

Quarry operators say Govt neglect crushing growth



T&T Aggregate Producers Alliance (TTAPA) president, Nigel Tenia



TTAPA director, Danny Persad.



TTAPA director, Krishan Sean Maharaj PHOTOS BY ANISTO ALVES



The quarrying industry in T&T, according to the Trinidad and Tobago Aggregate Producers Alliance (TTAPA), is standing at a critical crossroads.

This is not merely a business of gravel and stones; it is literally the foundation of the nation's roads, homes and high-rises, a sector that supports tens of thousands of jobs and could play a pivotal role in economic diversification.

Yet, despite its strategic importance, TTAPA warns that the industry remains trapped in a cycle of regulatory delays, poor oversight, and public mistrust. At the centre of the crisis lies a troubling paradox: a legitimate sector capable of generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue is being stifled by red tape, while illegal operators continue to thrive unchecked.

Building the nation

Nigel Tenia, president of TTAPA, in an interview with Business Guardian on Tuesday, did not mince words when describing the scale and significance of the quarrying industry.

"We probably employ between 5,000 and 10,000 people directly," Tenia explained. "But the cascading effect? You're looking at between 50,000 and 75,000 people. Because if we stop, then the cupboard guys don't do anything, the block manufacturers don't do anything, the truck man doesn't do anything. It's a chain reaction."

"Aggregate sand, gravel and crushed stone are the lifeblood of construction. It's used in foundations, walls, roads and various types of infrastructure. During dry seasons, demand surges as homeowners and developers race to complete projects. "Everybody wants to add on the room, finish the foundation, put up the wall," Tenia said. "And we feed into all these industries."

Tenia, who is also the owner of The Industries Professional Solution, indicated that the math is simple but staggering. A single operator moving 800 cubic yards per day at \$150 per yard generates \$120,000 daily. Multiply that across peak season and the sector's annual value easily crosses TT\$1 billion.

The legal grey zone

Despite its economic heft, the quarrying sector remains largely unregulated. TTAPA director Danny Persad has been waiting four years for a mining licence. "I don't really have a business as such," Persad said. "I just applied for a licence. Four years now without approval and nothing."

Persad points out that only four companies are legally registered with mining licences. "But over 50 people have applied. If the state agencies do what they're supposed to do, you should have no problem. You'd get plenty more revenue."

The cost to apply? "Just \$1,000. The cost of delay? Millions in lost taxes, unregulated operations, and a chilling effect on legitimate investment," Persad lamented.

Tenia noted that the recent arrest of businessman Danny Guerra has cast a long shadow over the industry. He said that before the incident, many private investors were showing interest in the quarrying business, asking about costs, plant operations and how to get involved. But that interest has since evaporated.

Now, Tenia explained, potential investors are hesitant to step in, fearing that a single misstep in a poorly regulated system could expose them to legal trouble and public embarrassment. The image of a prominent businessman in handcuffs for illegal processing, he said, has left many wary of associating with an industry that lacks clear oversight and consistent regulation.

According to Tenia, many operators in the industry remain guarded about their operations, a reflection of both the crime situation and fears of regulatory repercussions. He said that, based on experience, one can often gauge the scale of an operation simply by observing its output.

For most TTAPA members, the standard level of production typically falls between 600 and 800 cubic yards of material per day, though this can fluctuate depending on demand and weather conditions.

But TTAPA is not shielding bad actors. In fact, they're ready to expose them.

"Once we decide to pause our operation, we are willing to work with the Commissioner of Police to identify every single operator who's operating outside of the law," Tenia declared. "Get everybody under the arm of the law."

Still, he acknowledges the pain such a move would cause. "It will definitely be painful for us, no revenue coming in, and it may be

painful for the person trying to put up an apartment or a commercial building. But it's a burden we will all carry as an industry and as a nation."

The daily grind is no joke. "Most of us get to the quarry by about 5 o'clock, 5.30 am," Tenia said. "That's to make sure the operation starts up promptly at 6 or 6:30. Some operations run till 5, 6 in the evening. Nobody wants to get up that early and be worried about whether the Commissioner of Police is coming."

TTAPA believes the quarrying sector could absorb labour from CEPEP and URP, offering skilled employment and economic uplift. "We sincerely believe, because of the skill set of the people that were in CEPEP and URP, we can absorb them easily," Tenia outlined.

Persad agreed. "In terms of construction and stuff, they look forward to the quarry sector to help them. It's a big impact. When you look at it, it goes all the way back to a truck driver. They go into the quarries, stockpile to buy material. It's a long process."

And the potential for revenue is immense. "Although the revenues derived from it are minimal now, when you quantify it, there's plenty," Persad said. "In terms of the diversification that the government has been speaking about, this could be one sector that could help. It's been lying for years without a revenue stream."

Also speaking about the issue was Krishan Sean Maharaj, owner of S&S Contractors Ltd, one of many operators caught in this regulatory bottleneck. He confirms what many in the industry have long whispered: "We all operate at an illegal capacity." But the goal, he emphasises, is not defiance of its legitimacy.

The industry wants to work with the government to establish a framework where operations are legal, transparent and mutually beneficial. A system where state agencies from the Ministry of Energy to Town and Country Planning, WASA, and the EMA coordinate effectively, and businessmen can operate without fear of criminalisation.

"We complied," Maharaj said, "We try our best to make sure the environment is proper, the locations are proper, everything is legal."

Despite submitting applications and preparing documentation, operators remain in limbo.

"We've been given the opportunity to receive the licence and the processing licence as well as the mining licence. That's what we're asking for today," he explains. "Let us sit with them. If they have issues with documentation, we may see the problems more than they will. We can work together and finalise this."

The consequences of continued inaction are severe.

"If the minister doesn't respond, and we take a stand, it's not just our employees who suffer. Our suppliers, our clients, our entire network shut down," Maraj warned. "And if you look at the Ministry of Energy's own website, you'll see no one has ever received a processing licence."

Calls for engagement

TTAPA isn't asking for handouts. They're asking for engagement.

"It's only this difficult because you have not engaged the key stakeholders in the operators," Tenia stressed. "It's almost like somebody trying to play football and not engage any footballers. You want to have a World Cup without any footballers? How is that possible?"

He added that the quarrying sector is ready to be part of the solution. But it needs the state to stop treating it like a problem. The message from the ground is clear: this isn't about a meeting. It's about survival. It's about national development. And it's about time.