

YEAR 2005

PENSIONERS, HANDICAPPED PERSONS AND STUDENTS - FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT – MoU (16/08/05)

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Acting Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport and Shipping whether, in regard to the provision of free public transport to pensioners, handicapped persons and students, he will -

- (i) lay copy of the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the bus owners;
- (ii) say -
 - (a) how the estimated annual cost of Rs600 m. was calculated and how it will be paid out;
 - (b) whether it will apply to all students including those travelling by contract mini-buses, and
 - (c) whether a pass system will operate and, if so, give the details thereof.

The Ag. Prime Minister (Dr. R. Beebeejaun): Mr Speaker, Sir, the Government has implemented a scheme for free travel by public transport, for old age pensioners/disabled persons as from 15 August 2005. The 01 September 2005 has been retained as the date of commencement of the scheme in respect of our students in the primary, secondary and post-secondary schools. The scheme is applicable in Mauritius, Rodrigues and the Outer Islands.

This is a landmark measure that is aimed at consolidating our Welfare State and bringing social justice to the weak and the vulnerable groups of our society. As per our Governmental Programme, we have kept our promises to grant free transport facilities to the old age pensioners, the disabled persons and the students travelling by public buses well before the expiry of the 100 days delay we gave ourselves for realising this much cherished scheme. This scheme had appeared very high on our agenda to change the life of the citizens of this country. There is unanimous satisfaction from all quarters and the result has been beyond our expectations.

Features of the Scheme

The fundamental principle guiding the introduction of this scheme was to relieve parents from the financial burden relating to travelling expenses by public buses of their children that usually impeded access to free education. In the case of old age pensioners and the disabled persons, our priority as a caring Government, was to improve the quality of life of this vulnerable segment of the population.

Tremendous care has been taken to ensure that the scheme be -

- (i) transparent so that Government disburses the most appropriate amount on the scheme;
- (ii) flexible, especially bearing in mind the realities of the Mauritian context;
- (iii) simple and easily administered by Government, bus operators and other stakeholders;
- (iv) adaptable so as to account for yearly growth in the target population as well as any future increase in the tariff of bus fares;
- (v) cost-efficient and well-managed to meet the test of audit scrutiny, and
- (vi) effective so as to contribute towards the enhancement of the quality of life of the beneficiaries.

Given the complex nature of the transport structure, Government has decided to adopt the mode of direct disbursement to bus companies, as an interim measure up to the end of the current financial year.

Electronic Travel Card System

In the meantime, the possibility of introducing an electronic travel card system is being explored. This system would enable a passenger to swipe his card over an electronic card reader installed in a bus which could provide to the authorities concerned more reliable and accurate information on travelling pattern of the beneficiaries. I now come to the description of the project.

Facilities for Old Age Pensioners & Disabled Persons

According to statistics available, there are some 120,000 old age pensioners and disabled persons who are benefiting from this scheme. They are using their current concessionary bus pass to travel freely as from 15 August 2005 without any restriction on the frequency, distance and time of travel. New beneficiaries will be issued with bus passes.

Disabled persons under the age of 15, attending school and specialised institutions, will be provided with free transport according to the existing scheme operated by the Ministry of Social Security. They will also get a free bus pass for free travel at all times. Disabled persons not attending schools will also be provided with a free bus pass.

Operators will be compensated directly based on the proportion of Old Age Pensioners and disabled persons carried by them as assessed by the National Transport Authority (NTA). The same mode of payment will apply to Rodrigues where 63 buses operate and where there are 3,000 old age pensioners and disabled persons.

Bus operators submit on a monthly basis returns of their operations to the NTA.

The returns comprise the bus fleet, the number of buses operated per day, number of passengers carried per day, revenue collected, expenditure on diesel and other operating costs.

From analysis of these figures, it is found that –

13% of the total number of tickets issued by the operators are the old aged pensioners and disabled persons. This amounts to approximately Rs185m.,
32% of the total number of tickets issued by the operators are to the students during school days.

Post-Secondary Sector

The post-secondary sector composed of approximately 11,000 full- time students, both non-fee paying and fee-paying institutions. At present most of these students are travelling by public transport, except for those attending SSR Medical College, who use public service vehicle (contract) buses for commuting to the colleges or hospitals.

The NTA has worked out an estimate based on 85% of the post-secondary population travelling by public transport, excluding Mauritius Institute of Health and Mauritius Institute of Education, and the cost is around Rs40 m. annually.

As the present Road Traffic Regulations allow only students below 21 years to travel at concessionary fare, the regulations will be amended to do away with the age restriction of students as from the 01 September 2005. Necessary measures are being taken for the issue of bus passes to those not in possession of existing passes.

