

SCHOOL BUSES – ALLOCATION (22/10/13)

(No. B/791) Mr P. Jhugroo (First Member for Mahebourg & Plaine Magnien) asked the Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, National Development Unit, Land Transport and Shipping whether, in regard to the school buses, he will state the actions taken, if any, to review the allocation thereof, in the light of the problems being encountered by the school children to attend and come back from school, taking into consideration the security aspect and the number of school children.

The Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, National Development Unit, Land Transport and Shipping (Mr A. Bachoo): Mr Speaker, Sir, the present student population travelling by bus is approximately 153,300 and includes some 14,100 pupils from primary schools, 113,525 students from secondary and pre-vocational institutions and 25,670 students from post secondary and tertiary institutions.

1,020 dedicated school trips i.e. 433 in the morning and 587 in the afternoon as compared with 991 in 2012 are performed daily by stage carriage buses for the conveyance of students throughout the island. Apart from these dedicated buses, many students also travel by regular buses. I am tabling a breakdown of the dedicated school services by bus operators for 2012 and 2013.

Until recently, school buses, 4 students were allowed to occupy a seat for 3 and 3 students were allowed to sit on a seat for 2. Accordingly, a 60-65 seater bus was authorised to carry between 85 and 90 students, that is, some 25 students in excess.

Following complaints received regarding overcrowded buses and transport problems encountered by students, Government decided to review the allocation of school buses, taking into consideration the security and the increase in the number of students. Thus, the carrying capacity of school buses and the maximum number of students a school bus is now allowed to carry has been brought down to 75 as from 31 May 2013. This decision has inevitably resulted into a demand for more school buses. In this context, the National Transport Authority has almost completed procedure for the granting of additional licences to existing bus companies and co-operatives, as a matter of priority.

It is noteworthy that bus operators are reluctant to provide any additional dedicated school services, especially when such services require buses to run outside their normal itinerary.

They claim that additional compensation should be paid for any new school service.

Nevertheless, additional services have been provided in 2013 to several institutions.

Mr Speaker Sir, the NTA is presently conducting an island wide survey to gauge the situation and to license additional buses along routes where the demand is felt. The transport situation will be closely monitored and necessary adjustments made so that no hardship is caused to students. Negotiations are also being held between the NTA and the bus operators to establish the need or otherwise for additional dedicated school services in 2014.

Mr Jhugroo: Can the hon. Vice-Prime Minister inform the House how many school van or buses - as you may call it – have been registered with the NTA up-to-date and the number of school children who travelled by these school vans or buses on a daily basis?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, the question does not relate to school vans. I would request the hon. Member to come with a question that regards vans, that is, vans under contract which are entitled to carry the school students. We have got different regulations that regulate those types of vans. Here, the question is exactly on the school, that is, dedicated buses and the buses which are carrying students throughout the day.

Mr Speaker: Yes, hon. Obeegadoo!

Mr Obeegadoo: The hon. Vice-Prime Minister just told us that the maximum capacity of buses had been reduced to 75. Is that the equivalent of the normal capacity for the general public or is it still more? Now, if it is still more, can the hon. Vice-Prime Minister tell us from a safety perspective how can it be justified that a bus which has a normal capacity of x should carry more students?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, we have got a problem, being given that the school children are travelling in those buses. For the average public, it is around 65 plus 4 standing, it comes to 69 and for the students, it is about 75. We have already revised it. I can assure the hon. Member that we will try to bring it down as soon as buses are made available because we are trying to make all types of efforts to see to it that additional buses are provided as from January.

Mr Jhugroo: Just a point of clarification from the hon. Vice-Prime Minister...

Mr Speaker: Put your question, no clarification, please!

Mr Jhugroo: The school vans, according to NTA, are called school bus. For this reason, I wanted to ask the hon. Vice-Prime Minister, being given that free transport is being provided to all school children of this country, can he confirm whether the school children who travel by these small school buses do benefit from this scheme?

Mr Bachoo: I maintain that we have got different regulations for school vans and

whatever money is provided by Government passes to the buses. We use the word exact 'buses'.

