.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to inform the House, also, that this programme will cover squatters who reside on State Lands and on lands owned by state enterprises. In July of 2014, the Government had agreed to an improvement on the policy relating to squatters which was put in place in the year 2000. That 2000 policy provided for the provision of electricity and water connections only to utility service lines which already exist in the respective locations.

In 2014, however, the Government agreed that connections for the utilities will be accommodated also in locations where there is no existing infrastructure, such as overhead lines or underground high-voltage electricity cables and underground water mains, once the applicant has been residing on state lands and/or on lands belonging to the state enterprises for a period of not less than five years. This accommodation was made to improve the quality of life of persons residing in these circumstances, but it was made clear that no rights to land were conferred to squatters by this policy.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the implementation process, provision has been made for T&TEC to evaluate and proceed to implement requests for electrification that costs less than \$50,000, while the MPU will process and approve for implementation by T&TEC, jobs in excess of \$50,000. In February of this year, just three months

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ago, the Government agreed on some further refinements to the electrification policy in order to accelerate programme delivery and treat urgently with the requests coming from persons and certain organizations in need. The programme is therefore set to provide the following benefits:

1. All eligible households that are single, residential customers and communities are entitled to benefit from the electrification programme. This means that eligible applicants for electricity connections who were required to pay a capital cost to T&TEC to cover the cost of construction of overhead lines, installation of poles and transformers, if required, will now have this cost met by this programme.
2. As indicated earlier, squatters occupying state lands or lands owned by state enterprises for the period prior to June 14, 2014 will be eligible for this facility.
3. Requests from religious institutions, for example, mosques, temples, churches, as well as activity/community centres, will be accepted for consideration under the Electrification Programme.
4. By way of a holistic service, each pole installed under the electrification programme will, at the same time, be outfitted with street lights.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to clarify that the benefits of this programme do not extend to developers and commercial and industrial customers who will continue to be required to pay to T&TEC, the respective capital costs for their connections.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to advise the national community that application forms for the electrification programme are available and can be collected at the MPU's head office and at T&TEC and its sub-offices. It is the intention also to make forms available in the constituency offices of each Member of Parliament. Very shortly, the MPU will be placing full advertisements in the daily newspapers on the Electrification Programme to bring awareness of the programme to the general public so that all eligible persons will have an equal opportunity to apply. The advertisements will set out clearly the eligibility criteria and the detailed process for making an application.

As I indicated, we have preliminary funding in the 2014/2015 PSIP and it is our intention to see how quickly we can provide this most basic utility of electricity to our needy citizens.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Chaguanas West.

Mr. Warner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Minister, what is the average time between application and implementation?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. N. Baksh: Since this is a new programme here now, we have not had the experience to say, but I think within a month we could do this, from beginning to implementation.

**STATE LAND (REGULARISATION OF TENURE)
(MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENTS) BILL, 2015**

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Land and Marine Resources (Hon. Jairam Seemungal):
Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, Chap. 57:05 and the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Certificate of comfort) Regulations, Chap. 57:05 and to revoke Legal Notice No. 151 of 1999, Legal Notice No. 134 of 2000 and Legal Notice No. 135 of 2000, be now read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, it is with a sense of pride and selfless accomplishment that I stand to make this contribution on the second reading of the Bill to amend the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, Chap. 57.05.

2.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the People's Partnership Government has in more than one way ensured the interest of our ordinary citizens, the simple people, the most vulnerable and the poor people in society who are citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and this remains of paramount importance to this Government and expunges the emphasis of a people-centred development as one of the pillars of sustainable growth, whether it is through my Ministry's role in the regularization of squatters, honouring the outstanding commitment of the ex-Caroni VSEP workers, the modernization of our mapping and spatial inventory of our state land resources, or enabling middle, low income families to acquire their own piece of land through the Land for the Landless Programme, developing our coastal fisheries, fishing communities, decentralizing this Government or government services through extensive

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community programmes and outreach programmes, and addressing concerns of the most vulnerable persons in society through this Government's mantra: service to the people.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill today produced further evidence of this Government's care and can be demonstrated through its emphasis, for every person in society deserves an equitable and deserving place of residence. The need for housing is entrenched in our Constitution, and the need for persons to find shelter is of paramount importance to this Government through its housing programme, through its Land for the Landless Regularization Programme, or through the Squatter Regularization Programme.

Mr. Speaker, the vision of the Ministry of Land and Marine Resources towards transforming and empowering squatter sites into sustainable communities, assisting with the containment of squatters and bringing relief to the landless is as inherent today as it was in our manifesto in 2010, which states and I quote:

“Our government will resume the programme of regularisation of unplanned settlements in accordance with the provisions of the”—State Land—
“Regularisation of...Tenure Act, No. 25 of 1998.”

Mr. Speaker, under this Act which was introduced by the former United National Congress Government in this very honourable Chamber in 1998, made provisions for the issuing of certificates of comfort, a legal document which provides squatters with protection against eviction from state land. This initiative adds to this Government's accomplishment of its delivery and the promises that we had made in 2010, which now stands at over 95 per cent of the promises delivered. Mr. Speaker, let me put in perspective this whole squatter issue that we are facing today, and persons, many of whom believe that squatting is something that happened over the last couple of years.

The historic background to squatting goes back as far back as 1830, after emancipation and the end of the apprenticeship programme. The Government, albeit the British Government in those days, prevented simple people from acquiring land, by making a policy that lands that can be purchased from the State should not be less than 100 acres. And coming out of the indentureship and the emancipation of slaves, where they were working for the comfort of a shelter in most cases, could not afford lands to construct their home after the end of this era. Mr. Speaker, that being the case, it was out of a mere necessity, it is by no choice,

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it is through the need and the want to protect their children, their family, to provide shelter, that is what led to squatting in the early 1830s and squatting continued throughout history unabated.

It was not until the 1860s where the then Governor A. H. Gordon enacted a new policy that allowed for persons to acquire lands up to five acres and to acquire freehold property up to five acres. Many years later, the State under the People's National Movement administration literally put an end to the acquisition of freehold property of the State, and this is why today, we still have under the control of the State some 66 per cent of the land mass in this country.

Mr. Speaker, over the years persons, again out of necessity and the need to provide shelter and the availability of land and the cost of land, have also delved into squatting by way of providing shelter for themselves and their family. The first time ever that any Government had sought to protect squatters was in 1998 under the former UNC administration, which brought into Parliament the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act. This Act provides for persons who have been residing on state land on or before September 2000 and would be issued with a certificate of comfort which is to be followed by a deed of lease after the due process has been completed. What is this process, Mr. Speaker? The Act provides—and I want to quote from the Act just to clear up any misunderstanding or notion that lands can be given away. The Act provides that:

A “dwelling house”—and what does a dwelling house mean? It means:

“...a building or part of a building used mainly as a dwelling or residence, construction of which was completed or was in the course of completion immediately before the appointed day, and includes land occupied therewith, not exceeding 5,000 square feet more or less;”—can qualify for a certificate of comfort.

So, Mr. Speaker, the Act provides that persons who would have applied as of September 2000 and who would have been in occupation of these lands as of January 01, 1998, can apply for a certificate of comfort, but more importantly the amendment must be read in conjunction with the parent Act—which the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act—and more importantly, is that persons must have been in occupation of a dwelling house or in the process of constructing a dwelling house as of the appointed date which is January 01, 1998 and the land does not exceed 5,000 square feet.

Mr. Speaker, after the passage of this particular legislation, the administration changed at the end of 2001, where the PNM administration became the

Government of the day for the next 10 years, and the Act provides what should be done to give effect to the Act with respect to the regularization of squatters and the issuance of leases. One of the requirements of the Act is to survey all the parcels listed in the Schedule, which is just about 250 parcels listed in the Schedule. It was necessary to do the boundary survey and do a diligent search in the Registrar General's Department to determine whether these lands are state lands or they are lands in private nature. The Act only provides that the Land Settlement Agency can deal with state lands.

Mr. Speaker, none of that was done the years following the PNM administration. It also provide that persons who applied, due diligence search must be carried out, and this search is to determine whether or not they are citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, they have been residing on the property itself and they must have completed a statutory declaration which provides by law that if for any reasons that this statutory declaration is completed knowingly to the individual providing inaccurate or ill-informed information, then those are the matters that can disqualify individuals.

Mr. Speaker, in the year 1980 when the last survey of squatters was completed, there were some 7,559 households or families residing on state land and these areas were found in the County of St. George 4438, the County of Caroni 666, in Nariva/Mayaro 9, St. Andrew/St. David 125, in Victoria 948 and in St. Patrick 826.

2.45 p.m.

And at that time, it was determined that altogether, it was about 106 acres of land. The PNM Government at that time did nothing towards the containment of squatting on state land because one would appreciate that in 1980, having to protect and determine 106 acres of land where just about 7,000 persons were in occupation. Mr. Speaker, it was much easier at that time to contain or bring containment to the squatter issues and determine whether or not these lands, which had already been occupied, and persons had been residing there since the indentureship period or since the emancipation, those persons on these lands could have been regularised. But what happened, Mr. Speaker, is that it was not until 1998 when the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, for the very first time, sought to recognize the rights of squatters.

All of that period from 2002 up to 2010, there were persons all over crying out for the need for assistance through housing or through land or through regularisation. But instead of treating with this very important social issue, what did the PNM administration do? Instead of treating with the Act and surveying the

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sites and creating that environment in which squatters who had been residing, many of whom for more than 30 and 40 years, many of whom went onto these lands without choice, what did they do?

Mr. Speaker, during that period, there were many horror stories of the then Land Settlement Agency, under a PNM-controlled board, went into areas of squatters and before “fore-day morning”, they would break their houses down and put every single thing by the road. There are stories where women with children, women with babies, pregnant women—just recently, I held a ceremony for the distribution of the certificates of comfort and a woman from the Morvant area gave a testimony, that they came four o’clock in the morning and before she had an opportunity to remove her things, they attempted to demolish the property and all over you have been hearing that cry and it was not until—

Mr. Speaker, I just want to read into the record from an article published in the *Guardian* on Wednesday, May 05, 2004, and it was by one Reshma Ragoonath and Sherwin Long, and it states.

“Union Hall squatters were spared yesterday when a judge granted an interim injunction preventing the National Housing Authority from demolishing their homes and taking possession of disputed lands in Prime Minister Patrick Manning’s San Fernando East constituency.

San Fernando First Civil Court judge Peter Jamadar made the order for the injunction after NHA returned to the settlement yesterday morning and tore down makeshift shelters”—of—“squatters”—who—“had reconstructed...their homes”—that—“were demolished”—within—“two weeks ago.

Manning had called for an investigation into the NHA’s action against squatters.

Opposition senator Sadiq Baksh got leave to raise the matter for debate in the Senate yesterday.

Although Housing Minister Dr. Keith Rowley showed up to present Government’s case, the Senate”—had—“other business”—that went—“late into the night.”

And the article went on to say:

“Rowley eventually left the chamber.”

This goes to show and there are many more horror stories. My other colleagues would go into some of them. In Cashew Gardens, for instance, in Bagatelle, Diego Martin, in San Fernando, in Siparia, in Esperanza.

And in 2009, it was Kamla Persad-Bissessar, attorney—she was in Opposition then—who took a class action representing some 99 squatters from throughout the country, and went to court to represent these squatters, and it was Justice Gobin, in 2011, in whose judgment, stated that the Land Settlement Agency was acting illegally. That is the legacy in which the PNM administration treated with squatters.

Mr. Speaker, it is as though there is no care for the persons who are the most vulnerable in society, there is no care for the people who have been, in most cases, residing on these lands for more than 30 years and 40 years. It is as though there is no care for persons who have built their family who, when these persons went in to squat in these areas, had to use boxing boards, I was told, from the various assembly plants that they had. One of which, I think, was Neal & Massy and Toyota where they could have purchased a load of boxing boards for some \$50 or \$100, and they used this to barricade their homes and to create an environment and a place where they can rest their babies, where they can rest their heads and shelter themselves from the elements of the weather.

In most cases, when they went in on these settlements or sites, they had no infrastructure, and it is the Government of the day, and in most cases it was the PNM Government of the day that put in some infrastructure in some of these areas with the promise, in most cases, that they will be treated with or be regularized after election. Mr. Speaker, squatters in this country have always been played with because it was necessary that these people who have been living on these state lands be given access to housing or accommodation so that they can build their homes.

But the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, 2000, some 23,000 applications were received and during the period of the People's Partnership administration, we see a total of some 7,000 applications being processed and the certificates of comfort exceeds 7,000. But during the eight years of the PNM administration, just under 1,300 certificates of comfort were issued. This, itself, tells the story as to how and why the PNM administration failed to deal with the squatting issue. Mr. Speaker, what is most important is that the Land Settlement Agency should have been given the tools and the necessary funding for the development of those squatting sites and to carry out and implement the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, 1998.

When the Land Settlement Agency was created under the UNC administration, they had some 200-plus skilled staff assigned to the agency, and under the PNM administration, this number was reduced to just about 50 staff at the Land Settlement Agency. Surely, they were not very serious about addressing the

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squatting issues and allowing for squatting to grow out of hand, and to allow for persons to move on the state lands and occupy state lands unabated by reducing the staff of the Land Settlement Agency.

Mr. Speaker, the UNC Government of 2000 had negotiated an IDB loan, and this loan was expected to be implemented with the construction of some 16 sites. On these sites, they were expected to survey the lands to apply for Town and Country approvals, and put in all the necessary infrastructure, including road, sewer system and water on these sites. Unfortunately, as I have said, the Government changed hands.

And on these sites, because it was an obligation of the Government to carry out the necessary infrastructure works on these sites, much of the infrastructure, many of the works were left undone. An example is the Bon Air North site which they spent some \$40 million to develop that site but did not provide in that site pipe-borne water. Mr. Speaker, \$40 million was spent on one site but no pipe-borne water. Imagine basic utilities such as water and sewerage were not provided in most of these sites that were expected to be developed under the IDB loan of 2001.

Mr. Speaker, let me put it in perspective what then occurred. It took the PNM administration eight years to develop some 15 sites. If we take the amount of sites that we have in the Act, which is 251, it would take them some 134 years to complete the infrastructure work on the sites that have been allocated under the Act. Since 2002 to 2010, under the PNM administration, they boasted of a new-way housing programme and this is one of the reasons why they stifled the Land Settlement Agency.

But what was this programme about? This programme was developed to promise persons who are residing on or are squatting on state land that they would complete or build the infrastructure and the house and then they would return it to the householder.

3.00 p.m.

But, Mr. Speaker, this is very much the same legacy which they have left with the Las Alturas Project and some of these houses that have been left in dilapidated conditions, which the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, the hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal, had to deal with over the last five years. But that is the legacy of the PNM, how they treated with housing and providing shelter for the citizenry.

Mr. Speaker, what have we done, what has this Government done that has provided the necessary framework for bringing this amendment or for bringing

legislation that would provide for squatters? To date, we have surveyed some 120 sites, which we have issued survey order and planning works have started on most of these sites for the regularization and provision of infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, there are some 60,000 families which, during our social survey, we have picked up, who have been squatting mostly on state lands and are to be provided for in this legislation which is to bring the date of the 1st January, 1998 to 13th June, 2014. We have completed an entire aerial imagery of Trinidad and Tobago and this aerial imagery was done through an IDB-funded programme and it provides for imagery that can then be used as evidential purposes for persons who have made application and who would be making application as of 13th June, 2014.

Mr. Speaker, we have also started updating our cadastral mapping system and this is to identify all of the lands that are occupied, of the 66 per cent of the lands that are owned by the State and that have been occupied by personnel, including squatters and all the other agencies. Mr. Speaker, this cadastral mapping system is expected to be completed during the course of this year, 2015.

One of the most important projects that we have embarked on is a geographic information system and that is using GIS technology or GIS information and personnel to map all of the lands that are state lands in Trinidad and Tobago. To date, we have completed over 230 sites and these sites are updated into this geographic spatial database that we have started constructing.

What is this about? In today's new age of technology and the computer-savvy world that we are living in and especially the fact that the Ministry of Education that this Government has issued over 95,000 laptops to students and the Minister responsible for ICT is moving to an age whereby Internet can be made readily accessible to all, it is this type of technology that will help persons, in the comfort of their homes, to identify where their land is located. One such example is the construction of a site called Caronivsep.com where Caroni workers who have been issued with two-acre agriculture plots, they can go on this site and they can identify, by using their badge number, the exact location of their land that had been issued to them.

Mr. Speaker, just recently we have completed a GIS conference, which was geared towards bringing the private sector and all other ministries within the realms of navigation and development of their own GIS system that will help them in their ministry to provide the framework where they can protect their own lands.

The Government has also embarked on the purchase of an unmanned aerial vehicle, a UAV, which is using technology such as LiDAR and other digital

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imagery, again, with the aim of providing continuous photographic imagery of these areas that are occupied by squatters or any other area. This UAV, or the unmanned aerial vehicle, will provide at a demand, or on a demand notice, the aerial or mapping imagery that would be required to continue to upgrade our spatial and mapping database.

Mr. Speaker, what this will assist us to do, and the aim of which is to continue monitoring of all illegal structures and encroachments, continue with the enforcement of our planning and environmental regulations by State agencies, continue with the regularisation of occupation as well as the design of settlements layouts and routes through planning within settlements.

Mr. Speaker, the need for this mechanism is premised on the view that the survey infrastructure and mapping provides the foundation for information of land management and the development of every national project which impacts on the physical landscape within the realms of state lands by providing accurate mapping to inform the implementation of all further projects and to inform the development of various sites within Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to ensure, through the Land Settlement Agency, that squatters or persons residing as squatters and on whose land we intend to implement and provide infrastructural development, we continue to provide sustainable and long-term provisions that these persons can also be assisted in changing the status in which they live, from squatter to a person or individual who owns land.

By doing that, Mr. Speaker, it will provide the person with the necessary collateral that they themselves can approach financial institutions for the purpose of accessing funding to provide them with the upgrade to their homes and also more importantly to provide a sense of independence to persons who now have moved from landless to becoming owners of land.

Mr. Speaker: You have five minutes more.

Hon. J. Seemungal: Mr. Speaker, the issuing of certificates of comfort is only one phase, but moving to leases, which this Government has done historically for the very first time a couple of weeks ago, have provided, now, persons who have been landless, who have been squatting with leases up to 199 years.

