

CYCLONES GULA & EX-LOLA TORRENTIAL RAIN – WARNINGS (01/04/08)

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Home Affairs, Minister of Civil Service & Administrative Reforms and Minister of Rodrigues & Outer Islands whether, in regard to the abrupt lifting of cyclone warnings concerning cyclone Gula and to last Wednesday's tragic events, he will state –

(a) the contacts there were between his Office and the Meteorological Services, and

(b) if his Office had been informed of the 5.00 a.m. *Communiqué* issued by the Meteorological Services pointing to dangers for students, and obtain information as to if they had communicated same to the Ministry of Education and Human Resources and, if so, why schools were not closed on Wednesday last, in spite of heavy rainfalls the day and night before.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, first of all, let me reiterate my condolences to the families of the victims and I am sure the House joins me in sending them our condolences.

I also wish to point out to the House that we are dealing with unusual natural catastrophes and phenomena here. Similar unusual phenomena and natural catastrophes have taken place in other countries – with significant damage and loss of life.

Mr Speaker, Sir, for any system of warning to work there are well established protocols based on criteria, not individual judgment. The system of warnings in Mauritius exists since the early 80s, that is, more than two decades ago. Successive authorities have never questioned or critically appraised these criteria – be it for cyclones or floodings.

With regard to part (a) of the question, I am informed by the Director of the Meteorological Services that as far as “Gula” is concerned, a Class III warning was put into force at 04.00 o'clock in the morning on 31 January 2008 because it was found to be moving towards Mauritius. In fact, Mr Speaker, Sir, I should say that in the late evening of 30 January 2008, my Office was informed of the likelihood of a Class III warning and even a Class IV warning during the next day. According to the Meteorological Services the Class III warning was felt necessary because winds of 140 kms/hour had been experienced at St. Brandon when Gula was at its nearest from the Island. Let me recall, Mr Speaker, Sir, that the criteria for cyclone warnings is a threshold of 120 kms/hour while here we had already reached 140 kms/hour.

At around 07.30 hours on 31 January 2008, as further information from our stations in Rodrigues and St. Brandon and satellite pictures were received, it became evident to the Meteorological Services that Gula had, in only a matter of few hours, lost

its strength and was disintegrating rapidly. Because it was an unusual phenomenon the Meteorological Services did further verifications. Thus, the Meteorological Services thereafter decided to lift all warnings at 08.45 hours in the morning of 31 January 2008 because by then the cyclone had completely disintegrated.

Regarding depression ex-Lola, weather bulletin issued by the Meteorological Services at 05.45 hours on Wednesday 26 March 2008 indicated that the tropical depression was about 440 kms to the north of Mauritius and was moving towards the south-south east at about 10 kms/hour. The bulletin had forecast that for the next 24 hours weather would be cloudy and overcast with showers, moderate to heavy and at times accompanied by thunders. The bulletin also mentions that with the current rainy weather conditions, students attending schools must take all necessary precautions and that there will be accumulation of water in flood-prone areas and that the public was advised not to venture on river banks. I should add, Mr Speaker, Sir, that officials of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources had been in contact with the Meteorological Services as from 04.16 hours that very morning.

Rainfall data collected at 04.00 hours on 26 March 2008 did not reach the criteria for the issue of a torrential rain warning. The situation was being monitored continuously and at around 11.30 hours, the Meteorological Services noted that heavy rainfall was occurring and that conditions for the issuance of a torrential rain warning was now necessary.

My Office was apprised of the torrential rain warning at around 12.15 hours. Regarding part (b) of the question, details of weather bulletin are not routinely communicated to my office. Such communications are made only when cyclone warnings or torrential rain conditions are imminent or prevailing. The contents of the weather bulletin issued at 05.45 hours on 26 March 2008 were brought to the attention of senior officials of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources a few minutes before the issue of the bulletin. However, torrential rains situation had not been attained.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources did not take the decision to close schools.

However, when the torrential rain situation was registered later in the day, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources requested Heads of schools to proceed as per established procedures.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the House is no doubt aware that I have decided to set up a Fact Finding Committee with wide Terms of Reference and presided over by a Sitting Judge of the Supreme Court. However, I have also solicited the services of the World Meteorological Organisation to study our weather forecast processes and advise us on our human and logistical resources needs in the field of Meteorology.

