

4 14/10/03

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Mr Speaker Sir,

I wish, with your kind permission, to make a statement in connection with the recent alleged cases of food poisoning or intoxication in primary schools.

2. I would like, at the very outset, to remind the house that food poisoning/intoxication in the primary schools is not a new phenomenon and that from time to time, we do have cases of either individual or collective poisoning/intoxication as the case may be. Generally speaking, the sources of poisoning/intoxication are manifold and may be related to water supplied at school particularly following cyclones and heavy rainfalls. It can also be attributable to food, for example noodles, cooked on school premises in unhygienic conditions as was the case at Emmanuel Anquetil Government School in January this year or to the abusive use of pesticides in vegetable plantations adjoining primary schools, mostly in rural areas.

3. It was for that precise reason that Government took the initiative in March 2003 of setting up a Ministerial Committee under my Chairmanship and comprising my colleagues the Ministers of Agriculture, Food Technology and Natural Resources, Health and Quality of Life and Environment to look into the matter and make recommendations inclusive of preventive measures to be taken and set guidelines and procedures to be followed in case of poisoning/intoxication.

4. As a result thereof, a sensitization and information campaign on the safe and judicious use of pesticide was carried out by the Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Technology and Natural Resources and a circular letter outlining the preventive measures and guidelines to be followed in cases of poisoning/intoxication was issued to all the schools.

5. Concerning the recent cases of alleged food poisoning in two ZEP schools namely Marcel Cabon Government School and Pointe aux Sables Government School, I do not propose to repeat the information imparted in response to PQs B/639 and B/640 earlier today.

6. However, I wish to refer to the most recent incident which occurred at Rose Belle North Government School – which is not a ZEP School – yesterday in the early afternoon when some pupils of the same class of Std V complained of eye irritation and headache. At around 15 40 hrs, 19 pupils were attended to at J. Nehru Hospital in Rose Belle and 16 were admitted for treatment and observation. All were allowed to leave hospital this morning. I have further been informed that today, towards mid morning, some pupils of the same school complained that they were not feeling well. I am given to understand that they have been attended to by medical personnel present on site and that their cases do not warrant transfer to hospital. I have requested the same medical personnel to remain on standby at Rose Belle North Government School until the end of the school day. I have not been informed if there have been other such cases since the morning.

7. Since yesterday, various Governmental departments including the Ministry of Environment, the Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Technology & N.R., the Police Force and of course my own Ministry have gone into action investigating all possibilities to try and establish the cause of the state of ill health of the 19 or so pupils.

8. I have been advised this morning by the Ministry of Environment that during their site visit to the premises of Alcodis in the night of 13 October 2003, the oxidation pond was found to be not operational because of faulty equipment namely the aerator. As the oxygen was no more provided for the smooth process, hydrogen sulphide is being released by the effluents. According to the Ministry of Environment, as the prevailing wind was blowing yesterday from an East/North Easterly direction, the gas could have been blown towards the school situated about 750 m east of the factory. I am informed that the aerator has now been repaired and the odour has been minimised. The Ministry of Environment is serving an Enforcement Notice today upon Alcodis and is monitoring the situation closely.

9. However, I have a few minutes ago, received information this time from the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life to the following effect:

"during an inspection of the school premises this morning, it was noted that a vegetable garden is being exploited within the school compound and adjoining the Std V classroom where the intoxication and eye irritation occurred. From information obtained on site, it has been ascertained that spraying of pesticides was effected during the week end on the plants found in the garden. Further, the alcohol production plant, having not been in operation for the last week, cannot be directly incriminated as the fermentation gases from the alcohol plant would have affected the inhabitants in the neighbourhood including the whole school population and not a specific classroom situated at the back of the school building."

10. Accordingly, Sir, there is no clear and definitive indication at this stage as to the cause of the reported illness of some school children. In the circumstances and as a measure of precaution, Rose Belle North G.S. will be temporarily closed tomorrow except for Std VI classes which will be conducted on the premises of former Jomadar Government School so as not to penalize students preparing for the Certificate of Primary Education Examinations.. The situation will thereafter be closely monitored to ensure that there be no subsisting health hazard for the school community.

11. I wish to stress, Mr Speaker Sir, that at no time prior to the incident of yesterday was any complaint concerning environmental pollution made to either the Head Teacher, the Ministry of Education & S.R., the Police Force, J. Nehru Hospital, the Ministry of Environment or any other concerned department. It was accordingly impossible to anticipate or preempt the events of yesterday. Nonetheless, a thorough investigation is under way and, as always, the health and security of school children and of the school community will remain our foremost consideration.

Thank you Mr Speaker Sir.