Mr. Speaker, this proposed amendment seeks to amend various sections of the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act of 1998. Section 2 of this Act means that it is the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act. The Act itself, the amendment seeks to change the word of Minister and state the words “Minister” and “State Land”, and

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more importantly to change the appointed day from January 01, 1998 to June 13, 2014. Mr. Speaker, the amendment also seeks to make an order for applications that it is from three years after the commencement of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, the Act also provides for the Minister to be empowered to approve in writing the transfer of land to be vested on the Land Settlement Agency and the creation of head leases to the Land Settlement Agency and the Land Settlement Agency to own in fee simple for the purposes under the Act for the purpose of squatter containment. Mr. Speaker, it also seeks to remove stamp duty that is usually attracted to the transfer of land to any agency or any particular body.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, this is a piece of legislation that really seeks to help the most vulnerable in society. This is a piece of legislation that seeks to help persons who have been squatting in most cases for over 30 and 40 years, albeit some may be caught within the last few years, but who have a dwelling house and who are seeking now the land in which they have, to have title by way of a lease or deed of lease for a period of 199 years and this is only accessible to persons not more than 5,000 square feet.

Mr. Speaker, this Act also provides that the social network and the social net, in providing for the most vulnerable, would also address, by way of our promise in 2000.

There are some 60,000 squatters. There are some 60,000 families who can benefit under this provision and the provision seeks to regularize persons as of June 13, 2014. Mr. Speaker, it really creates, for the very first time, persons who did not have an opportunity to apply in 1998, persons who did not have an opportunity by reasons, they did not know, they did not take the legislation seriously or simply because the information was not carried to them. It gives them an opportunity now to apply for regularization under this Act.

Mr. Speaker, it also gives the opportunity to people, for the very first time, to be independent and not to be a slave to anyone or any individual and especially to allow them the opportunity to own their property and not to sit as prey that in the dusk of dawn their house can be broken down. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I beg to move, Mr. Speaker.

Question proposed.

3.15 p.m.

Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, I think the intention possibly is good, but I do not think

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that it was well thought out, nor even, can it be well implemented. I got the impression, Mr. Speaker, that this was merely a hustle before June 16th, so as to get as much as you can milk, in time for the election.

I will tell you why, but before I go into that, I want to make some corrections to the Member's history. I sat listening to him, and I saw behind him was the Member for Couva South, who used to help me teach history at Polytechnic for several years. I wondered how he could have allowed him to make such historical blunders, by saying, for example, that squatting began in the late 1830s. Minister, slavery was abolished in 1838. Abolition came to an end in 1838. What squatting you had then?

Between 1838 and 1845, you had a labour shortage in the West Indies. From 1845 to 1917, they brought Indian immigrants, and we saw the first effects of land regularization when they told the immigrants, "You could either go back home or take a few shillings and some land". That was a system of land regularization and, therefore, do not take any kudos that you are not entitled to. At the end of the day, everybody wants lands to be regularized, but the fact that I am saying is, I am asking the question—and I will say again, this whole debate is hinged on three questions, you know, which I will come to just now.

I want to also make the point that the Member rightly said, that 1998 a UNC Government began this, but I want to tell him, that there were previous Governments who began it too as well, not necessarily in the same degree as the UNC Government did, but that is apart. I want to know from the Member, why is it that the Government sought to move from 1998, of course, then to 2000, and then to June 13, 2014? I have not heard why. I have not heard, Mr. Speaker, if after June 13, 2014, there is any grace period, because the fact is, when the Act was passed in 1998, there were two years of grace period year after year, when this was extended. He has not told me at least, if there are any extensions. Nor have I been told what are the mechanisms—"yuh checking de history now"? All right, okay.

What are the mechanisms so that the public can know, because this magic date of 2014—in 1998, many persons in society who would have, and should have known and would have benefited did not know, and the Government, therefore, put it on for one year more, and then another year more, so as to take in those people who were not caught in the system. Therefore, I ask the question, does he not foresee a similar thing happening with the date of 2014, especially in the rushed way it has been and people most probably, it has been lost on them?

I will come to the certificate of comfort just now. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, it would seem to me if I were the Minister, I would begin to have a very serious island-wide education system, especially in those areas where you have squatters in a high density area. Because at the end of the day, you could pass whatever Act you want, whatever Bill you want, at the end of the day, if the public does not know, especially those who are supposed to know, then the whole thing has failed, but that might be a moot point. What for me is more important, is the certificate of comfort.

I looked through the whole Act. The Minister said, a certificate of comfort provides squatters with protection against eviction from squatting on state lands. Yes, Mr. Speaker, but if that squatter dies, who does the land go to, his children, his wife or husband, a kin? If he dies, who does it go to? If he wants to get money borrowed from the bank to repair his home, can he go with this certificate of comfort to the bank? Tell us that.

Mr. Speaker, I refer to an article in one of the best newspapers in the land, the *Sunshine*, on page 8, “Just Ask Rekha”. Rekha is chairman of the ILP. The article is, “What is the Value”—[*Interruption*] I promise not to dignify anything you say, you know. The article is “What is the Value of A Certificate of Comfort?” In the article, she says, I quote for two parts:

“The Act is clear that a Certificate of Comfort does not create an interest in the occupied land and that it is limited to only a personal right to protection from ejectionment.”

Therefore, if the persons dies, then what? I am coming to that just now. In the same article, she says:

“This means therefore that the Document called the Certificate of Comfort is useless in assisting in the upgrading of the living conditions of the squatter.”

I quote, she says:

“No bank will entertain a Certificate of Comfort as any form of security for a housing loan as the Certificate creates no interest in the land.”

Tell the people the truth. Tell them the truth. Nothing in this Bill has changed that, and if it has, let me know.

In an article, Issue 102, Friday, May 1st—this one here was, of course—this article here was No. 95, Friday, March, 13th. Mr. Speaker, 102 on May 1st, the same article again: “Just Ask Rekha”. She asked the question: “To What Extent...”—and as I said, Rekha is the chairman of the ILP, Rekha Ramjit—“...does a Certificate of Comfort

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Provide an Occupier with Security?” Hear what she says, “To What Extent does a Certificate of Comfort Provide an Occupier with Security?” She answers the question:

“...that...Certificate of Comfort grants protection from ejection from his/her dwelling house located on the land but does not create an”—oh, he has left—“interest in the land.”

It does not create an interest in the land. It is “ah mamaguy”. And, of course, after 1998, under the UNC, we come here 17 years later, with “ah mamaguy”. If the person dies, the person cannot even will the land to somebody else. I go further:

“This means that the Certificate of Comfort does not give to anyone entitlement to the land whatsoever.”

The land is not theirs. They have no entitlement to the land whatsoever, and that is what she is saying quite rightly. The certificate is meaningless. In the same article, I continue:

“For clarity”—she says—no, before I say that, I will continue:

“Sadly, this means that a person who has been granted a Certificate of Comfort cannot use that document for purposes of collateral for repairs of an existing dwelling house.”

But the Minister in his closing statement told this House that you can use the certificate as collateral. Then I want to see, tell me, show me where in the Act it says exactly. That is all I ask, and let the public know. You go to the bank, have a certificate of comfort, I want \$5,000 borrowed. I want to fix “meh roof, ah want to fix meh toilet and so on”, here is my certificate of comfort. The bank manager will “buss one long steups”, right, and tell me to leave. It is a useless piece of paper which, of course, it gives the illusion that you have rights, that you have benefits, but it is useless. You cannot give it to your children. You cannot go to the bank with it. You cannot do “nuttin” with it, until after you die, it goes. Mr. Speaker, in the same article, she says:

“For clarity, a statutory lease is a lease for 30 years and a Deed of lease is a lease for 199 years. Both types of leases create a legal interest in the land and can be used as collateral in any financial institution.”

Mr. Speaker, she said again:

“...a statutory lease...for 30 years—a Deed of lease...for 199 years.”

Those two can be used as collateral.

Yesterday afternoon, we conducted a walkabout in Marabella on the train line, San Fernando West; one of the most successful I have ever had for a long time. On that train line in Marabella, you have people living there for 30/35 years, they have nothing. “Whey yuh giving dem, ah letter of comfort?” Thirty-five years, I visited some homes, people living there 30/40 years, with their children, what do you give them? They are squatters?—Marabella train line. We spent five years, we walked through Marabella, we beg people to vote for us, and five years later they have nothing, and then you come here and talk about deed of comfort. This cannot make sense.

I read the last paragraph of this article, by Ms. Rekha Ramjit. She says this:

“The Certificate of Comfort then provides temporary relief against ejection and unless it translates into either a statutory lease or a Deed of Lease, the objective of the Act would not have been achieved.”

She is an attorney, top-class lawyer. That is what she is saying. Tell the people the truth.

What I find even somewhat disturbing, is that you have in the Act a whole set of areas being designated, and I looked, I could be wrong, but I hope the Member could tell me, where in these different areas here, which have been designated, I see nothing about Marabella on the train line, nothing about Marabella. I went up and down, north, south, central, where is Marabella on the train line? Because those people are people too, and they want to know, right, about their certificate of comfort.

Mr. Speaker, I do not intend to be long at all, because as I said I have three questions. One, to tell me and tell the House, whether these certificates of comfort can be used as collateral, in what form? Tell me—you should not check now, you should check before now—tell me if the certificate of comfort can be bequeathed to your children, and your children’s children. Can you give it to them? After you live for 30 years on a piece of land with “yuh house, yuh drop dead”, the certificate dies. Tell this House what you have done or propose to do about that, because I say again, certificate of comfort is a useless piece of paper, save and suffice only by giving the owner personal use. When the owner dies, that is the end.

Mr. Speaker, last of all, I ask again, tell me and tell this House, what mechanisms you have so that people can be educated, this big “gran z’affair”, this big, of course, gift and so on to the nation, right, first time ever, a lot of firsts, you know, ever, what have you done to educate people, and in their own interest to do so before election? It is okay, you know, you could pass Bill here like “yuh crazy”

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for the next two weeks, pass like “yuh mad”, pass Bills, endless Bills, at the end of the day, the people who the Bills are being passed for have to understand, have to benefit, and that is all I ask.

Mr. Speaker, with those few words, I thank you.

3.30 p.m.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the opportunity to make a very brief contribution on the Bill before us. Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by extending my own personal commendation to the visionary leadership behind this Bill, a person who has been involved in defending the rights of citizens, particularly, as it relates to citizens’ rights for shelter, for homes and for the protection of the State.

Mr. Speaker, the Member of Parliament for Siparia, an attorney-at-law and now Prime Minister, blazed a trail many years ago in defence of squatters, in defence of homeless persons. So that today we are very proud that the Minister of Land and Marine Resources, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, can come to this House and pilot what for us is an historic Bill that provides for the rights of persons who have been on state land and so far unprotected. So, I would like to commend the Minister, his Ministry, officials of the Land Settlement Agency and other agencies.

You may recall that some time ago in this very administration, I also had the privilege to work in this area and to provide ministerial and political leadership in the sector dealing with land regularization and squatting. So, it is in that context that I would like to say a few words and, of course, to respond to some of the issues raised by the lone Member in opposition to the Government in the Parliament today on these matters.

The Member for Chaguanas West is always anticipating my contribution, not only because it may be quite predictable, but because there are always a few good points to raise in response to the Member for Chaguanas West. Mr. Speaker, the key issue raised by the Member for Chaguanas West, which the Member for Chaguanas West has raised before—quite before on several occasions incidentally—is really the question that the Member asked, as to the validity, the utility value of an instrument called a Certificate of comfort. You see, the Certificate of comfort as an instrument has its origin in the parent Act, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act at section 4.

The certificate of comfort is a document which gives a squatter a personal right to the protection from eviction from state lands, and it is the first step in a

three-stage process towards the squatter ultimately acquiring security of tenure by way of a deed of lease, once he or she is situated within a designated area for regularization by the LSA and satisfies the conditions under the Act.

So, Mr. Speaker, a certificate of comfort is a document which confers on to a citizen a personal right, a personal right to protect that person from eviction. You see, the right to be protected against eviction is not an unconditional right. You cannot go on to state land, erect a structure and declare that you have an unconditional and universal right to be there. It is a right that must be conferred by the State, and that right is a qualified right. It comes with certain conditions. There is no universal right to erect a structure on state land and inhabit, and that must be very important.

The Member for Chaguanas West as well quotes, in his case, an attorney-at-law in a newspaper I imagine he has some contact with, by the name of I believe it is Rekha something, and the article is, of course: “Just ask Rekha”. What is the name?

Hon. Member: Ramjit.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Ramjit. Mr. Speaker, the first thing the Member for Chaguanas West may want to know is that her name is not Rekha. In fact, Rekha is a name adopted years after. I think her name is Parbatie and was known quite in her early days at Naparima College. Am I correct, Member for San Fernando West?—who may not have been there quite then. So, there was a name change and the person changed their name for whatever good reason, many people do. So, the person is really Parbatie. So Parbatie, now Rekha, writes and, of course, provides the legal armoury for the Member for Chaguanas West—Parbatie Ramoutar, if I recall correctly—being a close associate in his political movement, and the Member depends on this article and questions the Minister, questions the Ministry and questions all the state attorneys and questions the attorneys at the Land Settlement Agency because Rekha say that, you know.

The Member may want to also be very clear that the certificate of comfort, apart from giving a right to prevent you from eviction, it is used by citizens to access grants by the State. If you have to apply for a housing grant, a repair grant at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development—in my case, I know about that—but I am also certain in the Ministry of Public Utilities, through T&TEC, if you apply for some type of provision—[*Mr. Warner on his feet*] I would come to you. If you apply for your housing grant or some facility for electrification and so on, in a condition where you do not have a deed of lease, where you do not have a lease, these authorities ask if you have a COC or you have a sworn affidavit. [*Interruption*]

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So, the Ministry of the People and Social Development, I am also informed that when you go for whatever welfare benefits that would be available there, if you do not have a deed of lease, which many people will not have for several reasons, but you have a certificate of comfort, you can use that and say: “Look, I have my certificate of comfort from the State, please process my grants.”

I can tell you in the case of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, which I know a bit more of than the other Ministries, is that hundreds, if not thousands of persons would have been provided with house repair grants and other types of support only and if they can produce to us a certificate of comfort. This is why Members of Parliament are also very adamant, very passionate with the authority of the Land Settlement Agency. We are always passionate to get certificates of comfort for our constituents because we understand the importance of that. [*Mr. Warner on his feet*] I just want to finish the point and then I would give you way.

So that, to say, as the Member says today and said before, that a certificate of comfort is useless, it is a waste of time, there is no need for this, it is not completely true. It is not true at all. The Member is right, it is not a deed of lease. A deed of lease gives you certain rights. It gives you more than interest, it gives you right. You can pass your land, your house or whatever when you have correct legal title through a deed of lease. You are right there, but you are wrong—and if Rekha is saying this, we must ask her again—to say that a certificate of comfort has no purpose and a waste of time. Please.

Mr. Warner: Thank you Minister for giving way, I appreciate it. Minister, can you take a certificate of comfort and go to a commercial bank for a loan? Please, help me.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: The answer is—unless I am mistaken—no. So, you are right. It is not a deed. You cannot pass it that way. Unless I am mistaken again—the Minister of Land and Marine Resources is here—you cannot go to the bank, you cannot buy a car, you cannot go for a loan with a certificate of comfort, but what you can do is you can get the benefits of the State: welfare benefits, housing grant, electrification and you can get the protection so that you do not end up—Mr. Speaker, with your leave, I have your permission to show this— [*Picture in hand*] demolished! “Cyril Hutchinson sits on what remains of the steps of his...”—home in the vicinity of San Fernando yesterday. This was 2008 or thereabout. This cannot happen to you if you have a certificate of comfort. [*Desk thumping*] This, Mr. Speaker—[*Picture in hand*]—Joanne Basdeo stoops on the

remains of her Pleasantville home which the Land Settlement Agency demolished yesterday in 2008 or thereabout. This cannot happen to you if you have a certificate of comfort. [*Desk thumping*]

So, to indicate that a certificate of comfort is useless is not correct. You cannot get a loan from the bank, we know this. You need a deed of lease, but the certificate of comfort protects you from this. [*Picture in hand*] It protects you from this. This is why people, they claim—and we have had several functions to give out certificates of comfort and so on. I have had when I was Minister with that responsibility. Incidentally, I have had very successful functions at the Centre of Excellence and the people come there and they are happy, because they understand. In fact, it is a good thing that the people themselves understand the importance of a certificate of comfort, but it does not give you legal title like a deed or a deed of lease, and that was correct.

Mr. Warner: Thank you Member for Oropouche East, and this is my last interruption. Having said so: can the holder of a certificate of comfort pass it on to his or her children?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I have heard him say that before, and I have asked the question. I expect to have a proper response to you before I am finished, because I wanted to get the proper response. I have asked that in the way you are asking it.

Mr. Speaker, this Government, when we came into office, we discovered, you know, that the PNM administration between 2001 to 2010 gave out 1,300 certificates of comfort. I am proud to say that under this administration, between 1998 to 2000—that is the first part when we passed that law—and since 2010 to now, we have distributed 7,700 certificates of comfort. So, we have prevented 7,700 citizens of this country from this fate. [*Picture in hand*] That is what we have prevented. We have prevented that—and their families.

In my own constituency, why I talk about this, in the area of Golconda, Diamond there, I have been a victim as an MP. I remember one day persons coming to my office when I was in Opposition in tears—mothers, young mothers, holding their babies without clothes and in tears—because the State had demolished their structures. They were squatters, but the State did it in a manner that was later deemed by the High Court to be illegal. The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, attorney-at-law and others took up that matter and went to the court and, as the Minister said, won that matter.

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I also have a bad experience, and I would not call names, because it is not in my interest to call name. I led those people, a delegation, to the Ministry of Housing. Today, as fate would have it, my office is on the third floor. I led a delegation to the ground floor to see the LSA—and the LSA was at that building where I am now—and the then head of the LSA, the CEO, then head, spoke to these people in a way that they wept. I do not know if it was his personal style, but my constituents wept when he spoke. The way he spoke to people—I was there as the Member of Parliament and I called him out and I said: “You cannot speak to people in that way. Even if you are right, you cannot speak that way to citizens.” And they cried and they cried. They cried blood. The Member for Chaguanas West knows the individual. Mr. Speaker, when I came into office, I then stood in front of him as Minister of Housing. He left, I think, a few hours later.

Mr. Speaker, it was the arrogance as well. It may have been his personal style. I want to say that the person has never been rude to me, personally, but the way they spoke and the way they dealt—the trucks came with big burly men with hammers and sledgehammer and saw and all types of things. They came with the Task Force, Guard and Emergency Branch—the same people who might have abandoned the Parliament—they came there and they came with illegal instruments and broke down, and that was because those people did not have a certificate of comfort.

So to call a certificate of comfort today a mamaguy—and that is mamaguy and we are doing this for election—Mr. Speaker, this is election year. If you take on people, everything you do is election. So what do you do? Do nothing! “Park up, lock the door and throw way de key and say we doing nothing, it have election!” Mr. Speaker, the media has asked me, the Member for Chaguanas West is always asking.

We have an agenda. Our agenda is to pass Bills pursuant to our manifesto commitments, our policy commitments. We have laws to pass. Some laws we may not pass, but some we will pass, but this is a matter that we have a commitment to dealing with. I made a point earlier today, which I want to repeat for the public record. We come to the Parliament with a built-in majority, that is, this majority is now even more raw because the Opposition walked off the job. They are not here today.

