

## **MERCHANT NAVY CLUB – PULLING DOWN (07/07/09)**

**(No. B/746) Mr J. C. Barbier (Third Member for GRNW & Port Louis West)** asked the Minister of Education, Culture & Human Resources whether he is aware that the Merchant

Navy Club is being pulled down and if so, will he state if -

(a) it forms part of the buffer zone of the Apravasi Ghat, and

(b) any objection has been received in relation to the said pulling down.

**Dr. Bunwaree:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I was made aware of the pulling down of the Merchant Navy Club by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund on 20 June 2009.

Following a site visit effected by officers of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund at the Merchant Navy Club on 20 June 2009, the reasons put forward by the Mauritius Sailors' Home Society, the managing body of the Merchant Navy Club, for this demolition, were that the building was in a derelict state and was on the verge of collapsing and had become a threat to the immediate neighbourhood and environment. Consequently, this situation had left them with no option but to demolish the structures that had already fallen apart, the more so as the building was not insured, as no insurance company was willing to provide a cover due to its derelict state.

With regard to part (a) of the question, the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund has confirmed that the land on which stands the Merchant Navy Club forms part of the buffer zone of the Aapravasi Ghat.

Regarding part (b) of the question, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the answer is no. However, on 11 June 2009, after having been verbally informed by a member of the Seafarers Welfare Fund of the sale and demolition of the Merchant Navy Club, the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund informed my Ministry of same and lodged an objection to the Municipal Council of Port Louis, through a letter dated 12 June 2009, expressing its deep concern thereto, and requested the Municipality to take action to prevent the demolition of that building in view of its historical value.

The Municipal Council of Port Louis, replying to the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund on 24 June 2009, informed that the Council had taken cognizance of the partial demolition of the Merchant Navy Club with much regret, and that the Council did not receive any request for demolition nor had it authorised same. The Council also indicated that it had no enforcing power to prevent any further demolition, and informed the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund to apply to the Supreme Court for an injunction prohibiting any further demolition of the Club.

I am further informed that the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund has sought legal advice on the

course of action to be followed. The legal advice obtained is to the effect that the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund has no *locus standi* to go for prohibition of demolition.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as matters stand, it is most unfortunate that we have not been able to prevent the demolition of the historic building. This is due to the time taken for the preparation of the Planning Policy Guidance. As Minister responsible, I have given instructions for the speedy implementation of the Planning Policy Guidance for the management of the buffer zone.

The Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund is presently working on the Planning Policy Guidance for the buffer zone of the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site, with the support of a South African Heritage Consultant, Professor Karel Bakker. I am informed that about 80% of the works have been completed. Professor Bakker is expected in Mauritius on 19 July 2009 to finalise the document. During his visit, he will hold a consultative meeting with the stakeholders of the Buffer Zone to sensitise them on the very purpose of the Planning Policy Guidance. Upon finalisation of this document, the buffer zone will be declared a heritage area, and any development within that area will be controlled.

In the meantime, on 16 July 2009, a booklet on the buffer zone of the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage Site will be launched to sensitise the stakeholders and the public in general about the Planning Policy Guidance applicable in the buffer zone.

**Mr Barbier:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Merchant Navy Club was set up as far back as 1857, when the Finance committee of the *conseil législatif de Maurice adopta cette recommandation et vota 5,000 piastres pour l'institution de la Mauritius Sailors Home Society* qui avait eu la responsabilité de tout mettre en place. Ce Merchant Navy Club fut créé par le gouvernement mauricien de l'époque, à travers le conseil législatif. Etant donné cette situation, pourrais-je savoir si le gouvernement n'a rien à dire par rapport à cette démolition qui est maintenant en cours, étant donné que c'est un projet qui fut mis en place par les autorités gouvernementales d'alors ?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** It is most unfortunate, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, but I have tried to give all the information that I have concerning this sad incident. Of course, there is a void, because of this planning guidance not having been prepared yet, and we are doing our utmost best to go as quick as possible.

To reply to the question the hon. Member, I can inform the House that the Ministry is working in close collaboration with all the stakeholders, to see what is the best that we can do to try to do some sort of repair, if not, at least, for the memory to stay there.

