

FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT SCHEME – BUS OPERATORS – ABUSE (06/11/07)

(No. B/1046) Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun (Third Member for La Caverne & Phoenix) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport & Shipping whether, in regard to the free public transport scheme for students and the elderly, he will state if measures will be taken to combat abuse and inefficiency, and, if so, when they will be implemented.

The Minister of Environment and National Environment Unit (Mr A. Bachoo): Mr Speaker, Sir, the free travel scheme is a measure with an exceptional social dimension, which has ensured greater mobility in terms of access to education and welfare facilities, especially for the low income families, the elderly and the vulnerable groups.

It is necessary to underline that about 107,000 old aged pensioners, 26,000 disabled persons and about 115,000 students in Mauritius and 6,000 in Rodrigues benefit from the scheme, representing a total of over 250,000 beneficiaries.

Given its magnitude and coverage, there is need for constant monitoring of the practical operations of the scheme and take appropriate remedial measures. Some of the problems which have been observed are –

- (i) failure to pick up old aged persons or students at bus stops;
- (ii) rude behaviour of the bus crew towards the elderly;
- (iii) non-compliance with the scheduled time-table;
- (iv) irregular or lack of service in certain regions, and
- (v) tampering with or misuse of bus passes.

Since the very introduction of the free travel scheme in August 2005, a Central Monitoring Committee, comprising relevant Ministries, para-statal bodies and bus operators, under the chairmanship of the Senior Chief Executive of my Ministry, was set up to address issues relating to the implementation of the scheme.

The following measures have been taken to improve efficiency and prevent abuse

- (i) a new student bus pass was introduced last year with added security features to avoid tampering. Similar bus passes are being issued by the NTA to disabled and old aged persons;
- (ii) old aged and disabled persons are being encouraged to travel during offpeak hour;
- (iii) a hot line has been provided at the NTA to ease complaint reporting;
- (iv) all bus operators have been requested to provide regular training to bus crews in customer care;
- (v) dedicated school buses (yellow buses) have been provided to supplement normal services along approved routes, and
- (vi) in regions where services were deficient, such as in Flacq, Trou d'Eau

Douce, licences have been granted to the NTC.

Government is very much concerned about the extent of abuse from bus operators vis-à-vis students and especially the elderly and would not allow its philosophy on free travel to be dented by a few unscrupulous operators.

In that context, Government has requested the NTA –

- (a) to monitor closely the operation of bus services;
- (b) to have a fast track procedure to deal with all complaints;
- (c) to take stern disciplinary action against defaulting operators and their crews.

I wish to inform the House that 73 complaints have already been inquired into and are being heard by the NTA.

Sanctions taken include –(a) suspension of licences held by bus conductors and drivers for a minimum period of one month;

(b) forfeiture of five days payment due to the bus operator by the NTA. In the event the offence is committed a second time by the same operator, ten days payment is forfeited;

(c) in cases where an operator fails to provide scheduled services or submits fraudulent returns to the NTA with a view to benefiting from payment for free travel, his public service vehicle licence is suspended for a minimum period of three weeks.

This is a very strong measure, Mr Speaker, Sir, as in real terms it is tantamount to a penalty of over Rs25,000 in terms of loss of revenue. By so doing, Government wishes to send a clear signal to all bus operators that it will not condone any abuse of the free travel scheme.

To enhance control on payment to bus operators –

- (i) the NTA is scrutinising all returns submitted by the bus operators and making deductions for periods during which services were not provided. This exercise has enabled almost Rs1 m. to be recovered from payment effected and Rs2.9 m. deducted from payment due this year;
- (ii) since May 2007, bus co-operative societies are also required to submit appropriate returns for verification purposes, and
- (iii) the bus companies and co-operative societies are also co-operating.

I wish to remind all bus operators of the terms of the MoU signed with Government and to provide services accordingly with due consideration to senior citizens, disabled persons and students.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether

there have been cases of suspension of conductors' permit or forfeiture of payment or even penalties?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I don't have this information with me right now.

But, from information provided, 34 cases have already been heard, 20 cases are outstanding. As far as students and old age pensioners are concerned, 21 cases have already been heard and 47 are pending. If cases have been heard, it means that sanctions must be coming.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister whether he would agree to lay on the Table of the Assembly the report which was prepared by the consultancy services hired by the Ministry to look into how to improve that particular scheme?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I don't have any objection to that request, and I will lay the report on the Table of the National Assembly

Mrs Martin: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether any study has been implemented with regard to the cost efficiency of this measure? If not, will he consider implementing the study?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, that's why I am going to lay the report on the Table of the National Assembly.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, in August 2005, in reply to a PQ, the hon. Minister said that he was contemplating the introduction of the electronic travel card system. Can we know where matters stand as at date?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, this is a very expensive system. It is not possible to have it in our country.

Mr Soodhun: Mr Speaker, Sir, can the hon. Minister inform the House whether there are two types of subsidy given to the companies? One, which is the free transport, and another subsidy that existed since years?

Mr Bachoo: No, Mr Speaker, Sir. I can give the guarantee that it is a uniform system.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether he intends to re-channel the sum of money provided for by sugar estates for their employees, to ensure that it may be used for that particular scheme in the future?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I don't have this information with me. I need

notice of the question.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I draw the attention of the hon. Minister and ask him the following questions? I have put several questions in the past as to whether the Minister is aware that, in the regions of GRSE, Flacq, Bel Air, bus stops don't exist and, therefore, the buses don't stop to pick up passengers. What measures are being taken to make it mandatory for buses to stop where there are bus stops, in order to pick up old age pensioners and students?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have just mentioned that action is being taken against those bus companies, drivers who are not stopping. Secondly, we cannot compel any bus to halt at a place where there is no bus stop. Legally, it is not possible.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, that's not my question. Previously, I put questions to ensure that bus stops are put up where they don't exist. What is being done in order to ensure that bus stops do exist?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, steps have been taken by the NTA in a few places following the hon. Member's request. But, I have to check how many bus stops have been put up.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, many disabled persons are not taking advantage of this scheme simply because they cannot travel by bus. Can I know from the hon. Minister what is being envisaged for this category of persons who cannot travel by bus and cannot, therefore, enjoy free transport?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, this does not fall within the scope of this question.

Mr Bundhoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, can I draw the attention of the hon. Minister to the fact that private bus owners do not run their buses as regularly as they should be, especially during no school period? What can be done to ensure that they run their buses regularly?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, we have come across a few cases, and action is being taken. I have just mentioned that even licences can also be revoked if they repeatedly commit such mistakes.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, earlier in the Assembly, the substantive Minister had mentioned that he intended to review and revise the whole scheme. Has any decision been taken in this direction?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is working on that.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, can we have any idea when the new scheme is going to be implemented?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, this question should be put to the substantive Minister.

At 1.00 p.m the sitting was suspended.

On resuming at 2.30 p.m. with the Deputy Speaker in the Chair.