3.45 p.m.

The Opposition is not here; they have abdicated their responsibility. They walked off the job. While we are working here, they are being paid to put their

foot up on the coffee table at home and have a drink, but we work, Mr. Speaker. The Opposition has abdicated. We in a Government today, led by the Member for Siparia, we can come to this Parliament and pass any Bill we want. Do we do that? No. We have the Industrial Relations Bill, which we have before us. We have the Cybercrime Bill. We can come to Parliament at any time and pass those Bills. We have the majority and the Opposition walked off the job, but we have determined that there are groups in this society, stakeholder groups, interested parties who have concerns about cybercrime, who have concerns about that Industrial Relations Bill, and we mashed the brakes, we said, “Let us re-engage those stakeholder community before we go forward”.

Mr. Speaker, if it was the PNM in power, “they pass six Bill in one evening and go home”. Today, we believe that we cannot use our majority and our raw majority in that manner, so this is why we have adjourned debate on a few matters, but where we are not picking up the strong critical remarks, and so on—the Insurance Bill is one, the Gaming and Gambling—we have moved to pass those pieces of legislation. It is not our fault that the PNM walked off the job. It is not our fault. We cannot be blamed for that. And if you have a feeling that we are running fast—in fact, there is an editorial in the papers, I think they accused the Government of working too hard and working too fast.

They accuse us of working fast and working hard, and that is because without the Opposition you do not have the “ping-pong” debate so you have a sense that things are moving fast. Because if you have a debate you will have a “ping-pong” process where you will stay all day and, possibly, all night debating, so you have a feeling that that continues, but in the absence of an Opposition three or four Government Members will speak and then we will vote and we will pass, so you have a sense that it is moving fast.

So, today, the Government is accused of working too hard and working too fast. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Warner: Is the Opposition absent?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I must say, the PNM Opposition has walked off the job, but, the Member of Chaguanas West, I think he is working part-time because at 4.30, by commitment, by a principled commitment he departs the Chamber. So he is giving us a part-time job, and, I must say, the gentleman, today, from Chaguanas West, even in the Finance Committee, Mr. Speaker, I mean, he had some of the Ministers here on their toes. The Member for Chaguanas West, it is a sign of the maturity of this Parliament and our

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commitment to democracy, to openness and to accountability, that the Member for Chaguanas West will come here and ask this Government to account for every single dollar—and we do.

Mr. Speaker, because in the absence of the PNM, it is the Member for Chaguanas West—it fell to him to ask, almost on many, not all certainly, but on many of these accounting areas to get this Government to account publicly, and he has been doing that job. So, the PNM has run away, but the Member for Chaguanas West—I know “it had ah day” he was detained elsewhere and could not make it, but notwithstanding that he is here 95 per cent of the time, and continues that job.

So, Mr. Speaker, I want also to reflect on another matter raised, the Marabella train line. The Member said by his own admission he had a successful walkabout in Marabella. It may be a sign of things to come that—[*Interruption*] The Member is free to have a walkabout any part of this country; any part of this country he can do his walkabout. I do not think he can walk about in other countries, but in this country he is free to have a walkabout anywhere he wants—he was in Marabella on a walkabout. Now, for the Member’s benefit, I wanted to let the Member know that the Marabella train line, while not under any of the specified schedules here, the HDC has a jurisdiction on that train line, and we have moved over the years, Mr. Speaker. We have moved to relocate over 80 families from the Marabella train line into Corinth. [*Desk thumping*]

So, today, at Corinth, in proper new apartments, we have people who are living there and they were formerly from the Marabella train line. So, we are moving to relocate persons from the Marabella train line because it is a belief that you cannot anymore go onto places like a train line where people are living and squatting for many years, there are legal statutory rules and regulations, and you cannot bring the level of quality living on the train line. We have the same problem, incidentally, with the Ciper Road train line. That had been a matter outstanding, I think, for many years, because the people have built houses along the train line and you have problems with Town and Country Planning. [*Cell phone rings*] You have problems with municipal corporation approvals—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Members in the Public Gallery, could you switch off your cells, or put them on silent? The whole evening we have been getting disturbance from the members who are seated in the Public Gallery, could you kindly switch off your systems? Continue, hon. Member.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, so I am saying that the Marabella train line is an area that is under the jurisdiction of the HDC,

and we have been doing the surveys, we have moved people from there already. We have moved them out, and we will continue to work in that area so that we can move persons into proper apartments, generally apartments, and clear up the train line there, because that is part of a wider development zone, as well. Apart from the fact that it is impossible to bring relief in areas where the Town and Country Planning will not give approval, municipal corporations will not give approval for housing. So, the Marabella train line, I think, fits the HDC concerns.

Mr. Speaker, for the benefit of the Member, and for others as well, the certificate of comfort that we give is part of a step process. It is outlined in Chap. 57:05 at section 4, where for a squatter on state land, once you satisfy the criteria, the first step, Mr. Speaker—step one—is to:

“issue...a Certificate of Comfort in accordance with Part III in respect of one dwelling house only and such certificate may be issued in the squatter’s own name or jointly with another;”

So, I imagine you can join names for a certificate of comfort. In that way, Mr. Speaker, it also deals with another matter the Member for Chaguanas West raised, which is when you join names for a certificate of comfort, in a way you give protection to someone else as well, another member of the family, a son, a daughter, a sister, a brother.

When you have a certificate of comfort you can give it to more than one person. It can be done in the name of more than one person. So, you can take the certificate of comfort now, put another name onto it—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Warner: Is there an age?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Is there an age? I will ask somebody to check it for me now. I suspect it would be an adult person, 18 years and over, but we can check it. Is it 18?

Mr. Cadiz: Eighteen, and below is a minor.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Is a minor—so I suspect it is 18 years and over that you can join to a certificate of comfort and extend the protection that you have to another member of the family, or the household, as the case may be. All right. And I will get that information as well, hopefully before we are through here.

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Mr. Speaker, the step two now—there is another process, Mr. Speaker, step two is that:

“subject to the provisions of”—the parent—“Act”—the squatter is entitled—
“to a Statutory Lease in a designated area where he complies with”—other—
“requirements of section 14(2) and”—will be given—“a Deed of Lease in
accordance with section 15.”

Mr. Speaker, I wanted to indicate that it was just a few days ago that the Land Settlement Agency had a major distribution at central Trinidad, I believe in Chaguanas somewhere, and they gave out, for the first time, deeds of lease. Persons received deeds of lease who were already holders of a certificate of comfort. So that it was this administration that has given the historic first set of deeds of lease pursuant to a COC. It has never been done before. It means that that process has been triggered. It is working. The complaint may be that you have to give more people; you have to accelerate that. This is why, Member for Chaguanas West, we are very eager to continue our work in the next term of Government when we— *[Interruption]*

Mr. Warner: I will help you.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: I am sure, Mr. Speaker, with reporting like this, we can rest assure of the help of the Member for Chaguanas West and Rekha—Parbatie. Mr. Speaker, we can rest assured of that.

Mr. Speaker, so that it was the first time, a historic first—I saw it in the newspaper, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo and the officials of the LSA. In fact, Mr. Speaker, it was the same day there was a scheduling challenge that day, but on the very historic day that we turned the sod for construction of the Point Fortin Hospital, they were giving out 400 certificates of comfort and deeds of lease—I will find the number for you—on that same day. This is the first Government ever to distribute deeds of lease *[Desk thumping]* to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Indarsingh: Centre Pointe Mall.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: At Centre Pointe Mall—was it? Yes. Yes.

So, Mr. Speaker, our twin policy objective of homes for the homeless, land for the landless, is reaping rewards. You know, Mr. Speaker, I also read the newspaper, like everybody else, and there are times when somebody will give me free, a copy of the *Sunshine*, so I will see that as well, and I will read that. It is a critical newspaper, of course, so we will read that, but, Mr. Speaker, I could not

help but look at the *Express* today, they have “Govt hustle for squatter relief is troubling”, and suggest that we are hustling this, we are doing this without thinking it through, and so on, as the Member for Chaguanas West sought to do as well. But, Mr. Speaker, we have been in this business for some time now, we are very clear on these areas that we are designating. We know the areas. You see, it is not just state land and state land any old way, there are areas designated under the law where we have done the research, we know the squatting community there, we know the challenges there, we put that area under our business here, under our law, so that we know exactly—it is a targeted programme. It is a targeted programme for selected areas to provide relief for citizens.

Mr. Speaker, you know, I want to say, there are times when you deal with public policy matters and lawmaking matters and it is always—sometimes I feel, Mr. Speaker, because these areas do not affect the bourgeoisie, it does not—to use a term that the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre would have been using for a long time—bring a benefit to the bourgeoisie, it does not bring a benefit to high capital, it does not bring a benefit to, you know, the rich; it brings a benefit to the proletariat. One might even say the lumpenproletariat, Mr. Speaker, because it brings a benefit to poor people, underprivileged people, there is always that undertone in this society that you are not thinking things through. In fact, any time you bring a benefit for poor people you are not thinking it through.

We came with a benefit for the mothers, the grant for the babies—you are not thinking that through because it was a grant essentially for poor people. You increase the minimum wage—you are not thinking that through because it is for minimum wage, but, you know, the day we come to Parliament and there is some benefit for the investor community investing over \$300 million—that is good policy, you think that through. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Rambachan: They forget PNM and the salary.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah. No, that is it, they promise when they get back in power—God forbid—the first thing they are doing is introducing the “racket rail” and then a rapid salary increase. That is what they are coming back to do, Mr. Speaker.

Now, Mr. Speaker, they are talking about a ferry service up in Toco. Do you know, Mr. Speaker, when the UNC Government, of which, Mr. Speaker, you may have had some role there, but, Mr. Speaker, when the UNC Government introduced the idea of a ferry service to Toco—we have the record—they

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objected. They say we are going to destroy the environment, the mangrove will be destroyed. They came to Parliament—we have the *Hansard* record of the Member for Diego Martin North/East. Let me see if I get it.

Mr. Speaker: The speaking time of the hon. Member has expired, would you like an extension?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the question is that the speaking time of the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Development be extended by 15 minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: You may continue, hon. Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Diego Martin North/East is on record in *Hansard*. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Warner: Can I make a correction for the *Hansard*?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Of what I said?

Mr. Warner: Yes, Sir.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Sure. You want to do that now?

Mr. Warner: Yeah. Rekha Ramjit, the name on her birth paper is Rekha Parbatie Ramjit. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I stand corrected. I stand corrected. The Naparima Girls' Alumnae organization would correct properly what she was known as at school, and the Naparima alumnae remember Parbatie. So now you have indicated that—both names are relevant—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Warner: That is right.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal:—but the maiden name is Ramoutar. You could check that too. Get a text on that quick.

4.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I want to get back to this issue. When the UNC Government introduced the idea of a ferry service from Toco to Scarborough, the Member for Diego Martin North/East came in Parliament and said, “Look de Government want to destroy de environment”. Today, they go campaigning with the highest level of hypocrisy and say, “We want to build a ferry service in Toco”. That is what they are promising.

When ANR Robinson as Prime Minister was building a deep-water harbour in Tobago, the Member for Diego Martin West—we forget him now because he is not in front of us—called it a duck pond. “He say Robinson want to give people a duck pond in Tobago.” Today they come and promise any and everything. But not because they are not in Parliament we cannot beat them up; we must correct them in their absence, because they are at large promising everything to the citizens of this country—promising left, right and centre, but their track record is there.

They talk about equality and getting back in power for equality and bringing equality. When they were in office they came with a Bill to Parliament to punish whistle-blowers, where if you make a complaint to the Equal Opportunity Commission and it was deemed to be vexatious and frivolous, you had to pay \$250,000 in a fine—a quarter million dollars an innocent citizen must pay if the Equal Opportunity Commission determined that your complaint is vexatious. Could you believe that? And today, they come to talk about bringing legislation for whistle-blowing. You could blow a whistle on them and send them off the field. To use a language of the Member for Chaguanas West in the old days, “Give them a red card”. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago must give the PNM a red card; take them off the field. Not a red notice; that is a next matter I have been reading about today.

For the Member for Chaguanas West, I want to say that I am informed that the persons that you can join to a certificate of comfort must be 18 years and older, and that person therefore has the protection of the State from eviction and also has the entitlement to certain grants of a social welfare nature: housing, electricity and so on.

The Member for Chaguanas West I would ask him to consider that, and to ensure that he be wise enough in the sense that when you speak about certificates of comfort you know that you cannot get a loan with it. The banks will not accept it—they will accept a deed of lease—but it brings protection; it brings welfare. It brings the necessary to a poor person—and I want to come back to poverty.

This Government increased the minimum wage, not once but twice; we put the baby grant; we increased all—whether it is public assistance; whether it is pension; whether it is a disability grant; whether it is medical grant; whether it is schoolbooks. We have increased all 100 per cent. And today we stand accused by those opposite of not providing for citizens. They want to know what we do with the money.

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Mr. Speaker, when you pass on the highway you see the spanking new children's hospital, first of its kind in the Caribbean; that is where money is going—next to the Science City. We are moving on the Point Fortin Hospital, the Arima hospital. We need the time to continue those projects. Today I tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago if, God forbid, this Government is not returned, the Couva children hospital will suffer the same fate as the Biche High School, where in 10 years 1,000 children in the Biche and surrounding areas were denied an education in their community, because the PNM Government closed the Biche High School. "Dey say gas leaking there; people will get sick." When we came into power, the Minister of Education opened that school I think the next day. "Anybody get sick from gas?" Nobody. All we got from them was hot air when they spoke about that. It is in the constituency of Mayaro. "Anybody get sick from gas up there?" Nobody.

Hon. Member: Not a soul.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: For 10 years, 1,000 children were denied an education. That matter we should take to the International Criminal Court against the PNM; to deny them. A bus crashed taking children to a school far and wide. They will leave the children's hospital as it is. You will have "caraili" growing on the children hospital and snake running through that hospital, if they get into power. "No, it go have caraili and ting running on de walls in Couva." That is it. And they come today and asking people to vote for them.

The Member for Chaguanas West again had a next point I think he made. He talked about legislation. He spoke about the importance of education. Again, you have to listen to people and just smile, "yuh cyar say nothing". Everybody comes and tells the Government, you must have an education programme for this, an education programme for that, and when you put a programme, they say, "Look how much money yuh spending on publicity". They say, "Look how much millions yuh spending on publicity". But then they come and say we must have an education programme for everything.

The Member for Chaguanas West asked 1,000 questions earlier, and will come again to know how much money we are spending on publicity, and then come today and say, "Look, you have to educate people". But that is what you have to do. The Member for Chaguanas West came today, I think he had 14 questions to ask us. "Another government have 10 questions to ask him." He will come here and ask about this, but the publicity is part of education. When you do education, it is necessary advertising, it is publicity; you will have to spend. Now I am not sure the Land Settlement Agency and the Ministry of Land and Marine Affairs have the wherewithal to do that. We may have to lean to the Ministry of Communications.

Mr. Speaker, in the time I have allotted—I think it is about 10 minutes by my count.

Mr. Speaker: About eight minutes.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: In the eight minutes I just want to take this opportunity to extend the Government's commendation to the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo and to the LSA for this path-breaking, hard-working body for this Bill. Mr. Speaker, 60,000 citizens of Trinidad and Tobago stand to benefit from the measure we are dealing with here today. We are dealing with areas in San Fernando; Lady Hailes Avenue; Allambie Street—Allambie Street is in Corinth, near my own residence—Bamboo Village; Bayshore, Marabella, Ben Lomond. Bayshore, Marabella is somewhere near the line. So it may well be that that Marabella train line is captured in Bayshore; it was a major concern raised by the Member for Chaguanas West. As you see it now, Bayshore is here, it may well be that line, but the HDC also has a jurisdiction there. There is also Williamsville and Manahambre Road.

The list we are providing is also a comprehensive list. In the East-West Corridor I think there are about 30,000 squatters, if not more. Mr. Speaker, 30,000 squatters in the East-West Corridor alone who stand to benefit from this measure; 15,000 in Sangre Grande alone, who stand to benefit from this measure.

I want to appeal to those persons today, that this Government has a sincerity of purpose, we have demonstrated that. Do you know every single week we distribute 100 houses; 100 gone every week. When the people come and you look at their faces, you get the smile. In some cases you get the tears, they are happy. Sometimes you have the babies and the children coming to collect their keys. When you do that for poor people and people are so full of gratitude and love, it lifts you as a government, as a Minister, as a Prime Minister. I want to tell these 30,000 people—60,000 across the country—that the PNM and the Opposition have made it public their condemnation of this measure. They are not committed to this policy. In fact, they criticize and object to this policy. If you believe that the PNM will implement a policy like this, to bring relief to squatters, you have a different think coming.

They will return with the brutality that I showed you here. They will return with that brutality. They are known for brutality. It was a trade union leader—every Sunday he is calling a press conference. He is called the “press conference trade unionist”, every Sunday calling a press conference. I do not know what happen home that this fella does not like to stay home on a Sunday at all—every Sunday is a press conference. When we were in Opposition, they grabbed him at the

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Parliament building; held him by his belt; lifted him off the ground, squeezing his manhood, and they hurled him away. Yes, they squeezed his fortitude and dragged him away under the PNM. The police dragged him away and charged him. Today he is talking about any government charge him, they would lose the election. [*Laughter*] We look at him more as a nuisance now; nobody interested.

He does not entertain me, but he is more of a nuisance. He is the midday Sunday press conference. The former Attorney General in this country, Member for Couva South I think in the old days, now threatening to jail Government and jail the Prime Minister and jail everybody in sight. Mr. Speaker, these people have some problems.

We are working to deal with the municipal police and the commitments under the Privy Council and so on, but you are seeing now this consortium of the wicked, consortium of the malicious, conspiring against this Government and raising their heads now, because they believe it is an election season. They will not talk about the squatters who will benefit from this measure. They will not talk about poor people who come every week and collect 100 houses per week. They will not talk about the people who benefit today from the minimum wage raised. They will not talk about the mothers and the families who get the baby grant. They will not talk about the increase in disability grant. They will not talk about what we have done to lift the plight of the poor and the underprivileged.

They will come every Sunday because—I do not want to get too much with that—but they will come every Sunday in press conferencing Sunday to attack the Government on this and that. They talk about corruption. The Member for Chaguanas West, it is no secret, he is constantly accusing this Government of corruption, of Ministers, of all types of dealings with contractors. In fact, the newspaper that was cited earlier today with Rekha Parbatie accusing the Government, accusing this Prime Minister, accused the Member for Tabaquite, I think it was, a few days ago of favouring contractors.

