

Analysts: T&T's economy can't support expanded Caricom migration



Economist Dr Indera Sagewan

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Barbados, Dominica, Belize, and St Vincent and the Grenadines have thrown open their borders for free movement of each other's citizens. But while the decision has been hailed as a landmark for regional integration, experts suggest T&T is holding back because of its fragile economy and migration pressures.

On Monday, Caribbean Community (Caricom) Chairman and Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley announced the launch of the bloc's Enhanced Cooperation in Free Movement, a step beyond the existing Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME). Nationals of the four countries can now live, work, and retire indefinitely across those territories.

But economist Dr Indera Sagewan believes the move reflects Mottley's commitment to the CSME and could serve as a model for other states. But she argued that T&T is not yet ready to join, pointing to weak job creation, slow growth, and foreign exchange shortages.

"There are quite significant economic problems that are being confronted by countries in the region, and in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, a very strong focus needs to be placed on the issue of growth and revitalising the capacity of the country to generate employment. If we can get back

to a place where there is strong growth, I personally do encourage the free movement we are seeing being embraced by these four countries,” Sagewan said.

She said timing was critical, as T&T was already strained by migration.

“When you add on the fact that we have allowed so many thousands, probably running over 100,000, illegal immigrants to come in from Venezuela, which already is a strain on our social services, I do not think that we can, in this moment, simply widen the net.”

She dismissed fears of the country being “left behind,” saying the move was better suited to smaller economies with higher unemployment.

Sagewan added that full CSME adoption remained the ideal, but only once T&T’s economy improved.

“If it were in a boom period, I would definitely say ‘by all means, we are more than ready for it.’ But in this moment, given the socio-economic challenge, and the numbers we have already absorbed from Venezuela, I have to say that in this moment, we should probably hold our hands until we get to a better place where, absolutely, I think free movement of people is ideally what we would want to move to.”

Political scientist Dr Indira Rampersad said the initiative was legitimate under the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas and should be seen in the spirit of regional integration. But she cautioned that unfettered movement carried risks for T&T.

“Unfettered free movement of persons poses its challenges for developing countries. It is much easier to do this in Europe, and they have done this with European integration, but have not even moved towards the common currency. They have the Euro; even the OECS has a common currency, the Eastern Caribbean dollar, because of the varying levels of development and because of developmental issues.”

Rampersad said Government would have to carefully review its position, especially given the migrant pressures already facing the country.