Secondary Schools

There are 187 secondary schools that are managed either by the State or the private sector. As at May 2005, the number of students attending non-fee paying secondary schools, including those offering prevocational courses, amounted to approximately 115,000. On the other hand, those attending fee-paying secondary institutions total 5,048.

Government has decided that both non-fee paying and fee-paying secondary school students should benefit from the same scheme during school days and from residence to school and back on production of their bus passes.

Those not possessing one will be issued with the same. Moreover, students attending school during the examination period will be allowed to travel freely upon specific production of their official time-table containing their name and index number to the bus conductors.

Special schemes will be worked out by the Ministry of Education & Human Resources for students living in areas not served by buses.

The NTA has estimated the expenditure at Rs300 m. annually based on the assumption that 96,000 of all secondary students (fee & non-fee paying) travel by public transport to attend school for a period of 180 days, up to the end of June 2006.

Moreover, in the case of 10 schools where the Ministry of Education & Human Resources is already providing free transport facilities to diverted students, the system will be maintained. The actual cost of providing these services is around Rs5.4 m. annually.

At present there are 291 primary schools that are administered either by the Government or the private sector. As at May 2005, there were some 117,824 and 5,738 students attending non-fee paying and fee-paying primary schools respectively. The primary school students use various modes of travel and according to a recent preliminary survey carried out in all primary schools by the Ministry of Education & Human Resources, some 13% travel by bus. I am glad to state that the bus operators have agreed to take on board all primary school students on school days even though they are not in possession of a student pass.

The unavailability of data on the residential address, bus fares and distance travelled by students is rendering it difficult to make a cost estimate in respect of other modes of transport apart from public buses. A decision would be taken in the light of a comprehensive survey to be carried out by the Ministry of Education & Human Resources. In fact, it is expected that this survey would provide very reliable data and will be undertaken at the resumption of schools to capture all relevant information relating to the bus-using population and money spent on bus fares.

The NTA has assessed the annual amount to be disbursed to bus operators to be around Rs30 m for 13% of all primary students using public transport. It is to be pointed out that the NTA has not taken into account the 24 schools where the Ministry of Education & Human Resources is already providing free transport facilities to diverted students. This system will be maintained and the actual cost of providing these services annually is Rs4.3 m.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am tabling a copy of each of the MoUs signed with the bus operators in respect of old age pensioners, disabled persons and students. In fact, there are six MoUs including two for Rodrigues. All the bus operators have promised their full collaboration for the successful implementation of the scheme.

Disbursements will be effected to bus operators in accordance with the terms of the MOUs, i.e. the fixed amounts will be credited to their bank accounts on the 10th of each month up to 30 June 2006.

To recapitulate the scheme will cost Government the following amounts both in respect of Mauritius and Rodrigues -

Rs 6 Old Age Pensioners 185 m
Tertiary Sector Students 40 m
Secondary School Students 300 m
Primary School Students 10 m

Total 565 m (which is an estimated cost)

A Central Monitoring Committee has been set up under the chairmanship of the Senior Chief Executive of my Ministry to ensure that the scheme meets its desired objectives.

The Committee would address any weaknesses that may be identified within the system or brought to light by the public. Corrective measures will consequently be taken to improve the services provided to the beneficiaries.

Mr Bérenger: Mr Speaker, Sir, now pending us having the time to look at the sixth memoranda submitted, can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether other stakeholders were consulted and why have there not been memoranda of understanding, in particular, concerning the *Individual Bus Co-operatives* and the Contract Bus Owners' Association?

The Ag. Prime Minister: All the buses giving public service have been consulted and they have signed an agreement. Outside the co-operative there are about 50 bus owners who have signed a separate agreement on the same line that they agree to give the service on the terms and conditions which are being discussed. As to the contract bus, they are outside the scheme as at present. We promised free transport for students, old age pensioners, handicapped using the bus system and we are sticking to this for the time being.

Mr Bérenger: I was going to ask that later on, but can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister - since he has confirmed that Government will not be paying for the transport of students using contract mini-buses - whether, at least, a survey has been carried out to know how many students are concerned?

The Ag. Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition as it is important to clarify this position. As from the 18th, at the beginning of the school term, we are going to have a comprehensive survey of modes of travel of all students, but particular attention to the primary sector where we do not have, at the moment, enough information.

In the light of what comes out, we are going to take the appropriate measures and I can re-assure the House that we are very sensitive to issues of safety, of younger children and so on. This will be taken into account and before the end of the year, Government will take a decision accordingly.

