

AGALEGA –AIRSTRIP, TOURISM DEVELOPMENT, ETC. (19/06/08)

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence & Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the Agalega islands, he will state –

- (a) if the runway is fully operational;
- (b) if the new ship loading and unloading facilities are now operational;
- (c) the frequency at which airplanes and vessels service the islands, indicating how this affects the –
 - (i) people living thereat who are/fall sick;
 - (ii) children who are studying in mainland Mauritius, and
 - (iii) activities of the Island Council
- (d) if any project for tourism development has been agreed upon, and
- (e) if leases of State land have been granted to the families living permanently thereat.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker Sir, I am informed by the Outer Island Development Corporation that the runway at Agalega is not fully operational. The runway was constructed in the mid-eighties. In 1999, the then Development Works Corporation carried out a resurfacing of the runway. Thereafter, no major works were carried out on the runway with the result that it had started to deteriorate. I am further informed that in 2003, GIBB Mauritius Ltd was appointed as Consultant for the upgrading of the airstrip at Agalega. Tenders were called and opened in public on 15 April 2004. However, the tender was not awarded by the then Government as no funds were provided in the 2004 -2005 Budget.

In the Financial Year 2006-2007, an amount of Rs30 m. was provided for the resurfacing of the airstrip. But additionally, during my official visit to India in October 2005, I discussed with the Indian Authorities the possibilities of providing financial and technical assistance for the development of the Island, including the construction of an airstrip and the development of the port infrastructure. Just to remind the House that the Indian Government had agreed to give us some equipment for monitoring of the Exclusive Economic Zone at that time and also the fact that the airstrip looked as if it is not a question of rehabilitation, but had to be redone completely.

The Government of India replied positively to my request and dispatched in October 2006 a delegation to carry out an audit of existing

facilities on the Island. The experts concluded that the development of Agalega should be planned in two phases. The first phase related to the reconstruction of the runway and the second one spanning over a period of three years, aimed at extending the airstrip to provide for landing of bigger aircrafts and cargo planes.

We are presently considering an appropriate framework encompassing areas of assistance in the context of the development of Agalega. Meanwhile the Dornier carries out flights to Agalega to cater for emergencies.

As regards part (b) of the question, pending the development of the ports infrastructure, the O IDC in November last, purchased a new barge at the cost of Rs2 m. to facilitate loading and unloading in the port. In addition to the existing one, the O IDC has already acquired another crane.

I am informed by the O IDC that there is no major problem for loading and unloading of ships.

As regards part (c) of the question, O IDC organises four trips to Agalega annually in January, April, July and November.

In addition, the O IDC takes full advantage of the passage of foreign vessels of friendly countries in the area to stop over at Agalega.

Moreover, as I indicated earlier, each time there is a genuine emergency situation, the Dornier flies to Agalega on the advice of the medical practitioner in service on the Island. During the last 12 months, the Dornier effected eleven such emergency flights.

As regards part (c) (i) of the question, patients from Agalega who have to come to Mauritius for medical treatment, the following arrangements are made -

- (i) the Dornier plane of the National Coast Guard effects sorties to Agalega to repatriate patients who require advanced medical treatment in Mauritius;
- (ii) Once the treatment is over, the patient is paid a monthly compassionate allowance of 50% salary, until the next transport to return to Agalega.

With regard to part (c) (ii) of the question, as regards children studying in mainland Mauritius, arrangements are made by O IDC for them to proceed to Agalega free of charge to visit their parents for the April and

November school holidays.

As regards meetings of the Island Council, two meetings per year are held in Agalega in April and November when the ship calls there, and the other meetings of the Council are held in Mauritius. Since the creation of the Council, twenty meetings of the Council have been held.

In so far as part (d) of the question is concerned, there is no specific tourism project on the Island that has been agreed upon as yet, although there have been interest expressed for the construction of hotels on the Island. The full implications including the environmental impact of the such development is under study.

As regards part (e) of the question, construction of housing units in Agalega started in 1997. On 09 April this year, I personally handed letters of intent to 59 families out of 65 for the portion of land and the houses they have been occupying. The lease agreements are being finalised. As for the six other families, it is expected that they will have obtained their housing units shortly. I am also informed that duplex units are currently being built.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, as regards part (a), more than three years ago, indeed, it was found that the runway was not operational and that only the Dornier could land and take off there. But even then, on several occasions, the nose radar of the Dornier was damaged. Has the Dornier been able to operate there without that handicap?

