

■ Forex allocations...

## Business leaders call for transparency

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BUSINESS chamber heads acknowledged Prime Minister Stuart Young's ongoing foreign exchange talks with Finance Minister Vishnu Dhanpaul and executive management within the banking sector but called for greater transparency from financial institutions.

On Tuesday, Young and Dhanpaul met with members of the banking sector at Whitehall. A follow-up meeting will be held in two weeks.

President of the Chaguanas Chamber of Industry and Commerce Baldath Maharaj explained that a major concern for him and his membership is the lack of transparency regarding the allocation of forex.

'The chamber wishes to emphasise that one of our major concerns is the transparency in the allocation of foreign exchange. For too long, businesses- particularly small to medium enterprises- have been disadvantaged by a system where access to forex appears to favour a select few without clear criteria,' Maharaj said in a WhatsApp exchange.

Greater San Fernando Area Chamber of Commerce president Kiran Singh said the meeting signals Young's seriousness in addressing the forex crisis.

'The direct involvement of the Minister of Finance, a former permanent secretary, indicates to us that this forex issue will be dealt with at the highest levels. We are of the opinion that the Central Bank of T& T and commercial banks responsible for forex disbursement must be met with first. After those initial discussions, business chambers should be invited to voice their opinions and suggestions on a new program for the disbursement of forex,' said Singh.

Coordinator of the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers Jai Leladharsingh said the confederation is observing the actions and policies of the Prime Minister with 'keen interest'.

'The distribution of forex is a critical national issue that has been continually kicked down the road over the past nine years and despite the calls by the business community, nothing was done. Several conversations will definitely be needed and the government must give a clear and honest statement as to what are the causes of the forex challenge,' he stressed.

Immediate past president of the Penal Debe Chamber of Chamber of Commerce Rampersad Sieuraj indicated that the banks have been carrying on with these predatory practices for a very long time, and the time has come to institute banking reform in T& T.

'Imagine a customer cannot withdraw any US from their US account, pay charges to withdraw funds, obtain a cheque book and even a bank statement on your account. On top of that, the interest rate spreads are too wide (deposit rates vs. lending rates), and this is not fair,' said Sieuraj.

President of the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce Deoraj Mahase believes the meeting is a good move in seeking to address the forex issue.

'His comments about the situation, especially as it relates to the average citizen and SMEs, are very encouraging. His follow- up meeting to gather more information and facts before reaching out to the business community and/or chambers is proactive and can have a positive impact on those discussions. The inclusion of the various business Chambers would be an appreciative gesture,' said Mahase.

President of the Fyzabad Chamber of Commerce Angie Jairam stressed that there needs to be a 'massive overhaul on government policy to fix this situation'.

'The inactions have caused inefficiencies in the business sector, especially the SME's. Meeting their financial obligations, increased prices of commodities and service (goods and services) disruptions in expansion, many businesses had to shut down. This cannot be good for the economy,' she said.