

## Moonilal ready for Dragon gas talks with Maduro regime



Minister of Energy and Energy Industries Dr Roodal Moonilal PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

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Energy Minister Dr Roodal Moonilal has refused to say who will lead negotiations with Venezuela over the stalled Dragon gas project, insisting only that “the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is one Government.”

Pressed on whether he personally would meet with Venezuelan officials yesterday, Moonilal deflected: “All I can tell you is that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will have discussions with all stakeholders involved, whether it’s the Venezuelan authorities, the multinationals involved, the United States administration ... We are very confident that the Dragon has been resurrected.”

His remarks came just a day after Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar met US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington on Monday, where the US signalled support for restarting the cross-border venture. The development is widely viewed as a breakthrough, following Washington’s

decision in April to revoke a key OFAC licence—a move that stalled the project weeks before the General Election.

Former energy minister Stuart Young, who managed the deal under the previous government, yesterday accused the United National Congress of shifting its stance and warned that “the Government cannot avoid direct talks” with Venezuela Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, who is also its energy minister. (See page 7) However, Moonilal rejected that charge during a tele-conference with reporters, framing the UNC’s position as a critique of the People’s National Movement’s approach rather than the project itself.

“If and when necessary, I would have no difficulty going back to Washington, to Houston, to Caracas, to anywhere once it advances the interests of Trinidad and Tobago,” he said.

But Moonilal sidestepped repeated questions on whether his Government recognises Nicolás Maduro as Venezuela’s legitimate president.

He also sought to portray Government’s energy strategy as broader than Venezuela, highlighting new avenues in Grenada, Guyana and Suriname.

“We have not put all our eggs in one basket,” he said, pointing to ExxonMobil’s return to Trinidad’s deepwater acreage and Chinese investment interest.

He said T&T will participate in a major symposium in Grenada in November, supporting that country with “early scientific work, technical work and institutional capacity building.”

He also noted “very positive feedback” from Suriname’s new government and the intent to “rekindle ties” with Guyana’s returning administration.

Former energy minister Kevin Ramnarine, who signed a framework agreement with Caracas in 2015, yesterday welcomed progress on the deal.

“Anything that delivers more natural gas to our plants at Point Lisas and our trains at Atlantic is welcomed. In that context, the Prime Minister’s intervention this week with Secretary of State Marco Rubio is positive for the country,” Ramnarine said in a WhatsApp exchange with Guardian Media.

But former energy minister Carolyn Seepersad-Bachan yesterday urged caution, warning that the rhetoric-laden exchanges between T&T and Venezuela leaders could also jeopardise the 30-year licence granted to the National Gas Company in 2023.

“That may have an impact on the discussions and negotiations or the renegotiation of this E&P licence in order to meet the stipulation of the United States. But it is worth the attempt.”

International relations expert Professor Anthony Bryan also argued that T&T must push ahead with Dragon even under uncertain political conditions.

“T&T should pursue the Dragon gas deal to the fullest now that the OFAC licences are assured. If the US wants to reduce the benefits to Venezuela under the previous licence, that should be a matter of negotiation between Venezuela and the US.”

However, he cautioned Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar to show restraint in her public remarks.

“The PM should be more constrained in her remarks. Perhaps unstated is the possibility that Dragon gas will flow once Maduro is out.”

Political scientist Dr Bishnu Ragoonath went further, warning that hostile rhetoric between the Persad-Bissessar and Maduro administrations could complicate negotiations.

“Keep quiet to the extent that we are going to keep quiet and say that we are not going to inflame the conversations between Venezuela and ourselves,” he said, noting the Government’s alignment with the US on security in the Caribbean Sea.

“They need to tone down and keep their mouths shut when it comes to regime change or any interventions by Venezuela into Guyana or anything like that. Just keep quiet on those issues.”

For now, he said the project’s fate rests not only on US licensing, but on whether T&T and Venezuela can set differences aside and hold delicate conversations to benefit both territories.