And you know what, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas West has made it his personal campaign, his crusade, to expose allegations of corruption in this Government and to call to account Government Ministers and so on. I think the Member has made that his personal crusade, and so be it, we cannot do anything about that, but we must defend our good name. We must defend our policies, our programmes, our expenditure. We owe a duty to the Member for Chaguanas West and to others, to account—and account to him.

Today it was a surreal moment for me, which I want to put in my book, when I write my book, that today the Government of Trinidad and Tobago accounted for every dollar to the Member for Chaguanas West. I asked those around me to pinch me, so that I could be sure that I was living through this experience, where the Government is accounting for every dollar and every programme to the Member for Chaguanas West. That I will put in my book one day.

We are very proud that the land for landless, the provision of protection for squatters and the home distribution is taking place under our watch. We pledge to continue. The Member for La Horquetta/Talparo has given his personal commitment that the work of the Ministry continues beyond election. So anybody who believes this is an election ploy, we continue—in fact, Mr. Speaker, I may actually announce before the election the names of successful recipients of homes who will be getting homes after the election. I could do that with confidence.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this Bill, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill, 2015. Certainly coming after those two contributions, we can only augment some of the points that have been made by the previous speaker, the Leader of Government Business, who was in fact the Minister with responsibility for land at that time, and the LSA, and that work. They created the policy initiatives that are bearing fruit and that are being driven by the hard-working Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, who is now the Minister of Land and Marine Resources, a dedicated Ministry of Land and Marine Resources.

To underscore the importance of land—because it is my own view that a man can have many things. A family can have so many things, but if they do not own the land on which the home is built, their tenure is in question. They do not have that sense of stability. What can they build if they can be removed at a moment's notice from the land they occupy?

We want to commend the Minister, not only for this particular Bill, but all the initiatives that have been undertaken by this Ministry to ensure that the people are safer, they are more secure.

4.15 p.m.

I know that the Minister, the former speaker, indicated that the UNC Government in their period that they served, some 7,700 citizens received the

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certificate of comfort. That is an achievement because this takes a lot of work. Land is a very tedious process. It is encumbered in legality, in time periods and pieces of legislation that have to be researched, worked and reworked and checked and double checked, and all of this takes time with the limited staff that the Minister is now building in his Ministry. It is a monumental amount of work that has to take place.

Also, I know that the Minister—while he has delivered 7,700 certificates of comfort, the Minister is currently processing 2,000 certificates of comfort. So that will bring the total to a figure around 9,000. When we look at the amount of squatters that the Minister seeks to address, he is well on his way to treating with almost 50 per cent of the persons who are in critical need of certificates of comfort in the country, and therefore we really want to commend him, the 19 sites that he is working on. He indicated the PNM's track record, and he told us that they would take some 140 years or so to develop the sites if they continued at the pace that they were going. And the Minister is mobilized on some 19 sites to yield 2,000 regularized lots, open spaces and more than 1,000 residential lots.

Now I am well placed to contribute to this debate as well, Mr. Speaker, because in my constituency we are riddled with the problem of squatters and tenancy and tenure, because the lands of Caroni were available for persons who required housing to erect homes and to set up villages. Cashew Gardens is, in fact, the place that was referred to by the Minister of Land and Marine Resources in 2004, when he indicated that:

“Housing Minister...holds up a map of the Cashew Gardens housing settlement during a news conference at his South Quay, Port-of-Spain office yesterday.”

The Minister at that time was Dr. Keith Rowley, and Dr. Rowley in referring to my constituents, the good people of Cashew Gardens, indicated:

“Anarchy!”

This is Thursday, March 4, 2004.

“Rowley told a news conference at the Housing Ministry...that while the Government sympathised with the plight of squatters it wouldn't make any apologies for breaking down their illegal homes.

The Land Settlement Agency (LSA) and the National Housing Authority...recently demolished homes on both sites, insisting the illegal structures were interfering with Government's housing programme.”

I think in this article, Mr. Speaker, he continued to talk about the grand plans for Cashew Gardens, being affected by the squatters there. And also told them that the media will not give them any security of tenure.

That was the PNM policy and the way that they ill-treated with the squatters and the persons who found themselves in this position. And I want to say that from day one of this People's Partnership Government they have protected the weak and the vulnerable in the society and, in particular, the squatters of Trinidad and Tobago. And we must remember that. Not only have they protected the squatters with their rights, but also their right not to be terrorized.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that early in 2010 there were elements in the society that descended upon the Cashew Gardens and claimed that they were promised to help the Government to get into power and they will get lands, and they occupied lands in Cashew Gardens which is in Caroni Central. And it was a decision that the Government had to make, whether they would move in and ensure that law and order prevailed. And you will remember at that time the Minister of Food Production, Minister Vasant Bharath and the Commissioner of State Lands and the committee headed by the Member for St. Augustine was convened to ensure that law and order was preserved and the persons who occupied the lands of Cashew Gardens were not terrorized into having people grab lands and the land grab was stopped with immediate effect within one day of that committee convening.

So that is the resolve of this Government to protect law and order and to protect the squatters, the vulnerable. People are there not because they like the view, not because they feel they have a better water supply or that the roads leading there are better—

Mr. Sharma: Because they have a better MP.

Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: They are there in many—it is being suggested that because they want to be in Caroni Central. But the point is that they are there because there is little choice. Many times you, the family is made up of single mothers, it is made up of broken families who are the victims of fire, burglary, crimes in the country, and they would be seeking to make a living, to have a shelter, and the engagement of this Government is to begin the process of legalization at the desperate stage at where it is, to treat with the reality of the society and to begin introducing the person who is disadvantaged and who is in a very vulnerable position to the process of legalization.

And there is the *raison d'être* of the certificate of comfort in the last UNC administration, with pioneers like their Minister at that time, John Humphrey, who

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must be remembered for his strong advocacy, for the protection of the rights of the vulnerable in society, of the landless. In fact, in their own way, with others, they formed what was the Sou-Sou Lands Project which was to get together interested citizens and persons who wanted to make a change in the society, and at that time they were in the Opposition and dealing with a very, very arrogant and dismissive PNM Government that did not want to deal with the poor people in the society and engaged the real issues that were confronting poor people. And they bought lands, the Sou-Sou Lands in fact bought lands in the country, got together as a cooperative, and bought lands and started to sell those lands to persons who did not have.

Mr. Sharma: Subsidized rates.

Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And, again, in Caroni Central and in many other areas we have the Sou-Sou Lands Community of Carlsen Field, and I am sure in many areas you have the Sou-Sou Lands.

Mr. Sharma: Subsidized rates.

Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And this Government has been able—the Member for Fyzabad is pointing out that it was at a subsidized rate that they were selling the land and we have to come in now and help to develop those lands, that project. The idea behind it was to help those that were vulnerable in the society. And so, what the Minister is doing, is expanding, amplifying and creating new opportunity for many others who are unable to benefit from the good piece of legislation that was introduced in that time of 1998, the squatter regularisation Act of 1998.

And certainly it is not only in this sector that the Government, as previous speakers have indicated, the baby grant for children and babies under the age of one. People all over the country are now finding the forms, going to the social welfare office. The policy was criticized, but very often in Trinidad and Tobago when a policy is new it is treated with scepticism. But now we are seeing persons at our offices and you can help them with food, you can help them to repair their home if the roof is leaking because that will lead to diseases, environmental conditions that are unfavourable, that could lead to illnesses of children going to school and persons working.

You can help them with a medical grant. You can get an access to the hospitals, the External Patient Programme. It is not available in the hospital. This is the spectrum of assistance that is available under this Government. A real era of caring. An era of caring that embraces the individual that is in need and certainly if a child requires lifesaving surgery, under this Government 100 children have

benefited. Those children would not have been here today, in 2015, had the Prime Minister not taken the brave and bold decision to create a Children's Life Fund—*[Interruption]* once you are a citizen of this country.

And you know, it is interesting that we have to now advertise, and I am saying that as a Government we now have to advertise that these benefits are for only citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Just yesterday at my constituency office, a citizen of another country is clamouring, why I cannot benefit from all of these things that is happening in this country, because she preserved her citizenship, because she has a link with her country. She loves where she came from. She is married to a Trinidadian, does not want to change her citizenship, but is relishing the opportunities that exist in this society.

And I recall, similarly, a guy who is resident in this country and from Kenya. And he met me, and while we were having these Outreach Programmes he said, man, you giving away money in this country. You giving away money. He said in his country they could only dream of a house repair grant. They could only dream of a food card.

In many of our Caribbean islands they had invited this country to come and share what is the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, what we call the food card. To share the ideas because it is being spoken about at a world forum, in the fight against hunger, and Trinidad and Tobago with the School Feeding Programme, with the Food Card Programme, it is excelling in terms of nutrition, in terms of the fight against diseases, the fight against hunger because every 10 seconds in the world someone dies of hunger. While I am speaking to you in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker, many have died. And in Trinidad and Tobago they die, they may die of many things.

But in terms of our schoolchildren, in the School Feeding Programme, in terms of vulnerable families, poor families, persons who have become unemployed and do not have a source of income, the Food Card Programme is a saviour to these families and many MPs now have access to what was an innovative product which is called the temporary food card that understands that you cannot postpone hunger. Hunger, you cannot tell hunger make an appointment with me tomorrow at nine o'clock. "Ah hungry man is a man that must be fed." A hungry family must be treated with. Governments in the run-up to election promised to serve the people and to ensure that they are taken care of and this Government has ensured that food security, food availability for the poor and the oppressed is there for every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

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Indeed, the Member of Parliament for Oropouche East was quite correct when he signalled that this Government has looked at the social safety net and modified it many times. Not only by including new products, but we increased the grants that existed by 100 per cent and so enabled people to get real benefits. Many times persons would not have utilized the funeral grant, because they figure it would not even be able to bury someone. You would not even be able to get the necessities to bury the dead in an honourable way. It is this Government that increased it to \$7,000 where persons are able to have a respectable amount of money, and therefore the medical grant had been increased to \$2,500. Some of these figures were \$800. These things were—they were unable to do what they were intended to do.

Mr. Speaker: This is a good time for us to suspend to have some tea. This sitting is now suspended until 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Caroni Central. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and let me get back to where I was. Indeed, I had outlined the philosophy of this Government to help the needy and the vulnerable in society and, certainly, we will remember from our school days that the most important things in life would be food, clothing and shelter, and in this instance, food, I indicated that we have targeted a conditional cash transfer programme that has been modified, that has been innovative, that you can meet someone in need and give them assistance through the temporary food card, which is one of the best social innovations in this part of the world, in the western hemisphere.

The Government moved persons who were vulnerable and in need of food, from a figure of some 25,000 to now 40,000 persons, who can get assistance, and they also removed, by the systematic audit review, some 8,000 persons and took away the smart card from the smart men and created what is the temporary food card programme that enables the MPs and councillors to give support at a moment's notice.

Shelter is an incorporation of both land and house. The Minister of Housing and Urban Development has revolutionized the distribution process [*Desk thumping*] for housing, and is now giving 100 per week. This gives people hope. This gives people the feeling that they could be next, and many who never thought that it would be possible every Saturday—and I know when the Minister

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started this, there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm. I really applaud the staff members of the Housing Development Corporation for working five days a week and finding that Saturday. And I have been to one of those functions.

Indeed, at Cashew Gardens North, we have the HDC development, and I saw the staff working very, very hard to ensure that every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed so that the regulations, the process is one that is transparent; it is one that is accountable and it is one that the population can see that it is a process where the needy is engaged.

This year is landmark legislation and, you know, this Minister is very unique in bringing concepts in land, that have never existed in Trinidad and Tobago, to fruition. I want to say that, again, about three weeks ago in Chaguanas at Centre Pointe Mall in the auditorium, we had some 300 or 400 persons there in the audience. Minister Ramdial was there, along with Minister Indarsingh and others, and for five hours these persons, they went through the training programme, they went through an initiation programme, an induction programme, and they sat there from two o’clock to half past 10 in the night, and what they received was 199 years lease for a piece of land that they only had a certificate of comfort for. That is revolutionary.

And here it is, the Minister now bringing in legislation that will impact on some 60,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Many constituencies for the first time—the name of streets in their communities that have been clamouring for help. Every time the Member of Parliament goes there they will say, “Wey yuh doin fer us? Yuh know, we know we are a squatter development. Well, listen, squatter does vote. We exercise our democratic right to choose our representatives and to choose a government that serves us and we want that government that we support; we want them to support us.”

This piece of legislation, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill of 2015 that amends that Act of 1998 is the piece of legislation that speaks to the inclusion of communities that were disadvantaged, that did not have security of tenure and speaks pointedly to those squatters that, “You are people too”.

You see, Mr. Speaker, social ills are a product not only of economic circumstances, but when the environment is challenged, when there is flooding because of unplanned developments. People put up a shack and the next fella put up a shack right next to him, and then if “it have” some natural obstacle, they get away from that and they build in the low land, and it is unplanned. So there are no

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drains, and if drains have to pass from one neighbour to a next, there are disputes. And you have settling of water; you have stagnant water; you have dengue and you have medical problems in the community.

You have environmental problems, you have sewerage problems, you have outdoor toilet facilities, the whole nine yards, and that leads to social ills. That leads to people being displaced from the society, not having a fair chance and opportunity at good existence for their family, and this legislation is one that breaks that ground and brings these squatter communities into the mainstream of development in those constituencies and, by and large, into the national mainstream of development.

I want to commend the Minister of Works and Infrastructure for serving some of these communities with infrastructure, with roads and materials when he was there in local government, particularly, servicing these areas to try and bring them up to par. Well what this legislation does is gives them the right to now apply for the certificate of comfort, that they could not—because they were left out because of the time barrier in the legislation. The legislation only worked for persons at that time, in 1998, but now we have moved this date to 2014. And so, persons who are captured over the last year, who have been living there, they now have new opportunity to gain the right to not being evicted, and that is what a certificate of comfort is.

If we look in the Bill at clause 11(1), we will see:

“A Certificate of comfort—

(a) confirms protection from ejection pursuant to section 4(1);”

In this piece of legislation it is being amended, 11(1)(a) confirms protection from ejection, and:

“(b)...a personal right to protection from ejection.”

But 11(2) says—and this is very unique as well, in the Bill:

“Within three years from the commencement of the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Amendment) Act, 2015...a squatter to whom section 4(1)”—and the Minister spent some time on this as to who is a squatter—“applies, shall apply to the Land Settlement Agency or the”—Tobago House of—“Assembly for the issue of a Certificate of comfort...”

So there is a prescription, there is a method by which the Minister, by Order, can ensure that this person is included once they give a sworn declaration and checks

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are made with two deponents who are not relatives, to attest to the fact that the squatter was in actual occupation.

So I think it is legislation that really captures what has been a vacuum in our development. We recall, with horror, the way that the previous PNM administration would demolish homes. In my possession here, 2008, by Laurel Williams of the *Newsday*:

“Twenty-two Williamsville residents, including children were left homeless”—this is June 28, 2008—“after a demolition crew from the Land Settlement Agency broke down their homes yesterday... The angry squatters said they felt they were being victimized and discriminated by the Government as they claimed other squatting communities in PNM constituencies were not being demolished.”

On May 05, 2004:

“Despite probe, some came tumbling down

Squatters said a demolition crew converged on Union Hall settlement at...9 a.m. and broke down four structures.”

He said NHA officials were present at the first demolition.

“We are only hearing about relocation, but no one tells us when and how we will be moved.

“If the UNC was in office,”—Baksh said—that is Sen. Baksh said—“not a single house of any squatter would have been broken down in this... way.”

And I referred earlier to the MP for Diego Martin West, Dr. Rowley who continued to tell the squatters—and this is August 26, 2006:

Do not feel that going to the media will legalize your situation.

Well, they have not gone to the media; they have gone to the Minister of Land and Marine Resources; they have gone to the Prime Minister and they have said, “Prime Minister, you promised in the 2010 Manifesto, prosperity for all. You promised in the local government after, the flagship of human development. You continue to give us food for the needy in the society through the Food Card Programme, and you are improving that Programme by including the temporary food card, removing those who do not belong in the system—the smart men, from the Smart Cards. You are going biometric where people no longer have to have an actual card, but with their fingerprint they can access food and groceries.” So they are embracing the technology.

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I also want to compliment the Minister, and in this Bill there has been so much utilization of technology that exists in the world that is now being applied here, that will make the system more scientific, that no longer you will have to have testimonies from persons and ad hoc reliance on statements, but you will have geographical information systems, the mapping, the surveys will be done, and it is prescribed in the legislation as to a process that will create transparency, equity, fairness and justice for all.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Fyzabad.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (Fyzabad): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, what is perhaps most important in Trinidad and Tobago, in keeping with the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, the preamble to the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago talks about the resources of the State should be so spent that it reaches out to all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The resources of the State would also include land, especially state land. This legislation that is being considered here today is the most important piece of legislation for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Today we are talking about 60,000 squatters on state lands who are going to be treated with.

What is the intention of Government the world over? Or what is the noble intention of the current Government of Trinidad and Tobago? It is to treat with every citizen. For the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, and in the governance of, perhaps, any country in the world, we are seeing the intention of the Government, making sure the resources reach out to every single one. The other speakers indicated how we have been doing this. What this means for the 60,000 squatters? Today, we want our children to go to school. It means to say, the children in these 60,000 families, they are attending school somewhere, and after SEA examinations they receive a laptop. Every single home will now be able to obtain electricity without fear or favour because it is now legislation.

5.15 p.m.

In fact, earlier today the hon. Minister for Public Utilities indicated a programme, so that when we give the children computers we know they can access electricity. We want to make sure—in fact, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago, under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, indicated that no citizen would be left without the resources of the State, meaning that person would be able to obtain electricity.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of some history, when we revisit what obtained in this country in terms of representation, some years ago the Member for Siparia, in another hat that she wears which is that of an attorney-at-law, represented squatters. In fact, some of those who were represented came from the constituency of Fyzabad. I can recall those persons coming to the hard-working MP office in Fyzabad to make sure that they obtain assistance, and the hard-working Member of Parliament made sure they got the resources because one of the things that we did was to network and I wanted to make sure that we could get a bright lawyer, as the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre will say in his younger days, “he was able to access the services of a young bright lawyer”.

Some years later, I was able to get that for the members of my community, and I recalled Pearlie Ramnarine and her family in Darsan Trace, in South Oropouche, unable because the squatters were being treated differently by the then Government. In fact, if you look at an article that appeared in 2008, 22 Williamsville residents including children were left homeless. Their homes were broken down. The only common thread here is the PNM was in Government, and we must pray, Mr. Speaker, that the PNM never returns to Government. It is not good for Trinidad and Tobago, and this is very, very visible. When you go back to the articles that appeared in any one of the newspapers, 2004:

“Despite the ordering of a probe by Prime Minister Patrick Manning into”—homes being broken down—“in his own constituency, in the constituency of San Fernando East, make-shift”—homes—“came tumbling down again yesterday...”