Mr Speaker, Sir, recent scientific evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has confirmed that the impact of climate change will not be gradual but devastating and indiscriminating. In fact, the world has lately witnessed a series of extreme weather events in different parts of the world. Severe monsoon floods we have seen in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the wettest May to July period leading to massive flooding in England and Wales last year, abnormally heavy rainfall in China and Sudan, large swell waves in Maldives, heat waves in South Eastern Europe and rare snowfalls in South America and South Africa and even heavy snowfalls in China. We have also seen devastating hurricanes like Katrina, tornadoes and flood throughout the USA. In spite of their level of development and infrastructure, even the well-developed countries suffered heavy human and material loss.

Mauritius had not been spared. After a severe drought, we have been hit by an unprecedented downpour rain causing severe flood within hours. This is clearly a case of extreme weather event linked to climate change. Unfortunately, this kind of sad event will recur as global warming conditions continue and climate change is not addressed globally.

In the aftermath of the torrential rains on 26 March 2008 the hon. Minister of Environment and National Development Unit established a list of critical areas warranting immediate action. Around 100 urgent projects have been prioritized to be implemented under the Emergency Drain Clearance Programme. The Programme is expected to cost around Rs250m. Works have already been started in some regions and at other sites work will be started in the coming days. Various social security measures have been taken following the flooding. These include payment of an allowance of Rs109 per member of household and special allowance of Rs5,000 to each family who has incurred losses of basic necessities such as foodstuff, clothing, mattresses, kitchen utensils and school materials and so on.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, for us to leave cyclone Gula behind us, does the hon. Prime Minister find it normal that the Meteorological Station should have decided to lift all classes - III, II, I - without even getting in touch with the Prime Minister's Office, because everybody knew that problems were going to arise and did arise?

The Prime Minister: In fact, it did arise. I can tell the hon. Leader of the Opposition that, I, myself, took the precaution, because I met His Excellency the President on Thursday morning. I took the precaution of telling the President that it is unlikely that we have our meeting on Thursday morning because there might be a class III and, probably, a class IV warning. In fact, I should tell the hon. Leader of the Opposition that even at 5 o'clock in the morning - I had asked the Meteorological Services to send me the bulletin at home because there was a warning and they did so - the bulletin did say that the class III warning was maintained and that the class IV

warning was likely to be imminent. I took it that there was going to be a class IV warning. In fact, when all the warnings were removed later on, it was to my surprise and to that of His Excellency the President; we could not have our meeting because it was too late to go and have the meeting. This is what the Meteorological Services said: once the unusual phenomenon of the cyclone having disintegrated completely - they found it unusual - they wanted to verify with all the stations, not just Rodrigues and St. Brandon, but other meteorological stations and, when it was found to be such, they decided to remove all the cyclone warnings.

Mr Bérenger: I am sure the hon. Prime Minister is now aware that closing of schools is not tied directly to the torrential warning. If he has cared to check, in the past schools have been closed because even if it is not torrential, but very heavy rainfall. Can I ask the Prime Minister being given that the whole day on Tuesday, it had been pouring, when we left here, it was pouring outside, in the early morning it was worse - a few minutes ago he told us that he was in touch in the case of Gula at 5.00 a.m. - why he did he not get in touch with the Minister of Education to know what was being envisaged? In fact, on Tuesday evening, schools should have been closed for the next day. Did he take the trouble to get in touch with the Minister of Education & Human Resources?

The Prime Minister: I explained to the hon. Leader of the Opposition that there are strict criteria for deciding whether there is a torrential rain warning or not. There is a criteria of 100 millimetres of rain for 12 hours - I am just saying it offhand, Mr Speaker, Sir - consequently for 12 hours with likelihood of continuing heavy rainfall. In fact, Mr Speaker, Sir, if you look at the warnings that were given, let us look at Tuesday at 1600 hours -

« Les prévisions pour les prochaines 24 heures. Le temps sera couvert avec des averses modérées à forte et avec des orages. Il y aura également des poches de brouillard,, il y aura des accumulations d'eau aux endroits inondables. Il est conseillé au public de ne pas s'aventurer au bord des rivières »

That was at 1600 hours on Tuesday 25; it does not say that there was going to be torrential rain, it does not even mention anything here. I gave the details for Wednesday at 5.45...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, I said!

