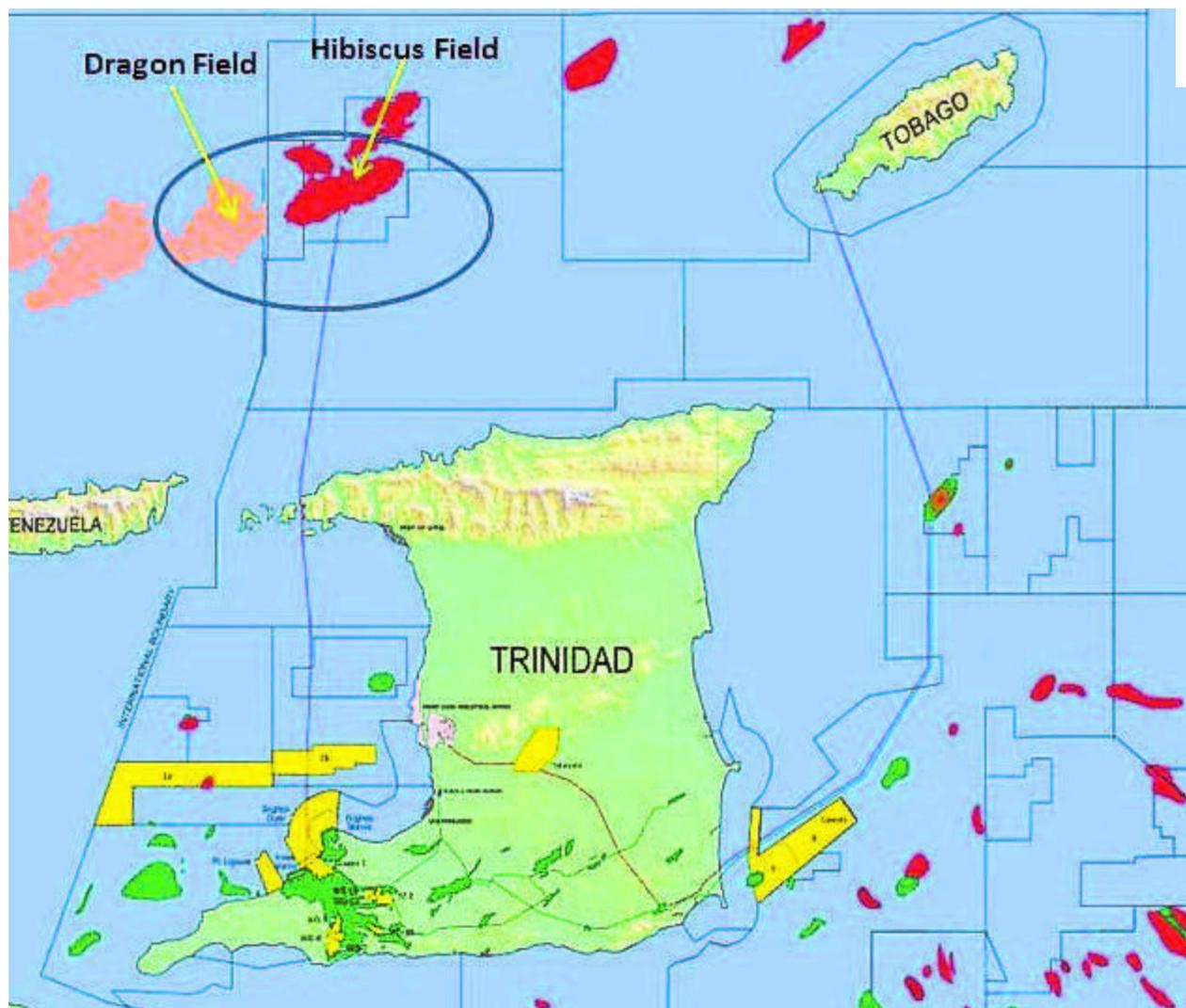


Shell refers all questions on Dragon Gas revival to Govt



The Dragon natural gas field on the Venezuelan side of its maritime border with Trinidad

GAIL ALEXANDER & ELIZABETH GONZALES

Shell, which has been T&T's partner in the Dragon gas deal, is remaining silent on the latest move to revive the project.

Yesterday, the company directed all queries regarding the revival to the Government.

On Tuesday, the Government announced that Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar had secured US support for the development of T&T's hydrocarbon cross-border resources. This support was obtained during discussions in Washington with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

The Government was later informed that Rubio backs the approval of the relevant Office of Foreign

Assets Control (OFAC) licences to begin discussions on developing the cross-border hydrocarbons.

So far, there has been no official word from Venezuela on its stance regarding the project.

Shell has been the State's partner in the Dragon gas field project, which the previous People's National Movement administration had pursued. The project was projected to export gas from the Dragon Field in Venezuela to Shell's Hibiscus platform off T&T's North Coast.

Contacted yesterday, Shell's Communications department stated, "Our official position at this point is that queries on the OFAC licence are to be directed to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago."

Energy Minister Dr Roodal Moonilal expressed high optimism about positive outcomes.

Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar is expected to provide further details today on the issue and other matters from her recent US trip, following her return home last night.

Meanwhile, NATUC general secretary Michael Annette congratulated the Government.

"This comes at a very opportune time, comforting news amid T&T's financial and economic constraints. We must thank the Government for getting it back on the table," he said.

"It's a development that's absolutely needed if we are to increase forex stock and revenue. The past government said they would have realised it by 2027, so we now need to know when the project will be realised, as it's critical for T&T."

Confederation of Regional Business Chambers president Vivek Charran welcomed the news.

"The confederation welcomes any news that the Dragon Gas project could become a reality. Given changing global foreign policy and diplomacy in the short term, it appears the USA is and has been the decider in granting the license," he said.

"As elusive and fragile as granting has been in the past, the license emerged, was killed, and now has risen again through the diplomatic interface of the new administration.

It's nonetheless of great importance to our energy sector in the short and long run.

Now that the immediate future of Petrotrin still hangs in the balance, as a refinery committee was formed, there is much at stake given our present economic circumstances," Charran added.

Farley: Don't leave out Tobago

Chief Secretary Farley Augustine has also welcomed the return of the Dragon gas project, calling it good news for the country's economy but stressing that Tobago must also be included in the energy plan.

Augustine, speaking after a media tour of the Courland Water Treatment Plant yesterday, said the project's revival is vital for the economy, and reminded Tobagonians that he had warned about the potential fallout when the deal appeared to be lost.

"Well, it's no secret that Trinidad and Tobago need access to gas and oil to help recover our economy," Augustine said.

"Earlier this year, when we heard it was off, I publicly spoke about how that would impact our economy. In fact, we were in the heart of the (election) campaign, and I explained to Tobagonians how this would make things much more difficult for us."

He also criticised the influence of powerful nations.

“How unfortunate it is that these larger countries can just sit where they sit and determine who we trade with, who we do business with,” he said.

Still, Augustine is pleased.

“It is good news that it is back on. I have always felt that we were at a disadvantage to the North. I have always supported it being on, and I want to make that clear,” he said.