So that once the PNM is there, the PNM does not care about people, especially small people.

We were in Opposition then, the Member for Siparia, Kamla Persad-Bissessar was in Opposition and—in fact, there was an article that appeared—for some reason I do not have the date. It says *Daily Express*—oh—June 30, 2011, and this is a judgment delivered by the High Court:

“...last Friday has given Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar another legal victory in a defence of hundreds of squatters whose homes were destroyed by the...LSA”—then.

So again, you are seeing the level of representation, and what that translated into, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, then Opposition Member becoming Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and from day one every single citizen of this country enjoys

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the benefit of the State, which is what the Constitution intended, the framers of the Constitution. The spirit of the Constitution was to make sure that the resources reach out to every single family.

In fact, in another article that appeared on Friday, September 12, 2008, is a judgment and the judge is saying:

“In the presence of this Minister...”—one—“Osley Francis in some kind of imported accent said, ‘We have a duty under the law’. Do you know what that duty was? Do not allow”—the—“people to take up their pitch-oil stoves...”

Mr. Speaker, pitch-oil stove, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, no more pitch-oil stove under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Every family has a good stove.

“...blankets, covers and pillows. The police moved them out of their little shacks; tied ropes on them and pulled them down.”

This is what obtained under the PNM.

I want to tell the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, an election is going to come sooner than later. Make sure, pray, do not vote for the PNM. We have to live in this country. All our citizens must be loved and cared for, and the demonstration of that love and care that reaches out, that touches the hearts of every single one, obtains from Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government. [*Desk thumping*]

“The matter is before the court. Yesterday, Justice Jamadhar issued an”—interim—“injunction saying that you cannot break the houses.”

He goes on to say:

“My distinguished friend for Siparia was the attorney in the matter. I congratulate her...”

That attorney was Kamla Persad-Bissessar. That is the person who is going to be Prime Minister from 2015—2020, making sure every single [*Desk thumping*] squatter in this country obtains justice at all times. At no time must any citizen of this country go to sleep, or a father goes to work and is uncertain what is going to happen.

Today, five years into Government, we can bring legislation. It is not only the legislation, it is what is being provided and the Preamble to the Constitution makes that point. The Preamble to the Constitution talks about the resources. Today, every citizen can access a roadway, can access water, electricity, the child can go to a school from kindergarten go right up. This is perhaps the only

Government in the world, in a short five years—look what we have been able to achieve: baby grant—when that baby is born, that baby’s family can obtain a baby grant; soon after a child has to go to early childhood care it is available free of charge; after that elementary school, free of charge, public transport available, breakfast—what is the plural?—available, teaching aid. Today, under the leadership of the Member for Caroni East, the hon. Minister of Education, Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, on a global stage in every examination written in this country, local and foreign, we are tops in every examination whether it is the LLB, accounting exams, degrees through the various universities, CAPE. Every single exam making sure that the children are well educated.

We go further. This is the judgment of Justice Jamadhar:

“I want to tell you something. You will not believe people are living in places that the LSA went to break down. You will never believe that people could live there and yet they find them. They pulled them down. In the presence of the Minister who is telling me that we have to talk to the Prime Minister;...”

Well, we do not have to talk to the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to do what is right. She demands that we do right. Under this Government for the last five years, you have not heard about squatters’ homes being broken down. What you are hearing is squatters are being treated with, their homes are getting electricity, their kids are going to school, we are making sure PTSC under Minister Cadiz—I left very good work there. He just has to continue, and he is doing a good job making sure the buses go out there [*Crosstalk*] and take the kids to school.

“we may need to change the legislation...”

They were saying this. Years ago they did absolutely nothing. Citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, wherever you are, PNM is bad news for Trinidad, and Tobago. There is no love in their hearts, no compassion. Look at the difference, Mr. Speaker. Look at the difference that obtains today.

“We may need to change the legislation or extend the period to cover those people who would have been covered under the certificate of comfort.

On several accounts we have enough justification to question the credibility of the leader of this country...”

That is about the PNM.

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Mr. Speaker, there are several matters and another matter:

“WHILE a San Fernando judge heard a lawsuit brought by...squatters from San Fernando...”

While he is hearing that under the PNM, NHA teams are breaking down homes. You will not find that under Dr. Roodal Moonilal, the current Minister of Housing and Urban Development, because he knows what the Government’s policy is. Legislation carries you to the spirit of care, and every citizen must know that the Government of the day must subscribe to that and must not have to go to court for that. Today, we do not want to have this happening because we are busy making sure we deliver goods and services to every single citizen.

Mr. Speaker, I want to lend support to this legislation. As a long-standing Member of this House, I feel very honoured that this legislation has come. Sixty thousand families, you are good under Kamla Persad-Bissessar. Rest assured we will take care of you. Your children will go to school, they will go to university, they will become the leaders of tomorrow of this country and they will sit in this Parliament one day. They may sit in the chair you are now sitting, Mr. Speaker. Under this Government everyone has an equal chance of goodness.

Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Minister of National Diversity and Social Integration.

The Minister of National Diversity and Social Integration (Hon. Rodger Samuel): Mr. Speaker, I want to give thanks for the opportunity to partake and be part of this debate with regard to the amendment re: the squatter regularization issues of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Mr. Speaker, in the midst of that, I want to thank and commend the Minister and the team from the Ministry of Land and Marine Resources as well as the bodies that are directly under the remit of the Ministry, the Land Settlement Agency, the Commissioner of State Lands and all of the agencies that worked tediously and have worked tremendously hard over the last couple of years to bring about the kind of change that we see today with regards to the regularization process and with regard to the changing of the lives of so many of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, among the many rights and freedoms that are there in the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is the right of an individual to life, liberty, security of person and the enjoyment of property and the right not to

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be deprived of these except by due process of law. Not only that, the right to equality before the law and the protection of the law and the right to respect for your private and family life.

It is so important for us to remember that because in so many instances—and I have always said it and I have said it before—one of the terms I use painfully and I wish we never have to use the term “squatter” because it is a painful thing for those who are described by society as squatters. Mr. Speaker, that term has attached to it and connected to it an attitude by those who look down at people, it has ascribed to it and attached to it a sense of discrimination, it has attached to it a sense of people who see others who are unfortunate and have to live on lands that are not their own as less than they are and lower in regard to how they are in their physical depositions.

Mr. Speaker, so I would not use the term. I will talk about people who are living on lands that are not their own, rather than use the term “squatter” because when you think about the word “squat” in its sense, it does not talk about somebody that is standing upright. Even in a form of physical exercising terminology the word “squat” talks about crouching and a position with the knees bent to the buttocks.

5.30 p.m.

It gives the idea of a lowly kind of disposition and when we use the term “squatter”, we, in our own minds, are actually saying that these people cannot stand upright, they must be bowed down and they must be looked down upon. To me, that is how the word was derived, and so I will not consider people like that because I believe that every government has the right to lift its people up and make sure its citizens can walk upright and make sure they can live uprightly and we must do and put all the necessary mechanisms in place to ensure that nobody is kept bent down, nobody is kept bowed down, nobody is kept below others but we must be willing to lift the lowest to the highest.

I want to look at it from that standpoint because of the stigma that is attached to squatting, the stigma that is attached to the word and people who live on lands that are stigmatized. In many instances, if you think about the kind of descriptive names given to the areas where people live on lands that are not their own, you would realize that even the descriptive names have a stigma in itself. So, from the time you say I am living “so and so”, people know you are one of those, you are one of the bend-down people, you are one of the lowly people, you are one of the persons in our society who are feasting off the society, you are not upright, you are

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not giving back to the society. You are one of those people that we have to watch kind of closely because you all are troublemakers. That is what the term describes and unfortunately so-called upright citizens have that mentality.

I was speaking to an individual who lives in my constituency and we have 13 such sites in my constituency and they are afraid. Sometimes when they describe themselves—one person said we no longer consider ourselves to be described by this way, we want to be known as Santa Rosa East, rather than Demerara. Because it is a stigma.

Even this morning I was listening to the radio and the talk about regularization of citizens from that standpoint was being discussed on one of the stations and somebody called in and said these people, something is wrong, why are we doing that? Why are we regularizing people? Not only that, they pass by some place and somebody who had been regularized had elevated themselves over a period of time, not over a month or two, over years and eventually probably they lifted up their lifestyles to the extent that they were able to build a high-rise house and stuff and now they are saying: “no, the Government should go and revisit him”, as if a person who lives on land like that must always remain bowed down, must always live in a shack, must always live in some little lowly place and nothing to call a real home. That seems to be the psyche and the mindset of the average citizen; they must stay down. As long as you receive land, as long as you receive a certificate of comfort, as long as you got a deed of lease. By the way, it is not free.

The same way that the State is subsidizing the cost of the land, it is the same way “we squatting for gas” because we are subsidizing gas. We are squatting too. We are squatters with everything else because a lot of other things are being subsidized.

Mr. Speaker, the idea of squatting is nothing new. The idea of dwelling in some place that is not your own is nothing new. From since creation that has been happening. As a matter of fact, all species squat. You look up in your attic, the birds are squatting. You look in your yard the animals come and squat because they have a sense of wanting to find a place that they call their own. That is a normal trend and sometimes we catch the birds, as young people, and we hold them in a cage because they are squatting for too long and we have the young. We do things. Yeah, we jail them and we feel that is something new. It is nothing new.

Unfortunately it is how we think in our society, how we think about people. It is so wrong to think like that. Because we need to be a society that cares for each other. It is Mahatma Gandhi who said that you know a society by the way it treats its dogs. You know how high they are and how strong they are and how loving they are and how

caring they are; how they treat their animals. These are not animals, these are human beings, citizens who are paying their taxes and who are doing what is necessary. Unfortunately, for some of them they were not born with gold spoons and inheritances as some people are born with. We should not look down on them, as so many have done in the past, but they are citizens and many of them are upright citizens in Trinidad and Tobago and they are giving back to Trinidad and Tobago the way every citizen ought to give back to Trinidad and Tobago.

So we must not stigmatize people on our own archaic and wrong views of the human society. We must not do that and if we continue doing that, then Mr. Speaker, we would all find ourselves in a way where we feel upright citizens only live in a certain part of the country and those that are lowly live in other parts. But I could tell you, you might have more upright people living in the lowly parts and we have to be very careful of how it is.

So I will speak about the idea of people who occupy land that is not their own and now it is the duty of the Government, based on their promises, to now help these people reach a sense of security and protect them. It is not just protecting those that dwell now. It is about protecting generations. Because if you begin to now protect those that dwell now and you concretize and give them a foundation, what you are doing is affecting generations down the road, because within all of us there is what is called the unborn generations that are waiting; a generation waiting to be born in our children and in our children's children. They are waiting to be born. And what we do with their parents will send a strong message for generations that we did not want them to live in the same old way where their parents began, but that they can now take over from where their parents have reached and that is why this programme is so vital.

Somebody asked about how the education process has been taking place. Mr. Speaker, in my constituency alone the LSA and HDC had been coming into the constituency and having several meetings with each of the settlements that are under this Act, and having dialogue with them and showing them the processes and what the stages are. I am glad, Mr. Speaker, because many folks had difficulties because the restrictions were for 1998 and 2000. Many of them were uneducated and unaware of the process of applications and many of them never applied. This opens up the avenue because that is where the education process had been taken.

I want to commend the Ministry and LSA and HDC. Why? Because we were out there on weekends. We would start on a morning and the team would be there, the team from LSA. HDC sent up a unit and they were on weekends going from

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settlement to settlement having dialogue with the people and setting up, subsequent to that, times when they would send their team in to go and help the people ensure that all of their documentations are correct.

This is something that is fantastic for the community. People are now having a sense of hope. You know what hope is? It is a joyful anticipated expectation. That is what it is. It gives the notion of a little bird waiting with its beak open for the mother to fly in with a worm; anticipated expectation, joyfulness. This is giving hope to people. The fact that the LSA can come into the communities and work with the people and then subsequent to that set up for two days in the community and people can come there and have their registrations rectified and their information. That is fantastic. It gives hope.

Which government does not want to give hope to a society? This Government does. Show them the stages. The first stage is the COC but then that is not the end product because the end product is to give you your deed of lease to ensure, at the end of the day, you have some kind of title or some kind of ownership. That is what is important but it begins somewhere. So they have been educating. And I want to commend them for that, for taking their weekends. Sometimes they would have journeyed from four or five different locations and not close locations anyway and they sat there with all the patience and worked with the people. That is the kind of attitude we want in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, because once a squatter is not always a squatter. We have the tendency to believe that, once you are that way you would always remain that way, yet we want change in our society. The first thing we have to change is how we think about people. Because all of us were not born in jacket and tie. We were not born like this and some of us have been through tremendous struggles and we appreciate it when somebody else stretches out a hand to help. There is an old song that says if I could help somebody along the way then my living is not in vain, and I like that because they have been helping. The workers at LSA have been helping and they have been pooling and coming out and working feverishly to help others along the way. Why? Because we must not leave people the way we met them. We must always leave them in a better situation and a better condition.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation and the amendments are so necessary, are so needed today. It is needed because it is a revolutionized kind of approach to dealing with people and giving people a second chance. Because the first chance left a lot out. A lot of people were left out, based on the first aspects of it. People were worried. They were tremendously worried. Over and over, people would come to me and ask: "So what happened? I did not register in the first period, what will

become of me?” Sometimes you have a community where, you know, 60 to 70 per cent did not register during the first period and they are all worried. When you have a worried community you have a troubled community because people are concerned about what will become of them. Then you have the tendency of people feeling left behind because others are getting through and we are not and we are being left. This amendment will take care of people. It will alleviate the fears of those people who were living fearful all the time and that is what we need because a government must alleviate the fears of its citizens.

Mr. Speaker, I commend this work. I have been close to the work because they have been working close with me, with the 13 settlements in my constituency, 13. Thirteen for, if we would use the term, for “donkey years” people struggling. There are people that are living on those sites for 40 and 50 years and they have no sense of security, no sense of protection. They always feel that something will happen to me, something will happen to my children, and in so doing affect the generations that are coming.

Mr. Speaker, I could tell you, many of them are concerned as to what will happen in this election because if this thing does not continue with us and we do not move on, they see trouble. The fear steps in again, that people would say you have to be back because this thing has to continue. It has to reach its ultimate goal and it tells you what is happening.

When we think about what this legislation does, we think about the fact that the Government has people at heart. That is what is important, people, people-centred governance and it is important for us to know that. Because everything we have done—we have increased so many things, we have opened up doors for so many things—it takes a person living in absolute darkness not to see.

This country has benefited from this Government and from the leadership of this Government, from the passion and the compassion of the leader, the Prime Minister of this Government. They have benefited significantly. And in the midst of all of the economic things around the world, the heart and the passion is still there, not to interfere with what now directly affects people. Do not interfere with the social programmes. Do not interfere with these programmes that will cause people to be comforted. That is a strong position for a leader. One thing you know this is no sales thing. This is no cut and slash situation. This is about directing and moving in the direction with vision and it is important for us to see that, Mr. Speaker.

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5.45 p.m.

So food, shelter and clothing, Mr. Speaker, protection, security, is in the heart of every citizen. Nobody wants to lose what they have, and we want to ensure that people who live on lands that is not their own, state lands, and they fulfil all of the requirements, that they too will not lose what they have been occupying, or that piece of land that the law says—I think it is 5,000 square feet or no more than 5,000 square feet—that they too can benefit, and they too—and some of them, Mr. Speaker, in their old age. We must take note of that.

I have met people 60 and 70 years old, 80 years old, who have been living on lands that are not their own for 45 years, 50 years. I mean, I sometimes go to the distributions of certificates of comfort, and I see people in tears. In tears, hugging this piece of paper, because this is like gold to a person who felt that they had nothing, and that everybody else looked down at them, and discriminated against them, and stigmatized them, and said all kinds of stuff about them.

Now, they have some semblance of security to say, okay, with this, they will not move me. Now, I have hope to move to the next stage, to the next level, and become all that I dreamt to be 40/50/60 years ago. That is peace and joy. That is comfort. That is security of mind. That is changing the dynamics and the dispositions of an entire community, an entire society. Could you imagine 200/300 persons are being regularized, and having the impact of having something that they can call their own? Could you imagine the change that can take place? Because now they can rest assured that, “ayeh”, my place will not be broken down. I would not be set out on the streets, and then my children’s children, can have some aspect of security.

So again, I want to commend the Minister and the team under his remit, and I would say to him, let us not stop at COCs. Let us go full speed into giving people their deed of lease.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Gender, Youth and Child Development (Hon. Clifton De Coteau): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to join this debate and lend support to my colleague, the Minister of Land and Marine Resources, MP for La Horquetta/Talparo, on this critical piece of legislation, entitled, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill, 2015.

I say this because not only giving support to him, but to those over 16 squatter sites in my constituency that I will come to later in my address. As stipulated by

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my colleagues and for the benefit of the listening public, and Mr. Speaker, if you should find me regurgitating some of the things that my colleagues would have said before, I was not in the Chamber, because I was with the hon. Prime Minister, opening the first assessment centre to the bedrock of our nation those—children. So if you find me regurgitating it—but then again, the educator that I am, repetition leads to retention. [*Laughter*] So let me regurgitate.

So I reiterate, that this Bill seeks to amend the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Certificate of comfort) Regulations, Chap. 57:05, and to revoke Legal Notice No. 151 of 1999, Legal Notice No. 134 of 2000 and Legal Notice No. 135 of 2000.

Mr. Speaker, let me place on the record that I am no lawyer per se. You may call me a bush lawyer, but I do not think that is acceptable like the “n” word. I am an herbal lawyer. [*Laughter*] I am not a bush lawyer. I am an herbal lawyer. [*Laughter*] Apart from laity in the listening public, it is critical [*Interruption*] that I am legally correct, when quoting regulations and legal notices, as those legal gurus in the public space tuning in, they probably train their verbal guns at me.

Mr. Speaker, the highest levels of performance come to people who are centred, intuitive, creative and reflective, people who know to see a problem as an opportunity. Deepak Chopra, author, public speaker said that you must see a problem or as I said, a challenge, as an opportunity. I say unequivocally, and most proudly, that those profound words are the hallmark of this administration, under the visionary leadership of the Member for Siparia, the hon. Prime Minister, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who has always been a champion for the less fortunate in our society. This is undisputed and irrefutable.

It is widely known that squatters occupying state lands and gaining eligibility to be regularized, was a systemic problem requiring those with the political will, visionary lens, and proactive strides to address this problem that affected over 34,000 families. I place on the record and I say that without apology, the previous administration really did not care about those squatters. Somewhere I would want to develop the theory that there is this syndrome, this political Stockholm syndrome, where you abuse people, politically abuse them to the point, that they actually fall in love with you, you know. [*Laughter*] So, that when you say, “I would remain so and so until ah dead”; political Stockholm syndrome. Mr. Speaker, it is an “I feel hypothesis” on my part, but check it out, there is some kind of degree of truth in it, and I wish I will develop that further.