The Prime Minister: Apparently, yes, Mr Speaker, Sir. I think I mentioned they have had 11 times in emergency cases landed there.

Mr Bérenger: But has the radar been damaged?

The Prime Minister: Not to my knowledge, Mr Speaker, Sir! I have no information that the radar has been damaged, although I know that quite some time back, there was a problem with the radar, but none that I know of now.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, I heard that the Indian experts advised the more sophisticated airport that could receive bigger plans, cargo plans and so on. Does the hon. Prime Minister have any idea of how much it would cost and over what period of time the works would be spread?

The Prime Minister: They think it would cost quite a bit. I think there was an estimate – I am saying offhand, Mr Speaker, Sir - of around

Rs70 m. and maybe more, they said, especially, if we want to extend the airstrip. That is why they suggested that it should be in two phases. But, we are looking if there can be any kind of MoU, if not, then we will have to do it ourselves.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, I heard reference made to larger planes. Is there anything more precise than that? Are they jet planes? What kind of larger planes?

The Prime Minister: They said cargo planes and bigger aircrafts.

That is what has been mentioned.

Mr Bérenger: At this stage, we have not approached either India or funding agencies for the funding of such an airport.

The Prime Minister: We have approached precisely because of the costs. It is going to be quite major works. If India could help us, we thought, it would be a good thing. As they are already putting in these instruments for monitoring of our Exclusive Economic Zone, they could have helped us and they have done so in the past, for example, to do the marine chart. That is why they had their experts sent in here, I think, in October 2006. We wanted them to help us build the airstrip and the port, but we are studying the implications.

Mr Bérenger: As regards part (b), loading and unloading facilities, I have heard the hon. Prime Minister - I think it is not in his text - added three words: in the port. The problem is that there is no port there. In his reply he said the new barge and other things, in the port. A decision was taken more than three years ago, precisely, developing the jetty and so on, to have a small port there because it is very dangerous when there is high sea and it does cause a lot of problem to load and unload both goods and passengers. Is Government envisaging to go ahead with the construction of a small port at Agalega?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there is actually a jetty there, but we want to create a port so that it would be even better. As I said, the Indian Government helped us. There was no marine chart there; this was very important for commercial vessels especially, and this is part of the assignment that we want them to have a look at.

Mr Bérenger: As part (c) of my question is concerned, I am sure the hon. Prime is fully aware of how difficult matters are when people fall sick

at Agalega or when kids want to go and join their parents during vacation time and so on. I see that there have been 11 emergency Dornier missions for people who have fallen sick, but the children have to wait for the vessel to come and go to Agalega. As I said the Dornier itself has problems to go there on emergency missions. But pending the full development of the airport, can't something be done urgently so that the Dornier, without danger to the plane or the radar, can go more easily there?

The Prime Minister: In fact, we have already decided, Mr Speaker, Sir - I should have said this - if we cannot come to an agreement then this is what we are going to do: maybe we will ourselves do it, if we can't come to an agreement.

Mr Bérenger: As far as the Island Council is concerned, can I ask the hon. Prime Minister to say whether it is fully constituted? As we know before, the Agalega islands were run as a completely colonial set up, with the Outer Island Development Corporation doing and deciding everything. Then the Island Council was set up so that the voice of the 65 families living there could be heard. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister as to the constitution of the Island Council as at today and who chairs the Island Council?

The Prime Minister: I do not have all the names, but the Council is fully constituted, I am told, and the Chairperson is Mr Hervé Aimée.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, you see my point. I think we took a step backward since the last election. The idea was that the Outer Island Development Corporation used to run that as a colonial fief and the Island Council was set up so that the voice of the people could be heard and the Outer Island Development Corporation would have to listen to them. Putting the Head of the Outer Island Development Corporation as Chairperson of the Island Council defeats completely the purpose. Can I appeal to the hon. Prime Minister to review that position, to put somebody who knows Agalega, who has a feeling for Agalega, maybe an Agalegan, but somebody from Agalega?