We are not paying vans or taxis for that.

Mr Speaker: Yes, hon. Uteem!

Mr Uteem: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. I heard the hon. Vice-Prime Minister mentioning that he is aware that currently school buses are taking on more students than they are legally entitled to. Being given that in the case of the Sorèze accident, the conductor is being prosecuted for having admitted people, in a standing position, more than what was allowed.

Doesn't the hon. Vice-Prime Minister find it shocking that despite the fact that he personally knows that this is being practised in school buses, he takes no action to prevent school buses from carrying more students than they are entitled to?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have never said 'illegal'. I have said we have brought it down. According to the regulations, the number of students that could have been carried goes up to 85 to 90, but we have administratively brought it down from 85 and 90 to 75 and when buses are made available, we can still go down. Legally they can carry up to 85, but we are carrying only 75 students and that too I can give assurance to the House that we are trying to do our best to bring it down because the number of students who are travelling and the amount of buses which are available makes the whole difference. This is the problem. That is why I have mentioned that we have reduced the number of students, though legally they could have gone up to 85 to 90, we have come down to 75 and we are still trying to find the possibility to bring it to 70.

Mr Speaker: Hon. Sorefan!

Dr. Sorefan: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. May we know from the hon. Vice-Prime Minister what type of insurance that NTA is engaged with insurance company, whether the insurance company is agreeable for a bus of 60 to 65 seats to carry about 75 seats?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, NTA is not responsible for insurance companies. Buses belong to different bus companies and cooperatives and all of them having properly insured to carry 85 to 90 students, but we are authorising them to carry only 75 students. So, they are properly insured; there is no doubt about it.

Mr Bodha: Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. May I ask the hon. Vice-Prime Minister from the figures he has given, I think, there are more than 500 buses are involved everyday;

can we have an idea of the age of the buses and whether all those buses have a Fitness Certificate from the National Transport Authority?

Mr Bachoo: All buses, in fact, do have the certificate from the National Transport Authority and, Mr Speaker, Sir, I am aware that most of the buses are below 18 years. There were a few cases for CNT that there were buses which were above, but there were specific conditions according to the Ministry that they had to undergo fitness test and all. I don't have any problem in submitting to the House a copy of how many buses are there which are beyond 16 years of age and I can also say that we have already ordered 65 new buses which we are going to receive as from March. Once we receive those buses, it means the age can come down below 16 years.

Mr Jhugroo: Can the hon. Vice-Prime Minister give an assurance to the House that as from now no school buses will carry more than 70 students as just mentioned by him and not packed like '*boîte sardine*'?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have mentioned 75. We have brought down 85, 90 to 75 and the buses will not be authorised to carry beyond 75. This is what I have mentioned.

Mr Bhagwan: May I know from the hon. Vice-Prime Minister how the NTA carries out inspections on the different routes which are being offered for school students to see that these instructions are being abided by the bus companies?

Mr Bachoo: There are about above 40 inspectors of NTA and they inspect throughout the country. They conduct regular checks and now being given that even the bus operators know that the penalty is very high, nobody wants to take the risk and, in fact, there has been a request from the part of the authorities that we have to increase the number of buses. That is why I have mentioned that we are trying to increase the number of licences by 32 to 40.

Mr Speaker: Hon. Obeegadoo!

Mr Obeegadoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, some time back in answer to a PNQ from the hon. Leader of the Opposition, it transpired that buses that are too old to be plying normal routes are given this task of carrying students or buses which are otherwise unfit for service. Can the hon. Vice-Prime Minister, today, in the House gives us a solemn guarantee that this is no longer the practice?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, all those buses have been removed completely. Those special dedicated school buses which NTC was utilising have already been removed.

Mr Speaker: Last question, hon. Jhugroo!

Mr Jhugroo: Regarding security, can the hon. vice-Prime Minister inform the House under what condition the young schoolgirl fell from a school bus at Phoenix last week? Can we know the reasons thereof?

Mr Bachoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, it is difficult for me to say. If there had been an accident, I am not aware of the exact details.

Mr Speaker: Next question, hon. Li Kwong Wing!