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Mr. Speaker, I am compelled, wearing the hat of a historian, to traverse what obtained and why it is imperative to treat with the amendments suggested now in order to bring much needed relief to many of our brothers and sisters throughout the sister isle. We strive to provide equity and access platforms for all of Trinidad and Tobago, echoing the penultimate line of our National Anthem, “Here every creed and race find an equal place...”

We are here to make some critical amendments to this Bill, and let me expound a little for the benefit of the listening public, and especially, again, my constituents of Moruga/Tableland who will be affected, as to the rationale as clearly as possible as many of my constituents, and I repeat, over 16 squatting communities, it would redound—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Name them.

Hon. C. De Coteau: Definitely, before I am finished, I would give you the names of all of them. Of course, I would put it on the record—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Sharma: Text it! Text it!

Hon. C. De Coteau:—for a better standard of living. Let me say to you, I am a digital native, you are a digital immigrant, who does not know about texting as yet. [*Laughter*]

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, under section 21 of the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, Chap. 57:05; Act No. 25 of 1998, the “‘appointed day’ means, 1st January, 1998;”. This needs to be changed to June 13, 2014. January 01, 1998 was the latest day that squatters could have been in occupation of state land, and be eligible to be regularized, which was a necessary condition that had to be fulfilled, to qualify in the law for regularization.

In this regard, amending the appointed day to a later date, such as the one proposed by Cabinet agreement, June 13, 2014, would now provide an opportunity for reapplication of squatters who cannot be regularized under and in accordance with the existing provisions in the Act, as it relates to squatters whose occupation of state lands were under the circumstances, such as, one, they commenced occupation after the existing appointed date; two, before the appointed date, but may have failed to make an application within the prescribed application period.

I know a number of MPs would have had people coming to their offices, and saying, “Oh, gosh, yuh know, MP, ah missed de date”, so they were in a quandary. Three, before the appointed day, but who cannot be regularized due to lack of proof or evidence, that they were in occupation before the appointed day; before the

appointed day, but the application or the applicants are now deceased and the application has not yet been determined; before the appointed day, the dwelling house existed, but who entered into occupation or acquired the dwelling house after the appointed day; before the appointed day, but whose application was incomplete, not submitted, or inherently defective.

Mr. Speaker, currently the Land Settlement Agency has determined that there are at least a number of families—I do not want to give a figure, lest I be incorrect—who made an application, including 1,000 late applications, and who cannot be regularized, as well as 30,000 families who commenced occupation of state lands after the appointed day. Mr. Speaker, I know about that only too well.

In the St. Mary's Village area, where the LSA is doing some work now in my constituency, there are a number of constituents, and as one Member said, you have to help them, because when “yuh tracking and yuh treading, and yuh going up an down” the constituency, they are important, you know. You do not look for minor road, and main road, you want all of their support, including all those persons who are squatting.

So like the previous administration, after they used them, they spit them out and they leave them there for another five years. We are saying thanks to the vision of our Prime Minister, and the good work of the Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo, we are making this a reality today. We will remove that political Stockholm syndrome from those people who are incarcerated and sometimes they do not realise how incarcerated they are. I do not want to identify communities, because they will go on the air and say, “Oh, the MP for Moruga/Tableland sayin we are dis, dat and de other”, but they know who they are. We need to take the scales off of their eyes, so that they can see clearly, and understand that we are trying to remove that political yoke that has them enslaved.

Mr. Speaker, you know, what that spells out loud and clear? We do not need to be aeronautical engineers to decipher that, but by simply changing the appointed day, to move to a more recent one, like the one proffered, June 13, 2014, would bring immense and unspoken relief to over 34,000 families who are unable presently to be regularized by the Land Settlement Agency under and in accordance with the Act.

Mr. Speaker, another dimension of bringing resolution to this whole issue is the urgent need for a more comprehensive application process, for regularization that would lend itself to a quicker determination of a squatter's eligibility.

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Mr. Speaker, as mentioned, the current application form had to be purchased by squatters as well, as it did not address important information which had to be gathered in order to process the application. The application was also in the form of a statutory declaration that could not be amended after submission. This meant that the death of an applicant or an error in the applications such as who was authorized to sign, or the addition or removal of an applicant, could not be done as this effectively nullified the application without recourse.

6.00 p.m.

You know, I remember the Minister and his team coming into the St. Mary's area and they were explaining to the people. They went into La Savvan, and they were explaining. There was such joy on the recipients' faces when they realized, you know, I can put somebody in this application: my next of kin, my son, my grandson. We are bringing relief to them.

Mr. Speaker, several applications were defective and the supporting declarations likewise. There were also some application forms in the Act made by Legal Notices No. 134 and 135 of 2000 for an application to be made by persons who purchased a dwelling house after the appointed date. This must be removed as it contradicts the provisions of the Act and the purpose of an appointed day and a period to apply for regularization.

The application, Mr. Speaker, and processing procedures should therefore be reviewed with a more thorough application form and process including a Form C being the recommender's declaration for those squatters who cannot provide proof or documents of the date of their occupation, but can get a professional to declare to such a date. Such declaration should be made by a recommender in the same categories of professionals or career ranking used when making a passport application or a pensioner's life certificate.

Any issues arising with an application should be subject to determination by the land settlement committee, the Board of the Land Settlement Agency, for all applications and all processing matters without recourse to seeking legislative review once the applicants who are in occupation of the state land or lands of state enterprises fulfil the normal eligibility requirements such as:

- (a) landless;
- (b) citizen or resident of Trinidad and Tobago; and
- (c) has met the age of legal majority.

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Mr. Speaker, designation of land settlement areas is the final arena of concern I wish to raise regarding probably the most important for the beneficiaries in my constituency. I would tell you, Mr. Speaker, in my constituency land is important, you know. I do not know, for some reason, “like all the nutrients does be in the boundary of the land”. [Laughter] Real fight, you know! Some people have a tendency, they keep cleaning and when you look sharp, if you are not around, they go straight into the other lot, but they are going to regularize that by having standard size. Sometimes you have tremendous fight.

I remember in the Valencia area, there was also death resulting, because you are fighting for that piece of land, when the only piece of land you are going to have is the piece that they are going to put you down in, but that is another time. That is to be discussed in another forum.

Mr. Speaker, you see, there is a need to designate as land settlement areas, vacant lots, land whenever produced, yielded during the course of development whether in greenfield sites or existing designated areas, sites for regularization of squatters. Mr. Speaker, moreover, the designation of land settlement areas will undoubtedly strengthen the land for the landless policy: Residential Lots Programme, including the village component where that successful policy would become supported by the LSA Act and beneficiaries would then be able to receive 199 year leases executed by the Land Settlement Committee Chairman, in the same manner as they regularize eligible squatters as is provided for having been so empowered by the President.

Mr. Speaker, currently without the declaration of land settlement areas, persons who can be deemed eligible for leasehold tenure in accordance with the Land for the Landless policy or regularized sites fall outside of the jurisdiction of the LSA and are constrained to be issued, all things being equal, 30 year leases from the Commissioner of State Lands under the provisions of the State Lands Act. The entire existing schedule of designated area is also to be declared as land settlement areas.

Mr. Speaker, again, in my constituency, it was absolutely necessary for the land settlement members to come in about three or four times to explain to members of the constituency, because clearly some of them did not comprehend it initially. How does this help us with that political syndrome? How does it help us with that political Stockholm syndrome?

Mr. Speaker, have you ever really realized some of those people who still remained committed, totally committed to the other side, have been so neglected?

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They live in depressed areas. It reminds me so much of when I was a little fellow. My old man called me and he said: “Coteau, look all yuh bank dey”. And he pointed to me the outhouse we had at the time and he said: “Yuh see you all”—and he was a visionary then. It was a PNM house, you know. He said: “PNM causing we to eat well, defecate well and dai we bank dey, we put everything in dat place dey”. Mr. Speaker, that is a political Stockholm syndrome.

You know, they incarcerate you, then they give you a little bit and you feel it is a God-given thing, “a lil cacada”, as you say, rightly. You become so dependent, a little trip and you fall in love with your abuser and that is what is happening. This would help to remove that political Stockholm syndrome. People are incarcerated. I have people from my constituency giving testimonies saying: “I never supported De Coteau in 2010; for 40, 50 years, I have been supporting this particular administration. They never gih meh nothing for meh children. I have 13 children, they never gih meh nothing. They had all their Christmas party this, that and the other. All around my house I had their symbol planted right down in mey little cave land. What did I get?” But we in the People’s Partnership were able to help to break that cycle to get them out of that political Stockholm syndrome. And do you know what they are saying now? “If I did not know the spiritual father, and I did not know that spiritual heaven, I would have said, I am in heaven. Thanks to the PP Government. Thanks to the PP Government”.

You know, when they take the scales off your eyes and you are seeing so clearly. You know, there was an advertisement where the man say: “I can see clearly now.” Some of them, now that we have broken the Stockholm syndrome, the political Stockholm syndrome, they are seeing clearly, politically clearly but, what do you think? They believe that they have you so politically “basodie”, they can neglect you totally for five years and come back to you and say: “Support us”. But, more so than that, they encourage you to be dishonest—“Take what they could give yuh and vote for we.” You believe it, you know. So, you take what can be given to you that would help to uplift you and help to uplift your community and you go back incarcerating yourself.

You know, when the psychiatrist Nils Bejerot and Dr. Frank Ochberg, when the people experienced what they say is a kind of infantilization, they are like a child, they are unable to eat, speak or go to the toilet without permission, and when they get little small acts of kindness, it prompts a primitive gratitude. I am saying a primitive political gratitude, it prompts for a gift. “You gih a lil 10 days” and the dependency syndrome and that primitive political gratitude, you hold on to that and you say: “I am a certain thing until ah dead” and you dying and you walking dead.

You see those people out there—you know, there was a demonstration “an when I look, is people like mehself, seniors; couldn hold it well”, it fell out her hand and I had to pick her up, but the younger people are not seeing that, you know. They are not so incarcerated. They are seeing differently.

Mr. Speaker, so that my constituents would be very happy for this, for those designated areas to be declared land settlement areas in Moruga/Tableland, and as I was challenged by the Member of Parliament for Couva South, one of the areas: Bla Cha Cha Trace, Basse Terre, Cachipe in Moruga, Douglas Trace in Moruga, Herrera and Remy Trace off Penal Road, going down Penal Rock Road. I would tell you something, you know, 14 acres of land the people are occupying around the savannah. Fourteen acres! Not one could say: “I could give this to my child.” You know something, Mr. Speaker, that area was a total base for the former administration.

You know something, I was very happy to hear when the community council from that area contacted me and told me: “MP, we have taken a decision, we endorse you as the candidate again.” The point is what I am saying, that people are seeing, you know why? For years their area was in a totally dilapidated state, poor infrastructure, landslip upon landslip, poor drainage, no lights, no water and they were happy. [*Crosstalk*] Yes, we were the landslip capital, the constituency—253 landslips, 93 on the Moruga Road alone; 16 in Lonnen Road, but people were happy with that.

What amazes me, people did nothing for them and they are still coming back. You see, we come back to the syndrome, the political Stockholm syndrome, if you could coin such a thing. You are abused. It is like a kind of domestic violence, you are abused and then you say: “He is a nice man yuh know. Is just that he does hit meh now and again, you know, but he really love meh.” [*Laughter*] That is what we find. That is the reality out there. How do you break that?

Mr. Speaker, so as I was saying, through you, to the Member of Parliament for Couva South: Lagoon Trace; Penal Rock Road again, Quanafan Village in Quanafan, beautiful area; Rock River in Moruga; Samuel Cooper Trace; Seashore Line Gran Chemin, White Trace and William Trace. Mr. Speaker, there are over 16 of them plus, and we are trying to lift the standard, and they are appreciating it because they realize that over the years they were fooled. They were fooled! So that is why when they realize, like parts, when there was a family day and they were

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passing through St. Mary's, not a bus, not a bus, where everybody used to be in red. They know for a fact, and I can say, they gone yellow; they gone yellow. They have removed that political Stockholm syndrome. They have seen the light; they have seen a brighter day.

Mr. Speaker, what a momentous occasion as this would not only benefit the constituency of Moruga/Tableland, but extends to north and central Trinidad and other parts of south Trinidad. Mr. Speaker, I would not delve into specifics with those areas. My colleagues from the respective areas would speak of this great news.

As this administration continues its mantra of serving the people and making profound positive impact on the lives of all citizens through incremental steps in our rigorous legislative agenda with legislation like this, I want this august Chamber and the listening public to muse on the words of Paul J. Meyer, a Christian businessman who pioneered the personal development industry when he said:

“Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort.”

Mr. Speaker, are the words not the trademark of the People's Partnership Government? Mr. Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

6.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Couva North, the Minister of State in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (Hon. Ramona Ramdial): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, Mr. Speaker, let me take this opportunity to commend the Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo and the Minister of Land and Marine Resources. Mr. Speaker, I must say that amongst ourselves, as colleagues and as Members of Parliament, we have been privy to all of the hard work that the hon. Minister has been doing for the past two years, and I think he deserves special commendations for that here in the House. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I have sat and I have listened to my colleagues, and also to the Member for Chaguanas West, speak and, of course, debate on this amendment on this Bill, the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill, 2015. Mr. Speaker, as a Member of Parliament I must say that I have come across, over the past five years, horror stories from squatters within my constituency. First of all, let me identify some of the sites within my constituency

that are termed squatter settlements. One of the biggest squatter settlements in the constituency of Couva North is that of the Brickfield community or the Brickfield area. We have a huge squatter community inside there. In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, we have in areas of Lions Gate, parts of Waterloo, Carli Bay now where part of the Carli Bay community is regularized and the other part is awaiting eagerly to be regularized, and in areas of Orange Valley.

So, in a lot of the communities, within the constituency of Couva North, we have pockets of squatters on state land. I do have the problem of squatters on private land, but that is a different matter altogether, but we are dealing here with squatting on state land. Mr. Speaker, you would be amazed to hear some of these horror stories, especially from the women and the mothers of these families within these squatter communities when they give you, you know, the breakdown about the police coming in and breaking them down—not the police, the LSA police at some point in time over the years would have come and tried to remove them from their areas and from their homes, broken homes, you know, you see the mattresses on the side of the road, children are unable to go to school, and it really, really begs for the development of the socio-economic fabric of society with respect to dealing with squatters in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Prime Minister has arrived, I also want to commend the Prime Minister for, of course, in her days in Opposition also advocating for the squatter and, of course, fighting on their behalf so that they can keep their homes and their families intact. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago it has been, you know, an evolution, because you would have heard the Minister himself talk about evolution in squatting, you know, you have different types of strategies emanating from those persons who squat. One of the highlights that the Minister spoke of earlier, and he also spoke of in the media, and I want to quote his words on January 22, 2014, he made a statement where he said:

Squatting had evolved to include persons who occupy vacant lands and when they are not removed after a long period of time they go on to sell the land to the poor citizens.

And this is an evolution in squatting that we have seen in Trinidad and Tobago.

Going back to the constituency, Mr. Speaker, in my area of Couva North and in the community of Brickfield, we have a lot of that happening in the Brickfield community, where it is we have persons who take advantage of the system, or lack of system, and they go in there and they stay on lands for a long period of time. Some of these persons are well-to-do persons within the community and they have

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a certain level of leadership within the community, and a certain level of financing within the community and, therefore, they are able to stay on lands without anybody telling them anything, without the authorities getting to them, and after a period of time they would then cut the lands up into either one lot parcels, or otherwise, and sell it now to the poorer citizens who are looking for a space and a place to, of course, settle and, you know, develop their families and their environment.

So, Mr. Speaker, I mean, I do not want to be too long on this. I have heard all my colleagues before me speak and they have endorsed the Minister with respect to bringing this amendment to the House. Therefore, I, myself, want to thank the Minister as a Member of Parliament, especially, for dealing with this. The constituents of Couva North, and, by extension, all my other colleagues, are very, very happy that we are now having this Bill amended so that persons before June 2014 can now apply to, of course, get their letters of comfort, and, later on, their lease to this parcel of land. So, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank, of course, the Minister and the hon. Prime Minister for really pioneering this part and this legislation in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC): Thank you very much, hon. Speaker, for allowing me to join this debate on what I think is a very important piece of legislation for some of the most vulnerable people in our country. I want to commend the Minister of Land and Marine Resources for piloting this—[*Interruption*] I am commending the Minister for piloting this piece of legislation in our Parliament today. [*Desk thumping*] I know, together with his Ministry staff, Head of the LSA, the Chairman and the CEO, and others out of the LSA, they have worked really hard over the past several weeks [*Desk thumping*] to bring this legislation before the Parliament.

Hon. Speaker, let me just rebut some of the arguments against this piece of legislation before I go into what I see as very important in improving the quality of life of more citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Firstly, the argument is that we are rushing this piece of legislation in the last days of the Parliament. Now, I could point to many other Parliaments, not just this Tenth Parliament but previous Parliaments, where coming to the end of the life of the Parliament important pieces of legislation have been brought forward, but I will not go there, Mr. Speaker. I would go from a different angle, which is to say, looking at what has been my commitment, and, in fact, promises I have made from many moons back with

respect to squatter regularization. So this is not something just born out of the night on the last legs of this Parliament, this is something that we gave a commitment to many, many, many years ago.

Mr. Speaker, look, I have in my hand a speech that I gave in Diego Martin in 2007. In 2007 we were in Opposition. The 2007 election was in the air and this is a speech that I gave, and I just want to quote some of it. I see in our presence, I see Archbishop Barbara Gray-Burke who would have been very much aware of the work that we were doing in terms of assisting squatters, together with Mr. Junior Barrack, together with many other residents of Bagatelle in Diego Martin. So, let me just read a few of these pieces and then we are going to the meat of the legislation, the Bill before us. So here am I in Diego Martin at a Monday night forum, May 14, 2007:

My brothers and sisters, just as patriots take pride in country, so too people and families take pride in land. Land was never conceived as being separate from people. To be connected to land is like the umbilical cord that connected mother and child. The connection to land is psychological if not spiritual in nature. Some say my home is my castle, referring to one's house, others say, my land is the bosom of my mother; there I find sustenance, security and comfort. Land is like water, you need it to sustain life. It is vital. It is life-giving—that is what land does for people.

I can go on telling you all the reasons why we ought to care for our land, protect our land, respect our land, by not poisoning it. I will do more at another time. Our friends who are involved in resisting smelters will tell you more, but tonight I am going to talk about the plight of people right here in this community who are threatened with having their ties with land severed.