The Prime Minister: It did say -

“Cloudy to overcast with showers moderate to heavy and, at times, thunders. There will be fog patches”.

I go on, Mr Speaker, Sir. At 11.30 hours, on Wednesday itself, this is what they had to

say –

“Le temps restera couvert sur l’ensemble de l’île et avec des averses éparses. Les averses seront fortes avec orages isolés. Les poches de brouillard persisteront principalement sur les hauteurs. La visibilité sera réduite sur la route et il y aura des accumulations d’eau à travers l’île et les rivières. Le public est fortement conseillé de ne pas s’aventurer au bord des rivières. »

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: Nowhere at that time was there any torrential rain warning.

In fact, they said moderate...

(Interruptions)

If you look at the world...

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: It is not a personal decision, there are criteria which you have to abide to.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he has checked that in the past schools have been closed without a torrential rain warning? Common sense should have made both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education move. Has the hon. Prime Minister checked that this is the case? Nowhere is it said that the Minister of Education or the Prime Minister must wait for the torrential rain warning to close schools! It is too late then!

The Prime Minister: Can I then ask the Leader of the Opposition on what criteria do we close schools then? You open the window and you say it is raining, then you close the schools....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Bérenger: Common sense! When we left here immediately after adjournment, it was pouring and any parent knew that it would be very dangerous. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he has cared to check how many Heads of schools throughout the island took it upon themselves – they did not wait for torrential rainfall

warning – to close the schools? Can he say how many such schools were closed by the Heads without waiting for the Ministry of Education to wake up?

The Prime Minister: That is the question that should be put to the Minister of Education. How do I know how many schools were closed?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Bhagwan! I am calling you to order, please!

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, has the Prime Minister had time to check whether something went wrong at Nicolière? Because this is not normal, two persons alight from the bus and are taken away by the waters in a surge. There was some information as if something went wrong and wrong orders were given. Has this been checked?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I also heard that people were saying that at Nicolière something had gone wrong. We had it checked and the information appears to be false. I leave it to the Fact-Finding Committee to check again, but this is the information that we have. The hon. Leader of the Opposition is right when he says that it is abnormal. That's what I was saying.

Mr Bérenger: The hon. Prime Minister has said that now a new programme will be set up to prevent such happenings in the future. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister why was the National Land Drainage Programme slowed down since the last elections?

The Prime Minister: I don't know why the hon. Leader of the Opposition thinks that way. It has never been slowed down. In fact, if you want to go by any criteria - I have the details here - the Land Drainage Programme has never been slowed down and I don't know why he said that in his press conference.

(Interruptions)

Mr Bérenger: It is in the Budget!

The Prime Minister: The hon. Leader of the Opposition should look at the Budget at his own time. In 2003-2004 the amount voted was Rs200 m. How much was actually spent, Mr Speaker, Sir? A sum of Rs42,202,000.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: Second year, 2004-2005: Rs200 m. again was voted. The sum of Rs100,400,000 was spent and the whole amount was not spent. It is the same thing that is happening here.

Mr Bérenger: The Budget Estimates themselves show that, for example, in 2006-2007, the figures were brought down to less than Rs100 m. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister, when the hon. Minister of Education did not assume his responsibilities on Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning, adding insult to injury, he made reference to one student having lost her life out of 350,000...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please!

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he has asked the Minister of Education to resign?

(Interruptions)

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I did ask the Minister of Education whether he actually...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! I said order! Can I tell the House that this is a very important issue for the public in general and I would expect hon. Members to behave and have the debate in a dignified manner.

(Interruptions)

The Prime Minister has to answer. I said order! It is the last time that I am calling Members to order!

The Prime Minister: I did ask the Minister of Education what actually he had said and whether he had said this. He apprised not just me, but also the Cabinet afterwards that if we listened to what he had said, he had not actually said this. In fact, he tells me that he had asked the particular radio station to replay it so that people can listen to it.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker ...

Mr Bérenger: I will not give way.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Minister of Education so wishes, he can come with it as a matter of personal explanation later on.

(Interruptions)

Order now!