(Interruptions)

If we do that Agalega will sink!

(Interruptions)

I meant Mahen Jhugroo, but Mahen Gowressoo, no!

(Interruptions)

I agree that hon. Mahen Jhugroo knows Agalega, but I do not think it would be good to have a political appointee. Mr Aimée himself is a political appointee. I think we should have somebody who knows Agalega, who feels for Agalega, but certainly not the Chairperson of the Corporation.

The Prime Minister: I must say to the hon. Leader of the Opposition that actually he knows Mr Aimée. Nobody will accuse Mr Aimée of being somebody with a colonial attitude, but the problem is the practicality of it. I suppose that is why Mr Jhugroo was named there in the first place.

Mr Bérenger: Can the hon. Prime Minister whether the representatives of the people living in Agalega do sit on that Council and what happens when the Council meets here in Mauritius?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, there are three Agalegans who are actually members of the Council. The problem is that it is impractical because they are in Agalega and for the reasons I have given, sometimes there is no quorum. When they sit here, unless one is here, he does not participate. That is why the meetings are not held once every month there.

Mr Bérenger: I am sure the hon. Prime Minister will agree that this is an additional reason for the airport to be upgraded as urgently as possible. I am sure the hon. Prime Minister is aware. The idea is to have this Council as a first step as was the case with Rodrigues and then to move on to a small elected council, but this won't be possible until the runway has been upgraded.

As far as part (d) of the question is concerned, that is, if any project for any for tourism development has been agreed upon, let us not go back to the past, there was one, it is out now. There was mention of a South African company, I have not heard any mention thereof. Without Agalega being *le nombril du monde*, but there is room to have a really world-class project there, with an airport of international standard, with due attention being paid to the environment and the people living there benefiting fully, will the Prime Minister agree with me that we should be looking for that kind of project, for that kind of investor? It would be of great benefit to Mauritius, Agalega and the inhabitants.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

The hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism just reminds me

that a cruise vessel has been given permission to go to Agalega and among the other islands. I should say that there is still the project of ARCON. They made a preliminary project proposal in December of 2005. It was looked at the BOI and then the project was considered at the fast-track committee in February 2006. We then decided that we needed to have more details of the project, more comprehensive development proposals. The BOI received on 04 June 2007 an amended development proposal from ARCON, and the project would entail an investment of around Rs15.8 billion and should create around 560 jobs. We have asked them to consider all the social obligations which they are prepared to do, including the setting up of a desalination plant. They also said that they could even look at the upgrading of the runway, they would use wind generators and all these things. But the main issue is that we felt that the amount of land that they were asking is actually higher than we thought, too much, and we want them to see whether they ask a lesser; and this is where the project is at the moment.

Mr Bérenger: Going back to the end of 2005, can I know what extent of land they requested, whether a letter of intent has been issued to that company and whether it is a fully South African share-owned company?

The Prime Minister: They have asked for 400 hectares of State land at Agalega, which would practically cover the whole of the eastern side of the North and South islands of Agalega. That is why we say it is too much. The other question was whether it is a South African Company. It is not a fully South African Company. There is a Mauritian national who apparently would be the main shareholder and I think I mentioned his name last time.

Mr Bérenger: I am sure the hon. Prime Minister will agree with me that especially there, great environmental care must be taken, whatever the extent of land is given to whoever. I am sure he will agree that this is a fragile eco-system – these two islands. I remember when I went there as Prime Minister, people there would wait for the low tide to travel between the North Island and the South Island; they would get into a vehicle pulled by a tractor and cross over damaging corals and everything regularly. I am sure the hon. Prime Minister will agree that we must be very careful.

The Prime Minister: In fact, this is part of what we have told them.

I also went to Agalega, as you know, and I saw this problem. We had to go earlier because of the problem of tide; but this is certainly something that we must be very careful about.

Mr Bérenger: As far as part (e) of the question is concerned, I am glad to hear that the families living permanently there have received letters, saying that they will get a lease, but the leases have not been finalised yet. I heard that as soon as the six families who have not yet had a house, they will get the same kind of treatment. They will have a lease on State land; their house is on State land. Can we know what happens to the ownership of these houses?