**Mr Bérenger:** The hon. Minister has confirmed that the Merchant Navy Club falls within the buffer zone. Will the Minister agree with me that, obviously what should have been done a long way back after the UNESCO had approved this site and Le Morne would

have been to produce regulations, prohibiting the action, demolition, whatever action within the buffer zone?

Can we know why this was not done? Better late than never! Are we going to do that urgently, have regulations published in the Government Gazette to protect the buffer zone of Aapravasi Ghat and of Le Morne?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is a very complicated matter because we have the guidelines set up by UNESCO. We have also to work on the document that I have just mentioned and we have had to take the consultancy of a foreign expert to help us. It is still not ready. I have said 80% of the work is done and we are expecting to finish it as soon as possible, but I do agree with the hon. Member that we have to do something urgently.

**Mr Lesjongard:** Can the hon. Minister, at least, give us an indication of the extent of the buffer zone around the Aapravasi Ghat?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** I cannot give an indication of the extent of the buffer zone offhand. But, I think it is approximately two kilometres around the Aapravasi Ghat.

**Mr Bodha:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the view of the fact that the hon. Minister said that the Aapravasi Ghat did not have the *locus standi* to challenge the demolition of the monument, may we know who has the *locus standi* to challenge the demolition of any national monument, so that such blunders do not happen in the future?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** I did not get the gist of the question.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Maybe, we could allow him to repeat it. Yes, hon. Bodha?

**Mr Bodha:** May we know who has the *locus standi* to challenge the demolition of any national monument in the future?

*(Interruptions)*

**Dr. Bunwaree:** Aapravasi Ghat? I cannot say who has got the responsibility. We are looking into all the aspects, not only for the Aapravasi Ghat, but for Le Morne and the other heritage sites as well.

**Mr Bhagwan:** Can the Government see to it with the promoters or the owners, or even through the Municipality which is the local authority that insofar as reconstruction, at least, the architectural design be made in such a way as to make it - not as it was before, but at least to keep the architectural design - as it was originally as far as possible?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** I think I have replied already. I have said that we are trying to see what can be done to at least to keep the memory of the building.

**Mrs Martin:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister said that problems regarding demolition have to be - especially national monuments - urgently addressed. May I ask the hon. Minister what are the immediate measures that he is envisaging in order to prevent the recurrence of such happenings?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** Once the policy guidelines are obtained, then there will no difficulties. We are going to have regulations as the hon. Leader of the Opposition mentioned and then there will be the implementation. We will make sure that we enforce whatever is in the guidelines.

**Mr Lesjongard:** In his reply, the hon. Minister stated that the building was pulled down and the reasons being the poor condition of the building and the danger it represented.

Can we know whether there was an expert assessment regarding the condition of the building and whether when the Municipality of Port Louis was informed that the building was being demolished, the city engineer submitted a report to confirm the condition of the building?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** I do not think that they had time to do it, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, because I mentioned the dates. In fact, the Aapravasi Ghat reacted immediately as they got the first verbal information and then the Municipality of Port Louis was informed. They tried – I believed - to do what they had to do but, unfortunately, it went so quickly and no permission was asked for. In fact, no permission is supposed to be asked for demolition of buildings, but it so happened.

**Mrs Perrier:** The hon. Minister mentioned the historical dimension of the building. Can he confirm whether the Heritage Trust Fund was aware of the pulling down and did they give their view on that demolition?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** No, I think in the main reply I have given already the reply to this question.

**Mr Barbier:** Is the hon. Minister aware that this institution, if I may say so, was set by the State, as far back as 1857, and that now since 2001/2003, there have been two attempts by some *gros requins* to try to take this site and to have some very important commercial buildings on this site? So, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, will the hon. Minister state whether there is any project which has already been earmarked to be set on this site and, if so, by whom, and who are behind this project?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** We do not have all these details, but we have opened a line of

communication with the stakeholders to see to it that whatever developments take place on the commercial aspects that there is some sort of corporate social responsibility, in fact, to keep the memory of this building.

**Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun:** In the past, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, when Le Nef was demolished, it was then built up again. Is there any possibility, in this particular case, to get the building rebuilt?

**Dr. Bunwaree:** I think that on three occasions I have replied to this question, but I can still say that we are trying to see in what way we can, at least, keep the memory of this building in the same place.