

Clarity sought on import list changes

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THE Trinidad and Tobago Contractors Association (TTCA) wants the Government to clarify who will benefit from the removal of building materials from the import negative list under the country's Trade Ordinance.

In an interview with the *Express* at the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI) compound in Macoya recently, TTCA president Lisa Ramoutar and general manager John Cardenas said while they had no problem with foreign competition, there were local operators who were also producing some of the items on the list.

During the budget presentation in October, Finance Minister Davendranath Tancoo said over the past decade, the cost of construction materials has skyrocketed. He explained that in an attempt to stimulate the economy in the construction sector, he was proposing the negative list under the Trade Ordinance be amended.

Some of the items Tancoo is having removed from the list-from January 1 next year-include clays, crushed limestone, boulders, sand, gravel, plastering sand, porcellanite, argillite and oil sand.

Tancoo pointed out the new arrangement is expected to reduce the cost of building materials and construction in general. The budget has since been passed.

According to Ramoutar, the association discussed the matter at its board meeting last week Wednesday, and several areas in the budget were seen as impactful to the TTCA's membership.

'We do have an idea of what could be in the pipeline,' Ramoutar said, while admitted this is welcome since construction has been slow in Trinidad, 'but in particular in Tobago where contractors are struggling. So, we at least have seen that there are projects in the pipeline'.

Despite this, Ramoutar acknowledged there were issues regarding monies owed to contractors by State agencies. She said she was uncertain whether this matter was addressed in the budget, and indicated it was an issue their membership was raising.

Coming back to the imported items on the negative import list, Ramoutar insisted the TTCA was unsure who would benefit when the items are removed from the list. 'If our local quarries do produce these items, are they going to compete with the foreign imports?'

Chiming in, Cardenas said while the association was unsure of the objective behind importing those products, they were also wondering if it was a measure to slow down illegal quarrying operations.

Cardenas reiterated the association did not have a problem with competition but only wanted clarity. 'As a matter of fact, in the past our members have bought material before when there was a shortage during the Patrick Manning regime, where there was a heated economy in construction and materials were bought to do the airport. So, we do not have an issue with it, really,' Cardenas said.

Asked if the police or anyone in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs had reached out to the TTCA after 19 people were detained at an illegal quarrying site in the Manuel Congo community, both Ramoutar and Cardenas responded in the negative.

Cardenas said while he believed there was no reason for the police to contact their association since none of the persons arrested were TTCA members, he admitted there should be efforts to regulate the quarrying industry 'since it was in a terrible state right now, because right now the Ministry of Energy is responsible for giving out licences to all quarries and a lot of them do not have licences. So, it is a big issue that allows for illegal mining and quarrying, and people just doing what they want and the State does not get money from those illegal operations'.