Mr. Rowley is suggesting they are lawbreakers—this is in 2007—Mr. Rowley is telling them that the comfort they enjoy from their land and their certificates of comfort are about to come to an end. Mr. Rowley, to pull poor people away from the land in that manner is like snatching babies out of incubators. Mr. Rowley, you are the bond who will be breaking a much higher law if you act in an inhumane way as you are now threatened. My brothers and sisters, this is a campaign that Mr. Manning and Mr. Rowley intend to wage across Trinidad and Tobago to disconnect people and sever bonds with the lands that have been sustaining them.

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I went on, Mr. Speaker—this, again, I say is in 2007, when I said:

A UNC Government will address housing needs as well as land needs. Bricks and mortar is not all, but that is what Mr. Manning and Mr. Rowley think, people with no land have no place to grow roots, people with land will grow food and have greater social stability and capacity to contribute to the economy. The UNC will not abandon this land policy but will improve it. A UNC Government will do all it can to provide restitution for those who are being hurt by the Rowley offensive.

One of the most pressing issues facing the people of the communities in Diego Martin is that of land tenure, the security of their tenure. There are over 2,000 families, I am told, in the Bagatelle, Diego Martin environs who are living on state lands. We are only hearing about the plight of about 71 who are currently battling with the Government. We would have been reading our newspapers and seeing on electronic media the reports of families who are described as squatters getting visits from officials of the Ministry of Housing advising them that they will have to give up the land on which their homes stand.

In many, if not most of the cases, these families have, what are called certificates of comfort, or they have applied for same, but this Government does not respect that piece of paper that is a legal document, legally issued, giving legal rights to those families. You would recall the Housing Minister, your MP, Dr. Rowley, saying that these certificates of comfort are illegal. He is giving the impression that because his view, they are illegal, that these families have no rights and no protection.

Tonight, I spend some moments to respond to that issue and others related to the subject of squatter regularization, and I went on that night to go into the parent Act in terms of what the Bill is now amending, which was the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, No. 25 of 1998, and was amended thereafter. The Bill that we now have before us is to amend that parent law, and in that parent law we had set out all the benefits that could be obtained from getting the certificate of comfort, thereafter applying for a deed of lease, and, thereafter, getting a deed, therefore, getting title, ownership and security of tenure to your lands—that is the parent law.

Now, the Minister would have dealt with the provisions here and elsewhere, but I think we need to point out to some who are misunderstanding what is taking place. When I first announced this once again, when I announced it in Diego Martin this year at another Monday night forum, I said we will deal with this issue

of squatter regularization, persons living on state lands, and so on. But there are those who are saying that this new Bill, the new law they are calling it, does not say that it is restricted to a plot of land not exceeding 5,000—I think the Minister dealt with it—not exceeding 5,000 square feet.

Mr. Speaker, as you well know, and Members of this Chamber know, but for those who may not know, if you are reading an amendment Bill you must read the amendment Bill together with the parent law. If we look at the parent law, the parent law is very clear, which is Chap. 57:05, the Act 25 of 1998, in the interpretation section, it very clearly says that it must be a dwelling house on land not exceeding 5,000 square feet, which I think the Minister has already dealt with. So, in the interpretation section of the parent law, it says:

“‘dwelling house’ means a building or part of a building used mainly as a dwelling or residence, construction of which was completed or was in the course of completion immediately before the appointed day, and includes land occupied therewith, not exceeding 5,000 square feet...;”

So the law is very clear. The amendment we are now bringing is not to change that 5,000 square feet, to give hundreds of acres or otherwise, as some seem to think; the law we are amending is to open the window of opportunity for making applications under the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act, Chap. 25 of 1998, contained in Chap. 57:05 of the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago. So just to clarify that, because there were some saying that the purpose of this law was to give out to big contractors, people having hundreds of acres of Government land, and this law was designed to give them these big parcels of lands they were squatting on—nothing is further from the truth. Nothing is further from the truth. [*Desk thumping*]

6.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, this amendment Bill seeks to grant a certificate of comfort, in the first instance, to persons who have been on state lands prior to the period June 14, 2014. Why that date? The Minister would have explained. We have the aerial photographs so we can locate houses. When you come to apply, we have the aerial photographs, they have them, and they would be able to deal with that matter.

So those are two things about elections and not elections. What is wrong with trying to win an election? What is wrong with that? Anything this Government does, they say we are doing it to win an election. What is wrong with that? That is exactly why we are in the Parliament, because we won the election; that is why we are here. [*Desk thumping*] And having won that election, we won it on a mandate to improve the quality of life of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

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That is what our job is. So if today in this last year of the Tenth Parliament, we are seeking to improve the lives of over 60,000 people in this country, what is wrong with that? That is why we were voted into Government, because those were some of the promises we made.

So we are into this phase of our governance, which we will carry into the next phase of Government, when we get the second term [*Desk thumping*] that is saying, “Look, those of you who are on state lands, you have been there all this time, where will you go?” Mr. Speaker, I asked your permission to use these. Look at what was happening, even when this law was in place look at this.

[*Hon. Persad-Bissessar SC displays photographs*]

Look at this:

Displaced squatters want help.

I will hold it up for you in a moment:

“LSA accused of racism”

This was carried in one of the newspapers:

“Josanne Basdeo, six, stoops on the remains of her Pleasantville home, which the Land Settlement Agency demolished yesterday.”

There were dozens of these in the newspapers every day. Here is another one. I think we all recall—here is another demolished structure—someone sitting upon it. A lot of these in the newspapers during the time before we came into Government. I think some people did not see this one, so I will show it to you—demolished. MP Sharma, this is your constituency I think?

Mr. Sharma: I had a very good lawyer.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I think he is trying to say I was the lawyer for this particular person when they broke down the house.

So there we were. We had passed the law, Act 25 of 1998, visionary law coming from a visionary man, who was then MP John Humphrey. He was the one who crafted it, who worked very hard with a lady by the name of Carol Cuffy-Dowlat. And there were some of us who were what you call the “supporting actors and actresses”, but I worked very hard with them on this piece of law. I understood it to be that if you were there on state land, you would get the certificate of comfort, nobody could come and evict you. The LSA would come in,

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work with you. If the land is earmarked for something else, they would relocate you. If not, they would regularize you on that same spot. That was our philosophy. That was our policy.

When the Government changed, the then Government—the last one, the one that we have succeeded—their policy was different. When I spoke about Dr. Rowley earlier in 2007 earlier when I was speaking, their policy was that we will give you housing. We will not give you this comfort on your lands; we will not regularize squatters on their lands, but then they could never build the amount of houses needed and, therefore, what do you do in the meantime? Where would these people live, in Mars, in the sea, up in the air? Where would they live? That is what this law was intended to do, to give a piece of your birthright, where your navel string is buried, that you have that connection back to this land that is mother Trinidad and Tobago. That is the purpose of this law.

So today many persons who are squatting, cannot afford to provide alternative housing solutions for their families. I said the PNM policy, carried through by the Opposition Leader, is that they would provide housing. In one case they were breaking down squatters houses night and day, and they said that they were doing that—and they said, “Well, what are you going to offer to these people, what is the alternative?” They said that they are going to fix some places. So why did you break them down first? Why did you not leave them and fix where you wanted to put them? But no, they broke them down. Where are you going to put these people?

Any one of you remember seeing people on their mattresses, children, babies, everything scattered? Do you remember those horrid days? People forget that, and then you come and talk about elections; well that is why we will win again, [*Desk thumping*] because we will do what is necessary for people to benefit. This country cannot be only for the haves. This country and the policies of the Government must deal with all levels and classes of people.

So you have persons squatting; they do not have an alternative housing solution; they are not able to legitimately acquire proper housing, and so they squatted on vacant state lands. The problems associated with squatting communities are far-reaching. It goes beyond pure economics. Issues such as flooding, pest infestation have always been associated with squatting, pollution of water resources due to improper infrastructure to support sewage liquid, solid waste, all of these in terms of creating unsustainable environments. That is part of our reality day-to-day.

To address this issue, previous Governments had taken the short-term and inhumane approach, victimizing those in these very dire situations. The lack of

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foresight in addressing the situation meant that the prevalence of squatting increased in Trinidad and Tobago, as families were forced from one area with no alternative. So when you broke them down here today, they went somewhere else. So you spent your life on a merry-go-round tracking down people who had nowhere to live, and that is what was happening. They could not get proper housing for themselves, for their children, in these communities. The disadvantaged state of these communities made it difficult for children to come out successfully. They created a future generation of those denied a basic human right. You know, there is the hierarchy of needs; they talk about food, clothing and shelter. And that is what housing is, it is a basic human right to shelter.

In 1998, as I said, Mr. Humphrey piloted the law. The Bill was introduced two years after Mr. Humphrey stood at the plenary session of the United Nations Habitat II conference, as a representative of Trinidad and Tobago. There he declared that our country accepted that shelter is a fundamental human right. Pursuant to this, our Parliament in 1998 made this Act 25, and what it did was to protect certain squatters from ejection from state land, to facilitate the acquisition of leasehold title by both squatters and tenants in designated areas, and to provide for the establishment of land settlement areas.

The parent law provided a means by which squatters or tenants in occupation of designated areas on which they had a dwelling house, of not more than 5,000 square feet, before the appointed day, may be granted security of tenure by way of the issuance of certificate of comfort. That comfort certificate, when you have it, gives you protection from being ejected from your dwelling house, that in the event of relocation the recipient may be directed by the Minister to relocate to another lot within the designated area or to another designated area, or to a land settlement area. So you have a guarantee of a lot and if not, you have a guarantee of relocation to a suitable lot.

The recipients who can be regularized where he or she is located may be supported in obtaining utilities, access to assistance for home improvements and onwards on that journey, to get a secured title by deed of lease once the recipient does not own or occupy any other dwelling house or residential land, or agricultural land on which that person may have a residential structure. So this is a one-off. It is not that you are going to collect—and that is another fallacy or ignorance, I would say, being propagated. This is not going to allow you to get five different lots all over the country, or 10 or 20. You are going to get one lot of land on which you have your dwelling house. You have been there by the appointed date and you must be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, of course, other criteria.

I am told that to date about 8,000 persons have received the certificate of comfort. This would have been those who would have applied in compliance with the criteria laid down in Act 25 of 1998. Out of those 8,000—I believe, Minister, you may have given us the numbers—that even though the law came into effect in 2000, Act 25 of 1998, from then until we came into office, it was just about 1,300 people who had got certificates. Even though—how many applied, Minister—23,000 applied, but only about 1,300 got certificates. Since then we have been improving the facility and, again, I thank the Land Settlement Agency for their very hard work—Mr. Hazar and Mrs. Allahar for their hard work and pushing. So we have delivered 8,000, with some more to be delivered.

What has happened then is that should this law come into effect, it means that more thousands would apply, because they are going to get that greater window of opportunity within which to apply. In fulfilling its obligations, the Land Settlement Agency opened its doors. Applications of persons who met the criteria in the first instance—they received 22,732 applications from squatters to be considered for the certificate of comfort or statutory lease as a requirement. They should have been there January 01, 1998 or before.

This statutory requirement, whilst providing the means by which a number of landless families would be regularized, also alienated a large number of families who did not meet the requirements of the appointed day as provided for in the Act. These include I am told about an estimated 30,000 families. They commenced occupation after the appointed date, that is, after January 01, 1998. Additionally, a number of families could not access the benefits of that Act whilst they were in occupation of state lands before the date, because they did not make an application within the prescribed period. That is very important.

Many people, I remember when I was an MP, when we started taking up the court matters for the squatters, they would come and say, “Well, look I have been living here so long. I need to get my certificate of comfort. I do not want to be evicted.” As an MP—and other MPs would tell you—residents would come, constituents would come and say they want help, but we could not help them because the window that they had, the appointed day, they could not meet that requirement, and secondly they did not make it within the time frame. I think you had one year, and then we amended to include it for a second year, so you had a two-year period, but some people did not even know about the law.

I know in my constituency, I went everywhere, and I encouraged as many people as possible to apply. I was a Member of Parliament with responsibility, but I also went into Windy Hill, I went in there. I went into Bagatelle in San Juan and

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other areas in central, a lot of other areas, helping persons whose houses were being broken down or being given eviction notices. But there were a lot of persons, one, who did not apply within the prescribed period, and there is another group of persons now who would not have been on the lands at that point, on the date January 01, 1998.

So we are looking at helping two groups of people: those who were there even long before June 14, 2014, but who failed to make an application within the time, and then there were those, as I said, who came after the January 01, 1998 and did not qualify. Even though they applied, would not have qualified to be regularized on their parcel of land.

So this estimate of the further 30,000 who commenced occupation after the appointed day, would now be caught within it and be assisted. There are a number of families who could not access the benefits because they were not on the lands prior to the appointed day; they failed to make the application within the prescribed time. And it is estimated there is another 4,000 families who made an application and they cannot be regularized, and now some of these families are those who may have been in occupation before the appointed day, but they cannot be regularized due to lack of proof or evidence that they were in occupation on the appointed day.

There are those who may have been in occupation before the appointed day, but their names were not on the application form, those who may have been in occupation before that appointed day, but the applicants are now deceased and the application has not yet been determined. There are those who may have been in occupation before the appointed day, but their application was incomplete, not submitted or inherently defective. There are those who may have been in occupation before the appointed day, the dwelling house existed but who entered into occupation of and acquired the dwelling house after the appointed date.

So let us say I am the one, I applied, I am now deceased, but my son or my daughter or my grandson or someone is there, they have no way in which to apply to get that land, because there is no provision for succession. They now can prove that they were in occupation. They can now apply with this new law, prove they are there and they are the persons in possession of that house and parcel of land. So a whole host of persons will now become eligible to benefit from the regularization process that was passed under Act 25 of 1998.

Mr. Speaker, when I first made the pronouncement that we would move to deal with the regularization of the squatters, there was another comment which said, "Well, we passed a whole law. All of us passed a law in the Parliament already;

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what are they talking about; what Kamla talking about?” But they fail to understand, or they do not want to understand that all these persons I have mentioned, all these groups of persons whom I mentioned, could not qualify under that Act because the date had passed. That is a very important thing in the amendment. We are now saying you have up to three years, from this Act coming into force, to apply. [*Desk thumping*] You have three more years.

6.45 p.m.

That is why it is a very simple amendment, you know. How many clauses in this amendment? I think there are nine, nine clauses, a very simple amendment, because what we are doing, one, is that we are changing the appointed day to mean, you have to be there, June 13, 2014, any time prior to that. Secondly, we are extending the time within which you can make your application. So where it was one year after the commencement of the parent Act, we are now saying, substitute the words, we are now saying, it will be three years from the commencement of the Act.

So, should we pass it here and it gets passed in the Senate, and then it comes into effect on a date—and we would want to amend it to be on a date to be proclaimed—once it is proclaimed you still have three years. I mean, a lot of people, let us understand, they do not read the newspapers. Not true? [*Interruption*] I hope many people do not follow the newspapers—[*Laughter*]—but I know there are many persons who do not read it. So they may not know about this.

Then you may have some MPs who do not do their footwork. Some of us did it, I walked and talked when the first law was passed to get those people regularized. So it may take time for it to trickle down and then you just do not know and you lose it. So we are saying, let that application period be over three years, so everybody has a chance to apply. That is the second part of the amendment.

There are some other consequential amendments to vest lands in the LSA, because at the moment when the land belongs to another state agency—for example, Petrotrin, PSAEL, HDC—and then the LSA does not have the powers to go in and fix up the area and do other things that they need to do. So once it falls within our Act you can then have those lands, the Petrotrin lands, for example, vested in the LSA to do their work.

I know there is a big area where I had worked for regularization. It is the Wilson Road area in my constituency, a very large block of squatters. And that Wilson Road fell under state enterprise, Petrotrin. So that will allow now, this

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new law will help us to vest them, where these squatters are, to vest in lands in the LSA for LSA to go on and do their work. And the other part of the amendment which is very important is, whereas there were—how many sites?

Mr. Seemungal: Two hundred and fifty.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, there were 254 scheduled sites. The amendment schedule now includes an additional 451 squatter sites. That is a major something, because it means all over the country now, an additional 451 squatter sites. There are sites in Sangre Grande, Toco, Tunapuna, Valencia, Carapichaima, Couva, Claxton Bay, Barrackpore, Moruga/Tableland, San Fernando, sites which fall under the spontaneous settlement programme of Caroni (1975) Limited, the Land Settlement Agency, Land for the Landless policy and residential lots.

And I would like to read into the record some of these designated areas and sites because these are the people, if you are hearing me, or someone wants to relate it, it is important to tell people, you will be entitled, you come forward, you apply. And so we have in Sangre Grande, the 6 mile mark, 8 mile mark, Matura; Ackbaralli Trace, Malabar; Acono Road (from Belle View to Caurita Road), Santa Cruz; Agostini Street, St. Joseph; Albert Street, Matura; Alexander Trace, Valencia; Alexis Street, Morvant; Alfred Richards Street, Port of Spain South.

Mr. Speaker, we have about 18 pages of these with our 451 additional sites. Yes, Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland you are included in here.

Mr. De Coteau: Yes, Ma'am.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, you are right on my left. Yes, your roads and places are here, but it is not being done on any partisan basis. This is throughout Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] This includes all the squatters in Diego Martin, and there is not a single Member for Diego Martin in the Parliament right now, because I think they have walked out of the job. So you have Diego Martin West, Diego Martin North/East and Diego Martin Central, walked off the job, but their areas are covered.

There is Laventille East/Morvant, their areas are covered. Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, their areas are covered. We can go along the bench of those who have walked off the job, Point Fortin and so on. Chaguanas West, all walked off the job. But we are still on the job, we will continue to do the people's business, we will continue to do the work to provide benefits for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Mr. Speaker, in the few more minutes left let me just say once again, to commend the Minister of Land and Marine Resources, to commend the Chairman and the Board of the LSA, Mrs. Allahar, and the CEO, Mr. Hazar and others from that fraternity in the LSA. Are you smiling on what I am saying or am I saying his name wrong, Mr. Hazar?

Hon. Member: Mr. Hazar Hosein

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Hazar Hosein, I know him as Mr. Hazar, never mind, same person, Mr. Hazar Hosein. So, we increased the number of sites and, Mr. Speaker, they say self-praise is no praise, okay. I crave your indulgence to talk about some of the work I did when I was just an Opposition Member of Parliament, because it is to show the commitment I had then and I still have as Prime Minister [*Desk thumping*] to deal with these issues.

Mr. Speaker: May I interrupt you?

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Prime Minister has expired. Would you like an extension, hon. PM?

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes thank you, hon. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the question is that the speaking time of the hon. Prime Minister be extended by 15 minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, hon. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, in those years and there are still some of the matters outstanding, but I think it is important for us to place on the record, there were pictures I showed to this House and the many others. There were disenfranchised families, which is very important to me and to many others.

