

SECONDARY

SCHOOL TEACHERS/OTHERS

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

WIRELESS LAN DEPLOYMENT – MAURITIUS & RODRIGUES SECONDARY SCHOOLS (23.05.2023)

(No. B/597) Dr. M. Gungapersad (Second Member for Grand' Baie & Poudre d'Or) asked the Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology whether, in regard to the deployment of wireless local area network in the 155 secondary schools in Mauritius and Rodrigues as announced in the Budget Speech 2021-2022, she will state where matters stand.

The Minister of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation (Mr D. Balgobin): Mr Speaker, Sir, I humbly request you to bear with me. I have a lengthy reply; just to be able to give all the details.

Following the announcement made in the Budget Speech 2020-2021 for the deployment of wireless local area network in 155 secondary schools in Mauritius and Rodrigues, my Ministry initiated discussions with the main stakeholder, the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology in August 2020 for the latter Ministry to submit its concise requirements.

Consequently, meetings were held with officers of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology in August, September and November 2020 where it was agreed that the project would consist of procurement of relevant equipment as well as provision of connectivity services to cater for the entire secondary schools, that is, all classes, Specialist Rooms that is, Home Economics, Design & Technology, Computer Labs, Administrative blocks among others.

Mr Speaker, Sir, it is to be noted that during the period 10 March to 30 April 2021, the country was in total lockdown and thereafter further sanitary restrictions were in place, resulting in lesser economic activities and only a limited number of public officers were called upon to ensure service delivery and business continuity. This had an impact on the whole process of the project.

Nevertheless, the Central Informatics Bureau, CIB, which is the technical team of my Ministry, worked on the specifications of this project along with the stakeholders concerned and given its project value which was Rs170 m., the bidding documents were submitted to the Central Procurement Board for vetting and floating of tenders on June 2021.

Various meetings were held at the level of the CPB during which a number of clarifications were sought and agreed upon. Thereafter, in line with the recommendations from the CPB, the tender was amended and launched in January 2022, with a closing date fixed for 09 March 2022 and extended till 06 April 2022. However, several queries were received from potential bidders and upon request of the latter, the closing date was extended till 12 April 2022.

Mr Speaker, Sir, on 27 May 2022, my Ministry was informed by the Central Procurement Board that none of the bids received, was found to be responsive after the evaluation exercise carried out.

Mr Speaker, Sir, taking into consideration the urgency of the project, on June 2022, an alternative solution was approved at the level of my Ministry for the project to be implemented in two parts that is, the connectivity part and the infrastructure part, as in the meantime, on 09 June 2022, my Ministry had signed a Framework Agreement for the Government Intranet System that we called the GINS with Mauritius Telecom Ltd after a tender procedure. Therefore, the project would have been broken into two components, that is –

- (i) provision of the wireless LAN infrastructure in secondary schools by a potential supplier, and
- (ii) the connectivity services provided under the GINS Framework as I mentioned above.

Mr Speaker, Sir, consultations were held anew with stakeholders concerned and a new bidding document for the provision of wireless LAN infrastructure in secondary schools were prepared by the CIB and sent to the Central Procurement Board in October 2022 for its vetting prior to the launching of the tender. Subsequently, additional clarifications were sought on specific items of the bidding documents, including the cost estimates and various meetings were held in November and January to finalise the bidding documents.

Further clarifications were submitted again in February 2023 on the bidding documents and on March of this year, the Central Procurement Board requested my Ministry, for additional

information including the revised cost estimates taking into account the external factors which have impacted on the increase in the price of various commodities including IT equipment, that is, the fluctuations of foreign exchange, the COVID-19 pandemic, increase in the cost of freight and shortage of chips or semi-conductors and non-availability of specific IT equipment on the international market among others. This was reiterated in a meeting held at the CPB in March 2023.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in this regard, in March, a committee was set up at the level of my Ministry with the technical team and representatives of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education and Science and Technology to work out an updated cost estimate. Meetings were held again in March and April 2023 and I was informed that there has been a considerable increase in the project value due to the reasons I mentioned above.

Therefore, in line with established procedures in such cases, my Ministry has approached the Ministry of Finance in April 2023 for financial clearance on the revised project value. A reply is currently awaited.

Mr Speaker, Sir, pending completion of the tender procedure for the main project, connectivity has been successfully deployed in the computer rooms of 47 secondary schools, through the GINS project on a temporary basis. It should be noted that the required infrastructure was already in place in those schools and I am tabling the list of these 47 schools.

Dr. Gungapersad: Mr Speaker, Sir, in reply to PQ B/430 dated 22 May 2018 by hon. Osman Mahomed, the Minister of Education asserted that she was informed by the then ICT Minister that the connectivity project would be completed by the end of June 2018. Now, the new Minister of ICT is further extending the year for the completion of the work. Will the Minister inform parents and students how soon we are going to have this connectivity in schools, because they have been waiting for long?

Mr Balgobin: Mr Speaker, Sir, I mentioned in my reply that the deployment of wireless Local Area Network in 155 secondary schools including Mauritius and Rodrigues was announced in the Budget 2020-2021. I cannot reply to the Member as to what was said in 2018 as this particular project is not comparable to the previous one because the previous one was connectivity in certain classes only.

This new project announced in 2020-2021 provides for connectivity in all classes in all premises of the school. So, this is a new one. The idea is the same to have connectivity, but not

in a specific area, but in the whole compound. I explained in my reply; that is why I took time of the House to give a lengthy reply of the procurement exercise, and that it takes time. We have had discussions. A survey has to be done in all the schools to understand the infrastructure of the school because there are civil works to be done in the schools. Connectivity will come afterwards. We have gone for the process of the tendering exercise through the CPB and that is the status as at now.

Dr. Gungapersad: Mr Speaker, Sir, given that the Director of Audit has been very critical regarding the way this connectivity project has been mishandled, especially financially, will the hon. Minister inform the House what is the estimated amount of public funds which will be invested in this project, because since its inception, it has been going on; we mentioned 170 million in 2021-2022? Also, to inform the House if any sum has been recouped from the liquidated damages.

Mr Balgobin: Mr Speaker, Sir, the question that has been put by the Member is where matters stand for this current project. What he is referring to is a project that was initiated in 2013 by the then government. We have a lot to say on that particular project if he comes with a question, and if he has the courage to come with that particular question about how the seed was put then, and the tree grew up very badly.

On this particular project, I have mentioned that in the financial year, the budget voted was 170 million and due to the various external factors which we do not control, the team - the Central Informatics Bureau and other stakeholders - has worked a new revised estimate which has been sent to the Ministry of Finance to have a clearance. Eventually, once we have all the exact information, we could give all details to the House.