Mr Bérenger: May I also ask whether the transport facilities being paid for applies also to part-time students at the University, to the pre-vocational institutions and elsewhere?

The Ag. Prime Minister: This applies to full-time students of all institutions.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether the measures taken apply to all buses, air-conditioned or not?

The Ag. Prime Minister: The problem has cropped up. The short answer, Mr Speaker, Sir, is yes, it will apply to air-conditioned buses, because the bus companies have agreed to provide the service. It will not apply to the blue line special coach that comes from Rose Hill or Vacoas to Port Louis directly. It won't apply to the express service, but it will apply to the air-conditioned buses and the bus operators yesterday have all agreed that they will do so.

Mr Bérenger: The Ag. Prime Minister has made reference to an interim way of paying out the sums that are to be paid out. Am I given to understand that different companies operating on different routes will be paid the same amount irrespective of how many students they do carry?

The Ag. Prime Minister: A survey has been done and the spread is fairly even. It is interesting that between town and country the spread is fairly even, but what is more important is that it will not be based solely on the number of buses that the fleet has. It will be based on the number of buses operating.

Mr Bérenger: Can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister what measures are envisaged or have already been taken to control so that there is no over expenditure as the scheme develops?

The Ag. Prime Minister: At the moment, it is an agreement that has been fixed in time, but we'll reserve ourselves the right to review it as more information comes in.

We are more concerned, Mr Speaker, Sir, with the standard of service. Government feels that we've got probably a good arrangement with the bus companies, especially that we have an arrangement to buy in bulk with the bus companies, and after a lot of persuasion, in view of the fact that they are being paid a sort of captive money, they are getting it as a guarantee, they have come down in price; and now I see some of them are over-reacting as maybe they are losing, but anyway it is for the benefit of the public.

Mr Bérenger: From what I understand a door has been left open following a comprehensive survey that will be carried out for the possibility of something being done for the students and their parents who use contract mini-buses. Can I ask for further clarification - there are memoranda of understanding with bus companies – concerning the situation as far as the *bus individuels* are concerned? The Ag. Prime Minister gave

some information, but I would like to know what is going to operate in the case of the *bus individuels*?

The Ag. Prime Minister: The *bus individuels* have grouped into a co-operative and we have signed a memorandum with the cooperative. As I have said before outside the cooperative, there is – it is not a majority – a few individual owners with whom we have already signed the same sort of agreement.

Mr Bérenger: I heard the Ag. Prime Minister say that procedures are on to adopt, in due course, some form of electronic pass system. Can we have more details? What stage discussions have reached and whether there will be a tender procedure?

The Ag. Prime Minister: It is much too early. We have just started the procedure. We have some estimation, but I don't think it would be in the interest of anybody to speculate at the moment. But we are aiming to get a report as soon as possible within the next few months.

Mr Bérenger: Being given that now we are informed that this facility will be paid to pensioners at any time, can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister why it was spelt out in the Government Programme delivered on the 29th of July that as far as pensioners are concerned, it is only, I quote – “176. (...)during specific time periods” that that will be paid.

The Ag. Prime Minister: Following the announcement of our Programme, there have been requests that this be extended. We have listened to the people as always and we have come to the right conclusion. But I would make a plea here. In the interest of the old-aged people travelling it might be best if they avoid the rush hour. This is just an advice on safety that we are going to give to the old-aged people.

Mr Bérenger: It is a good thing that after the Government Programme came out and following points raised by the Opposition and others that Government *a corrigé le tir et le texte aussi - pas seulement le tir*. Mr Speaker, Sir, being given that facilities are being extended to the disabled and handicapped persons, can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether Government will give consideration to special arrangements being made for the disabled to travel? As we know, elsewhere in buildings and so on, special arrangements are provided. Can I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether this has already been discussed with the bus operators and other stakeholders and if not, whether Government is prepared to look in that direction?

The Ag. Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The answer is yes, we have looked into this problem. We are aware of the difficulties encountered, not only for travel, but in buildings and other places as well and we are paying particular attention to this problem.

Mr Dayal: I should like to ask the hon. Ag. Prime Minister whether he will consider the possibility of fine-tuning the provision that has been made by considering complaints and suggestions and, why not, criticisms from the stakeholders, from *forces vives*, from people concerned and from Members from the Opposition side because they also had it in their programme.

The Ag. Prime Minister: Yes, Sir.

Mr Dowarkasing: May I ask the Ag. Prime Minister whether he has envisaged measures for those old people that do not travel by public transport? Because not every old person travels by public transport.

The Ag. Prime Minister: My colleague, the Minister of Social Security, I am sure, will attend to this problem.