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister has made reference to a Fact-Finding Committee to be chaired by a Judge of the Supreme Court. As the hon. Prime Minister knows, a Fact-Finding Committee has no powers to call for witnesses, to call for papers or to do anything. Given the gravity of the situation, will the hon. Prime Minister agree to upgrade the Fact-Finding Committee to a full-fledged Commission of Inquiry with the same Judge chairing, to do a complete job with the correct terms of reference?

The Prime Minister: I think the terms of reference are quite wide here, Mr Speaker, Sir. On purpose I have made it very wide. It is felt, Mr Speaker, Sir, that if we want to have good results - if somebody does not want to come and depone, we will know about this, and then, if need be, we will look at it, but, at the moment, I feel a Fact-Finding Committee will be the quicker solution.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister if he can give us some more indication about the criteria that are going to be used to pay those Rs5,000 to households who have been hurt by the events of last week?

The Prime Minister: I think the Ministry of Social Security has defined the criteria, Mr Speaker, Sir. I know it is about people who have lost not only foodstuffs, materials in the houses like clothing, mattresses, kitchen utensils, but also those who, for their living, have to use certain materials that have been destroyed. I think it is quite open. In fact, from what I understand I don't have the exact figures - the number has increased dramatically and it costs much more than what we thought, but it does not matter, because these are the criteria that we have used.

Mr Bérenger: Can I have a guess estimate of how many families will be able to benefit from those facilities? How the enquiries are going to be carried out and by whom and when payment can be expected to start?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the Ministry of Social Security, in fact, is still enquiring and they don't have an idea as to the number of people, but we understand that the number is increasing.

Mr Bérenger: Will the hon. Prime Minister agree with me, after what has happened both in the case of cyclone Gula, but, more seriously, in the tragic events of last week, that there is urgent need for much closer cooperation, consultations between the

Meteorological Station, the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister's Office in such circumstances and we should not just sit and wait for the miraculous torrential rain warning to start saving lives?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, Mr Speaker, Sir, even these criteria have been there for more than two decades and nobody has questioned it in the past. That is why I have said in my declaration that not only we will look at it, but I have also asked for an expert from the World Meteorological Service to come and have a look and see what are the lacuna that we have in our system so that we may correct them.

Mr Lesjongard: May I ask the Prime Minister why, until now, the Minister of Education has not gone to see the family who has lost their child and why, up till now, he has not even talked to that bereaved family?

The Prime Minister: I understand that he has made arrangements.

Mr Jugnauth : Mr Speaker, Sir, we have heard the hon. Prime Minister say that there are established criteria in deciding when to give torrential warnings etc. May I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether these criteria are in absolute terms? Because we had information on Wednesday morning from the Meteorological Service that 94 millimetres of rain had already fallen and it was continuing to rain. May I ask whether we had to wait for the other five or ten minutes, half an hour, for it to reach 100 millimetres, then they would have taken the decision of closing the school?

The Prime Minister: In fact, to be precise, it is correct to say that in one place only, they had around 94 to 96 millimetres of rain; in other areas, they had as low as 20 or 30 millimetres. The criteria says here that it has to be 100 millimetres of widespread rain in less than twelve hours and that this heavy rain is likely to continue for several hours, then only will they issue the warning.

Dr. Mungur: Mr Speaker, Sir, the climate prediction net project uses about 95,000 computers in 150 countries. They work together to investigate the climate change. Can I ask the hon. Prime Minister whether he will agree with me how complicated is predicting climate change and shifting patterns of rainfall?

The Prime Minister: Well, I am not making it a political issue.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order please!

The Prime Minister: But it is a fact that in many countries they have been taken by surprise because it was an unusual phenomenon.

Mr Bodha: M. le président, étant donné que beaucoup de zones sinistrées se trouvaient dans la région de l'est, puis-je demander au Premier ministre pourquoi les deux ministres, qui étaient réclamés par la population dans cette circonscription - ils sont des députés de surcroît – au lieu de rendre visite aux habitants de la circonscription, c'est le docteur Mungur qui y est allé pour affronter la colère de la population?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker : Order!

(Interruptions)

Time is running out, we are losing time!

Mr Ganoo : Can the hon. Minister tell the House, on that fatal day, at what time did he first talk to the Minister of Education?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I must say also – and I think that people who have been in Government ought to know - that the issue of warning and removal of warning does not fall under the PMO. As I explained, at 4.16 in the morning the Ministry of Education was in touch with the Meteorological Services. But when the warning was issued, it was then that I talked to the Minister of Education.