So in 2008 I took the decision to represent pro bono—and the lawyers say pro bono; that means free of cost, free of charge—over 100 squatters who were living on lands formerly owned by Caroni (1975) Limited in California, central Trinidad. In July 2008 these persons were served eviction notices by the Land Settlement Agency under the former Government. Some dispossessed persons were also subject to horrific scenes as men stormed into their homes, they began throwing furniture and appliances outside with little regard for the cries of families and children and so on. A number of families sat and watched helplessly as their homes, years of hard work totally destroyed.

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I have visited those villages at that time together with others. I remember the Member of Parliament for Couva South at that time, Mr. Kelvin Ramnath, invited me to come as a lawyer to meet with residents. I remember meeting under a house with a flambeaux, some of you might be too young to know what a flambeaux is, but I think most of us here should know what is a flambeaux. And, you know, under flambeaux light, and all these families so terrified because in their own village other homes had already been broken down and they were coming for the rest of them. And I took up their case. Not theirs alone, I took up other cases throughout the country, but this one I remember vividly because that was one in which we got a landmark decision of our High Court which then led the way for all the other cases because that stood as a precedent. So, I went in there, we spoke with the residents and it took us a long time to gather the piles of paper, but we did it, Mr. Speaker.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this case was more than just a clarification of the responsibilities of the LSA. My case then was that the LSA had no authority and no power and no jurisdiction in law to break down anybody's house. That was one of the bases I went, because the LSA was being used. And having come into the Cabinet we saw where the then Cabinet by Executive decision—not by law of Parliament, remember this law was the law by Parliament, by the people's Parliament—but the previous Government undermined that law of the Parliament, took an Executive decision to set up what you could call a “demolishing gang” within the LSA. Totally illegal. They created a unit to break down people's homes when they had no power, no authority, no lawful jurisdiction to break down anybody's house, Mr. Speaker.

And so I took up those cases, and I think the case represented a challenge to the abuse of PNM power. It was not just about the jurisdiction of the LSA but it was the way in which the PNM, in their DNA, abuse power every time it is placed in their hands. And that I think represents a very marked difference in the philosophy between my Government, myself and, of course, that of the others on the other side.

We were trying to keep people's homes secure, and as usual the other side was misinforming the nation—I think Dr. Rowley went so far in a *Trinidad Express* article; he said the UNC was promoting squatting. Nothing further from the truth—that we were promoting squatters.

We were applying the law, we were following what was laid down in the law. They said we were promoting squatting. This is because his Government, the Government he was a part and he was the Minister of Housing, they were willing and they did in fact abuse the LSA—a creature created by the former UNC Government. When I say “creature”, a statutory creature created by statute,

providing security of tenure for persons who had been in occupation of state lands. They took the LSA, designed to protect from abuse, against citizens, and they turned it instead to a weapon against the very citizens. It took this Government, Mr. Speaker, my Government to return some sanity to the LSA and to bring back to that agency its own humane purpose under the law of Trinidad and Tobago.

Let us talk to the figures, Mr. Speaker. Certificates of comfort: under the People's Partnership Government, the total certificates of comfort fully processed have been 12,400. The total being processed at this time, approximately 9,900. The total certificates of comfort recommended, 8,100 and issued thus far 7,900. Under the former UNC Government and now the People's Partnership Government, approximately 6,800, and as I said before in those years, those barren years under the PNM, from 2000 down into 2010, 10 years' time, only 1,300 were actually given to people.

And so the question is, why did they prepare so few of these certificates of comfort? Their priority was never to secure the welfare of citizens. It was to use state resources to manipulate and bully the electorate. And so, Mr. Speaker, if you look at the PNM housing policy history, squatting is the response of the failure of that Government to provide accommodation options to citizens. The rapid growth of this sector is mirrored by the high growth in demand for housing and the comparatively low level of housing solutions offered. Their solution to squatting was this: to construct a few houses, then give those houses to whoever and for the average citizens they could choose between Las Alturas and everywhere and elsewhere.

I recall this Government having to spend over \$100 million in the first year that we took office to repair the houses that they had built because of poor quality workmanship. Mr. Speaker, it is said that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. In other words, know them by their actions and we all know the maxim that actions always speak louder than words. On May 24, I said at that UNC forum, on May 14, 2007, I want to remind you of my words, I said then, I said the UNC Government will not abandon its land policy, but will improve it. And a UNC Government will do all it can to provide restitution for those who have been hurt by the Rowley offences.

Mr. Speaker in the *Guardian* of March 04, 2004, then Minister Rowley describes squatter communities as "Anarchy". He told a press conference:

"...that while Government sympathised with the plight of squatters it wouldn't make any apologies for breaking down their...homes."

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Whilst Government, meaning his Government, sympathize with the squatters it would not make apologies for breaking down their homes.

“The...(LSA)”—he said—“and the...(NHA) recently demolished homes at both sites”—of Cashew Gardens and Wallerfield—“insisting the illegal structures were interfering with Government’s housing programme.”

In the case of Wallerfield, part of the land being occupied has been earmarked for the University of Trinidad and Tobago. From the same report:

“Asked how the Ministry intends to assist squatters whose homes were demolished, Rowley said at least three sites were being prepared to accommodate such people.”

I said it to you before, the sites were being prepared to accommodate the people whose homes were broken down. So, they did not say let them fix up the other venues first, let us fix up these other sites, let us put these people, they are human just like we all are, like themselves, let us fix the place then we move them then we break them down. I do not know if they call that “cart before horse”, or the “horse”—whichever one comes first. Instead they were breaking down the houses first, they were putting people out on the streets and then saying they were fixing them. I do not know if they were really fixing them, but I guess when faced with the storm that was coming from those who had been dispossessed and put on the street, they said, okay, they were fixing three other sites. Up to today, I do not believe one of those has been fixed in the way they spoke.

Mr. Speaker, they are also fighting this \$100 that we say we will sell the homes where people have been there for how many years, over 30 years. In the common law of Trinidad and Tobago, if you are on state lands for over 30 years you are entitled to something known as a Possessory Title, a Possessory Deed.

7.00 p.m.

So if you have been in these state houses over 30 years, why should you not also get a title, a deed, for this? Why not? What is wrong with that? But they are saying now—when I announced this recently, Mr. Rowley said—he questioned how practical it was that poor persons could have security of tenure, could have stability in their lives, could dare to own something that has been theirs for decades.

So if it has been theirs for decades, give them the piece of paper, give them the title paper which says—hold that up. Any man coming knocking on your door to move you—“I have, from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, I have from the Land Registry, I have a piece of paper which says, you see this, this is mine.”

[*Desk thumping*] Instead, they said how practical it was that poor persons could have security of tenure, could have stability in their lives, could dare to own something—could dare to own something! Well, I say, dare to own it. You deserve it after 30 years of occupation, and we will give it to those who have been there for 30 years in occupation at the \$100. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Speaker, we will not be deterred. As long as I head this Government I will aggressively pursue the benefit of every sector of our country. I will ensure that the poor and disenfranchised continue to get the attention of the Government and continue to benefit. Whilst I do that, I would want to just go back to the case I talked about as land-breaking, and just read a very small article given to me by Minister Seemungal which I think Mr. Hazar Hosein was kind enough to bring to his attention, to bring to my attention. And just to close that chapter with respect to that case—I think I have one minute left. No?

Mr. Speaker: No, four.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. This is an article of the *Express*, January 30, 2011:

“A judgement delivered by the High Court last Friday has given Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar another legal victory in her defence of hundreds of squatters whose homes were destroyed by the Land Settlement Agency.” [*Desk thumping*]

I began the case.

“Justice Carol Gobin, in a 16-page judgement, agreed with Persad-Bissessar’s argument that the LSA’s move to destroy homes of squatters in 2008 was unlawful.”

Mr. Speaker, I started the case, but when I became Prime Minister I could not complete and we handed up—so I want to thank those lawyers for carrying forward that case and for that victory for squatters. Whilst you have this Government—my Government—in place, there will always be a victory for squatters in our country. [*Desk thumping*] There will always be.

But, Mr. Speaker, whilst we move to regularize squatters, we will also put the measures in place to contain illegal squatting. That is why we have given a cut-off date, and that cut-off date is June 13, 2014. Should you squat thereafter, then we will come for you. We will have the containment by the Land Settlement Agency, and that Bill is before the LRC right now, so that the two will come together and we will be able to deal with illegal squatters thereafter. But it will not be as the former

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government and their policy, because we have something in place. We have the Land for the Landless policy and programme. So should it be that you now feel you have to go squat somewhere, do not do that. After that date, no, you cannot. You will not be regularized. But instead you can apply under the Land for Landless policy and, again, we can look to see where there is available state land in designated areas to assist those squatters.

So, Mr. Speaker, again, I thank you very much. I commend this Bill to this honourable Chamber and I again congratulate the Minister of Land and Marine Resources and his team out of the LSA and his Ministry.

I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Minister of Land and Marine Resources.

The Minister of Land and Marine Resources (Hon. Jairam Seemungal): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me first start by thanking the hon. Prime Minister and all those who have contributed towards the debate of this very historical amendment towards the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act.

I think the Prime Minister was very modest when she described the taking of those matters before the court. What she did not say was the amount of persons who would have come to her crying, would have come to her pleading and she went and visited nearly all the state lands—the squatter sites—to build that case to stop the brutality and to stop the Land Settlement Agency, under a PNM board in 2009/2010 from that brutality in which they would have enunciated on people—human beings—who would have been living on these properties. Just two weeks ago, during a ceremony, we had someone coming and stating how long—some 30 years or so—they have been residing on property, and during that period the Land Settlement Agency would have approached them to break their houses down.

Mr. Speaker, I want to close, really, and just to bring clarity to one point that the Member for Chaguanas West, who led the Opposition team today, where he asked the question of what education system was in place to educate squatters with these new changes. Mr. Speaker, over the last couple years the Land Settlement Agency has visited over 130 squatter sites, and with that, we had intense consultation and we also started the programme of educating persons as to how they should have applied and why they did not qualify based on the 1998 Act.

We also held a two-day Land Conference at the Hyatt in Port of Spain and in that particular conference we invited community councils, community groups, and community leaders from every single squatter site in Trinidad and Tobago, who

were represented at that particular event. During that four-day conference—it was an international conference—persons from the World Bank were there, persons from IDB were there and persons from various spheres of society also presented at that particular forum.

The entire discussion as to squatter containment, squatter regularization—which is a phenomenon throughout the world; it is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago. It is really in the whole of the Western Hemisphere. When you listened to some of the speakers at that particular conference—would have pronounced on how to deal with squatters. I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, they were very impressed as to what we are doing in Trinidad and Tobago, and I want to congratulate our hon. Prime Minister for leading the charge for the most vulnerable in society. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, let me just reiterate the point that when this Act was passed in 1998 and gave persons the cut-off period to apply as of September 2000, they received 23,000 applications. Mr. Speaker, they crippled the Land Settlement Agency, moving it from a staff of 200, to less than 50 of the technical people to deal with the provisions under the Act and to deal with the applications. And in that 10 years, when they could have reviewed all 23,000 applications, they merely reviewed about 1,300 or so.

Doing nothing, Mr. Speaker, is really the hallmark of the PNM administration, and that is the legacy they want to leave with these most vulnerable in society. They did nothing for that entire 10 years and by doing nothing they would have left the Land Settlement Agency without the necessary tools, the necessary infrastructure and the necessary personnel that would then review the 23,000 applications with moving into the certificate of comfort and thereafter moving into lease.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to point out, for clarity, with respect to the question also raised by the Member for Chaguanas West when he spoke about certificate of comfort is not worth the paper it is written on. When persons come to these ceremonies and they receive these certificates of comfort, it is like receiving a bag of gold. Because you know why? With the certificate of comfort, God forbid and the People's National Movement administration comes into power, they would not have persons coming to their homes before sunrise and breaking their houses down, putting their babies and children by the road. That was the brutality handed out by the PNM administration during the period from 2004 all the way up to 2010.

The certificate of comfort would at least give them the protection that if the Land Settlement Agency and members of any protective service come to their

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house, they can present the document and at that point they would be protected against the eviction, and it would allow them to sleep comfortable in the night. [*Desk thumping*] It would allow them to sleep with ease. And when they put their babies and children to bed, it would give them the comfort that no one will come and interfere and break down their houses. [*Desk thumping*] That is the power of the certificate of comfort. So I beg to disagree and correct the record that the Member for Chaguanas West would have pronounced.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: He probably needs a few hundred of—

Dr. Moonilal: He needs a certificate of comfort.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: He needs a few certificates of comfort. He needs comfort.

Hon. J. Seemungal: Mr. Speaker, so we have started on the right path, and I want to congratulate the chairman, Mrs. Nisha Mathura-Allahar and members of the board of the Land Settlement Agency and the CEO, Mr. Hazar Hosein and the staff of the Land Settlement Agency, who have been going out nearly every single weekend—

Mr. De Coteau: All up in Moruga.

Hon. J. Seemungal: Weekends, Mr. Speaker, Saturday, Sunday. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, in some of these squatter sites a lot of people have been calling in on the radio station and making comments, making a fuss as to why we are regularizing people in squatter sites. One station, I listened to them this morning and a caller called in and said that, “I have been working”—referring to himself—“I put myself through school and I put myself through education and I am working hard and I do not have a place to live because I did not want to go and squat, and others have been squatting there for years and we are rewarding them.”

Mr. Speaker, what we are doing here is that persons, in most cases when they go and squat it is because they squat out of necessity. It is out of necessity, Mr. Speaker. It is not that they want to go there. It is not because they want to break the law. It is by mere necessity that they have nowhere else to go and put their babies, put their children, and have a place to rest and be sheltered from the elements. So instead of going and “making bed” under the eaves of the buildings in Port of Spain, in Arima, in Chaguanas, in San Fernando, they would then find some place where they can build a small home for themselves, albeit, in the first instance, out of galvanize.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: But we also have initiatives for those working people, middle class people—working people.

Hon. J. Seemungal: Albeit out of galvanize. Then as their circumstances would change, so, too, their lives would change. I have heard one of the callers say, “And yuh seein people going on state lands and when yuh pass yuh see a big house”. Mr. Speaker, when they went and squat, they “din ha no big house”. When they went and squat, they actually had the bare necessity, and as their circumstances—this Government, under the hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, has given every single child, every single adult, every single person residing in Trinidad and Tobago, the best opportunity to educate themselves and to improve their standard of living. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: What about the other initiatives for land and houses; TTMF, 2 per cent.

Hon. J. Seemungal: That is what we have done. And for everyone else, this Government has provided the opportunity for them. Under the Land for the Landless Programme, persons can now apply to TTMF for up to \$850,000 to construct their homes.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: No down payment.

Hon. J. Seemungal: Mr. Speaker, and that is no down payment. That is no down payment, that they can now move from a galvanized shack by obtaining their lease. By obtaining the title for their property, they can now move from a galvanized shack to a mansion. And anything that moves from one stage to the other, they can then be very comfortable in that place that they have changed.

It is not because when you pass by some of these squatters—Mr. Speaker, I want to just give you one example of a woman in my constituency. It is a squatting area in the constituency as well. My constituency has many squatting communities. There is a particular individual, and I always look at the progress and progression of this individual. This was a person residing on a piece of state land with galvanize around and galvanize on top, so it was an entire galvanized structure.

7.15 p.m.

She came to me—and she really did not come for the land or to be regularized where she was—seeking employment because she had two children as well. I assisted her in getting her a job in one of these Ministries, and over time without even having a deed of lease, this particular woman would save some of her money and she will then start building little piece, by little piece, by little piece, “chirrip-

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chirrip”, as they would say, and today she actually has galvanize over the structure that she is building with some blocks around. This is how squatters actually move from one stage of residence, of the structure of their house to another stage.

They do not become rich overnight. They do not change the house that they have overnight. We are providing that when they receive their lease, they can do that now overnight by accessing \$850,000. But for years they would be moving from one stage in their house to another stage. Our Prime Minister has said it on several occasions, she moved from house to house to house to house, and this is why she feels for the most vulnerable.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Move from pillar to post.

Hon. J. Seemungal: From pillar to post, Mr. Speaker. Our Prime Minister has also said she went to school in rubber slippers and barefoot in some circumstances. Many of these squatters live like that.

There are squatters, Mr. Speaker, when they went in in some of these sites, had to tote their children on their back, on their shoulder to bring them out because of the amount of mud during the rainy season. That is all we are trying to do. All we are trying to do is make the lives of individuals who are the most vulnerable in society better. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Speaker, with those few words I want to really thank the Land Settlement Agency and all my colleagues, and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Division please, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: No, we have not reached there yet.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clause 1.

Question proposed: That clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Chairman, I beg to move an amendment to clause 1, as circulated, which is:

- A. Insert after the word “title” in the marginal note the words “and commencement”.

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- B. Insert after the word “2015” the words “and comes into operation on such date as is fixed by the President by Proclamation”.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 3A.

Mr. Seemungal: Mr. Chairman, I propose a new clause 3A which reads as follows:

Insert after clause 3, the following new clause:

Section 3 amended	3A. Section 3 of the Act is amended by deleting paragraph (b).
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New clause 3 read the first time.

Question proposed: That new clause 3A be read a second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed: That the new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 3A be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, with amendment.

Question proposed: That the Bill be read a third time and passed.

The House voted: Ayes 25

AYES

Moonilal, Hon. Dr. R.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Hon. K.

Seemungal, Hon. J.

McLeod, Hon. E.

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Ramadhar, Hon. P.
Gopeesingh, Hon. Dr. T.
Peters, Hon. W.
Rambachan, Hon. Dr. S.
Seepersad-Bachan, Hon. C.
Khan, Mrs. N.
De Coteau, Hon. C.
Cadiz, Hon. S.
Baksh, Hon. N.
Griffith, Hon. Dr. R.
Baker, Hon. Dr. D.
Khan, Hon. Dr. F.
Douglas, Hon. Dr. L.
Samuel, Hon. R.
Indarsingh, Hon. R.
Roopnarine, Hon. S.
Ramdial, Hon. R.
Alleyne-Toppin, Hon. V.
Partap, C.
Sharma, C.
Ramadharsingh, Dr. G.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

7.30 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday 5th June, 2015, at 10.00 a.m. and to serve notice that on that day it is the intention

Adjournment

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of the Government to adopt the Second Report of the Standing Finance Committee and to debate a Bill to vary the 2015 Appropriation. Mr. Speaker, time permitting, we will also debate the Family and Children Division Bill, 2015 brought from the Senate.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

Corpus Christi Greetings

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, before putting the question, I am sure you would allow me, with your approval, to indicate that we are all aware that tomorrow, Thursday 4th June, 2015, marks the sacred holiday of Corpus Christi. This sacred observation emphasizes the joy of the institution of the Eucharist, which is very dear to the hearts of many of our brothers and sisters in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and internationally. Hon. Members, on the occasion of Corpus Christi, we join with our brothers and sisters in observing this sacred and holy day.

Question put. [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker: No, we are adjourning first and then I shall indicate to you.

Question agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 7.32 p.m.