

No nays as SoE extended

IN PARLIAMENT

■ Ria Taitt

Political Editor

THERE were no nays from the Opposition when the motion for the three-month extension of the state of emergency (SoE) was approved on Monday night.

The three-month extension would take the SoE to April 14 when it expires, unless it is extended again.

The SoE was implemented on December 30 and under Section 9 of the Constitution remains in force for 15 days.

That meant that the 15-day period expired at midnight of January 13.

At 11 p.m., one hour before the expiration, the House passed the motion extending the SoE by three months.

As he wound up the debate on the motion, Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley on Monday night criticised the Police Service Commission (PoSC) for its interpretation of the law, which he said prevented it from taking any action for permanently filling the post of Commissioner of Police during the period that the incumbent's tenure has been extended.

Erla Harewood-Christopher's term of office was extended for one year last May and therefore ends in mid-May.

But, according to the PM, the PoSC took the position that it is unable to search for a new substantive commissioner while Harewood-Christopher is occupying the position. 'We may be dissatisfied, as you are making a case of it, with the performance of our current Commissioner of Police, if that is what you are saying, (but) the Government cannot jump in and rectify that. Madame Speaker, you wouldn't believe that in the interpretation of the Police Service Commission, at a time when there is dissatisfaction with respect to the police effectiveness and the demand for a new commissioner, the Police Service Commission takes the position that we are not going to begin the search for a substantive commissioner during a period when a retired officer on extension is there, because there is no vacancy,' he said.

'Try and explain that to me. Because an officer is there on a year's extension, a retired officer, as a matter of logic that would mean that while that year is going on, the commission is searching for (a substantive commissioner). No, no, it is only when a vacancy occurs-and of course, when that vacancy occurs, we have no commissioner, so we extend the ex-commissioner's (term). That is a madhouse. And the Government does not have it within its power in the law to intervene in that,' the Prime Minister stated.

Things could have been worse

Rowley said the Opposition was attacking the Police Commissioner 'as though the Government hand-picked a Commissioner of Police that is incompetent...It is you all who put that arrangement in place where the Police Service Commission has to select by detailed process and put before us (the Parliament) their finding (nominations) and it is from that we have to choose,' he said.

Saying that the Government did not have the option to go and choose a commissioner of police, the Prime Minister said the law hamstrung the Government into accepting what comes to it from the Police Service Commission.

The Prime Minister said there was no point in the police doing the work and when they get to the courthouse, the criminals were happier than the police. He spoke of the revolving door in the bail system and the leniency from some magistrates and judges.

'We all have to tell the criminals: we see you, we hear you, we know you, we will touch you, we will convict you and we will restrict you,' he said.

The PM stressed he understood the difficulties of working in the prisons, but he said some of the problems in the prisons were facilitated by the behaviour of the prison officers.

The Prime Minister said had the Government not taken the initiatives it did to address crime, things would have been worse.

'When the police take 1,000 guns off the street and 10,000 rounds of ammunition, some getting wounded and killed in the process... If we weren't doing that, what would have been the outcome?' he asked.

He said when the Opposition makes it look as if the Government is doing nothing, nothing was further from the truth. T& T had taken a leadership role in fighting crime at home and abroad, going to the source of the gun manufacturing-the United States, he noted.

The Prime Minister said it was a deliberate policy of the US Department of Commerce to sell and export arms and ammunition to little countries like ours, and said the Government had made that argument to the Americans in Washington. 'It was our agitation and representation that caused the American government to make illegal gun traffic across states to be a federal crime,' he said.

Rowley said the Opposition was talking about law and order in the debate, and one wouldn't believe that they had been the architects of Section 34, the owners of LifeSport and the nurturers of parliamentarians with questions to answer before the court.

Much of police time was taken up 'investigating trafficking, investigating fraud and misconduct by people who are supposed to be honourable in this House', Rowley argued.

The Prime Minister said all the UNC cared about was the election, and said they were elated that crime was escalating-'as it has been since you all were in office'.

Rowley said he had to listen to the Opposition MP for San Juan/Barataria Saddam Hosein describing the state of emergency being political gimmickry as the Opposition leader was asking why it had not been declared sooner. He said everything the Government did, the Opposition saw in terms of elections, because that was all it cared about. He said the Opposition was calling for an election as though this was something that bodes well for them. 'The election will be called and we are going to beat them in the East, beat them in the West, we going to beat them in the North and beat them in the South,' Rowley stated.