Mr Bundhoo : Mr Speaker, Sir, with regard to the enquiry to identify where there is need for draining system, may I ask the hon. Prime Minister when was this enquiry carried out, when were all these spots identified and what was done in order to remedy this situation by the previous Government?

The Prime Minister: The answer is obvious and I must say that I am not putting blame as such, because it is difficult. Mr Speaker, Sir, that is why sometimes I say that very often we shoot ourselves in our feet. Again here, we have criteria. The Minister, for example, cannot decide that he will give this contract to this or that person. There is a whole procedure. I suppose that is one of the reasons why a lesser amount was spent. In the Budget, a sum of Rs200 m. is supposed to be spent, but only much less is spent. It is because of the procedures. In fact, I told the Minister that he has to accelerate the procedures and if we have to go through the same system...

(Interruptions)

When the hon. Member himself was chairing those committees, he did not manage to spend the money. What is he saying?

Mrs Perrier : Dans le cas d'un cyclone, c'est en alerte II que les écoles sont fermées, c'est-à-dire avant que le cyclone n'arrive et ne soit un réel danger pour les habitants. Dans ce cas présent, peut-on savoir pourquoi avoir pris la décision de fermer les écoles au moment même où c'était le moment le plus dangereux, c'est-à-dire au moment où les pluies torrentielles avaient été identifiées et le *warning* avait été donné par la météo? C'est à ce moment-là qu'il y avait les pluies torrentielles et qui représentaient un réel danger pour les élèves.....

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member should not repeat herself.

Mrs Perrier : C'est à ce moment-là que les enfants ont eu l'autorisation de partir et les écoles ont été fermées. Est-ce que ce n'était pas irresponsable...

Mr Speaker: This is a statement? The question has been put, the hon. Member should let the Prime Minister answer. Time is running out!

The Prime Minister: In fact, it is more complicated than we think. When the warning was given, in fact, the Ministry of Education did not allow the children to go out. They were held...

(Interruptions)

In many cases they were held in their schools because they had to organise transport. We should not forget that the parents are not at home at the time, transport had to be organised and then, only then, were the children allowed to go.

Mrs Martin : Is the hon. Prime Minister aware that there have been some cases where Police is actually refusing to take the statements of flood victims and can I ask him whether he can remedy to the situation?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware that there have been cases where Police refused it, but if the hon. Member can let me know, I will look into the matter.

Mr Bhagwan: Has the hon. Prime Minister's attention been drawn by the Police authorities or by the officers of the National Educational Unit to the fact that no transport facilities were arranged for the children just at the time when they were asked to go home? We have witnessed it. My office is near the JSS Mohamed and all the children were there in the rain.

Mr Speaker: No transport was arranged!

Mr Bhagwan: This is the cause...

Mr Speaker: I have understood the question.

Mr Bhagwan : Don't shout at me!

Mr Speaker: I am not shouting at you. I have said that I have understood the question. I am not shouting at you and if you continue like this, I will take action against you.

The Prime Minister: In fact, as I explained, there is a whole procedure. That is why, I understand, the hon. Minister of Education did not immediately allow the children to go because they were supposed to organise the transport. In fact, the Fact Finding Committee will find out.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, it has been rightly pointed out that schools are closed when a cyclone warning class II is in force and not class III or class IV. And I remind the hon. Prime Minister that in the past it has happened that schools are closed without the torrential rains warning being issued. The way the hon. Prime Minister is answering, is he telling the country that we are going to keep on doing just that, that is, to keep schools open until that miraculous torrential rains warning or are we going to review and allow those kids to go before the warning is issued?

The Prime Minister: But, Mr Speaker, Sir, this is precisely what I said earlier. We are going to review and see what are the lacuna and the criteria. That is why I have asked an expert from the World Met Office to come and I have set up the Fact Finding Committee. I am looking at other possibilities and asking other people also to help us establish the criteria.

Mr Speaker: Time is over! May I inform the House that Parliamentary Question B/86 addressed to Dr. the hon. Prime Minister will be answered by the hon. Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Tourism. Parliamentary Questions B/106 and B/128 will be answered by the hon. Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance & Economic Development. Questions addressed to the hon. Prime Minister!