The Prime Minister: I think that at one point we were looking at whether we could do the same as we have done with the CHA houses here.

That is what we had in mind, that is, to let them have the ownership.

Mr Bérenger: Is the hon. Prime Minister in a position to confirm that, in fact, there is no private owned land at all at Agalega, that the whole of the two islands is composed of State land?

The Prime Minister: That is my understanding, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Bérenger: Without picking a quarrel on it, I think we do realise that Agalega has been left behind over the last three years. Will not the hon. Prime Minister agree that ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Bérenger: Will not the hon. Prime Minister...

(Interruptions)

Those who know less speak more than anybody else, cackle more than anybody else!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Bérenger: The people living there vote in Constituency No. 3.

More than three years ago, we tried to organise a trip with the help of Transaal from France, which broke down on that occasion, and I had to go by the Dornier. I am sure that our French friends would be very eager to put

a Transaal at the disposal of Mauritius for a one-day trip for the hon. Prime Minister, Ministers, civil servants, I would say the Members of Parliament also, the Leader of the Opposition, travelling there to send a signal that we all care for Agalega and we are going to do everything we can to the benefit of the inhabitants of Agalega.

(Interruptions)

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I must say, yes, I want to give a good signal to the Agalegans. But, I must tell the hon. Leader of the Opposition that, in fact, we are the ones who gave the 59 houses, and we have built three new houses as well, to the Agalegans. Apart from that, we have done a lot of things, Mr Speaker, Sir.

We are constructing a building of a height of 4,000 sq. ft. to serve as a refugee centre which has already started in case of natural calamity, because of the tide problem as the island being low. We have set up infrastructure for the improvement of telephone services. I can say, for example, Emtel will go and put up a structure there.

Apart from that, we have also done for the infrastructure of telephone services, we have set up the infrastructure for the MBC radio and TV broadcast, which was not there before, and also the lower secondary schools which are already operational since January 2008. Therefore, we have done quite a bit for Agalega, but we still say that we have to continue upgrading the development there.

Mr Jhugroo: Est-ce que je peux demander au Premier ministre combien de maisons ont été construites à Agalega entre 2000 à 2005, et combien de maisons ont été construites après 2005 ?

The Prime Minister: To give precise figures to the hon. Member, 2000 and 2005, five houses have been constructed; between 1996 and 2000, 33 houses have been constructed. Since we have taken over again, 59, as I have just mentioned.

(Interruptions)

59 houses have been given, not constructed! Three additional houses have been constructed.

Mr Jhugroo: Est-ce que le ministre est courant que quand le *Development Works Corporation* construisait des maisons à Agalega, le

coût était trois fois plus cher comparé à ce que nous avons fait construire entre 2000 à 2005 ?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I must say two things. Only 5 houses were constructed by them, compared to 33 before. I must also say that he, himself, found there was a need for a refugee centre, but then nothing was done.

Mr Jhugroo: Le Premier ministre peut-il nous dire, à part ces maisons qu'on a fait construire entre 2000 et 2005, quels sont les autres bâtiments qu'on a érigé à Agalega ?

Mr Speaker: The Prime Minister has already answered.

(Interruptions)

Order, now!

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, there was an agricultural lease which was granted to some planters from Mauritius to grow vegetables on the island. May I know from the hon. Prime Minister what happened to that project?

The Prime Minister: In fact, not some planters, it was Mr Seetaram, the former Speaker of the House.

(Interruptions)

An association among whom he was the main one, I believe. Apparently, from what I hear, he started planting part of it and then there was no further development. And since, there are other projects - even before I became Prime Minister - I think it is logical that he will not have the land.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask a last question? We all want to preserve and develop those two islands. I heard the hon. Prime Minister say that India is being helpful so that we can look at our economic zone around Agalega and protect it. May we know what arrangements prevail as at now, as far as Police and Coastguard are concerned at Agalega, and whether there is need to reinforce their presence there, being given that there is also that issue of this Exclusive Economic Zone that Agalega generates?

The Prime Minister: This is also something that I discussed with the

Commissioner of Police and the Commander of the SMF. I asked the Commissioner of Police to discuss it with him. We need to have a permanent presence there, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Speaker: If there are no more questions, we will move on to the next item.