

## Gopee-Scoon disappointed with TCL

■ Melissa Maynard

TRADE Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon has expressed disappointment over the recent price increase by Trinidad Cement Ltd (TCL), the country's sole cement supplier.

TCL raised its prices by 7% on Monday, marking the fifth consecutive year of price hikes.

Notably, today marks exactly one year since TCL's last price increase.

Gopee-Scoon's comments came yesterday during a media briefing following her tour of Creamery Novelties Ltd at the Diamond Vale Industrial Estate in Diego Martin.

Lamenting that the prices are simply too high, she said: 'For us, we are not happy...at the cumulative price increase by TCL; we are not pleased about that at all. That is fully before us. I have had discussions as Minister of Trade and Industry with TCL, and I've said in no uncertain terms that we will not countenance the continued increases by TCL in the marketplace.'

The minister said cement as an item has been a challenge for the Government over the last few years. 'And when you look across the region, and if you delve deeply, you'll realise that there are a number of challenges before the CCJ on TCL cement-and other cement as well.'

'For us, in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, there have been two things that we've had to balance: the consumer side of things, and...the industry side of things. And initially, we were very clear that we wanted to ensure that that industry remained a viable one in the marketplace. There are 500 direct employees at TCL, and another 1,500 indirect employees. So, in the first instance-so let's say, in the last five, six years, it was to ensure that business stayed here and those persons remained employed,' she said.

Another factor, she said, was the question of quality: 'Quality cement has always been a matter of concern for the Government, and rightly so. One only has to look at the disastrous effects of some earthquakes in other parts of the world to see the effect on property and lives lost as a result of possibly using questionable cement.'

She continued: 'What we have in place within our structure is at the TTBS-the compulsory standard for cement, which we intend to abide by. And what we are trying to ensure is that we open back up the market. We've done that by reducing the CET (Common External Tariff).'

Gopee-Scoon said the CET has been reduced from 50% to 10% over time.

Gopee-Scoon said she is examining what the possibilities are now.

'But...it's a balancing act. Even more important is ensuring that quality cement comes into this country. So, we're looking at all sides.

'We've had discussions with TCL. We have also spoken with the Contractors Association. We understand the effect that the price will have on the market, and we expect to be able to make decisions shortly, while keeping before us the balanced interest of the consumer and the industry both surviving; and of course, we're anxious that there should be other players coming into the market. I don't want to say too much about that,' Gopee-Scoon said. She said that the process has already begun to find other suppliers, saying: 'It remains for the private sector to see the opportunity and intervene, and not just the local private sector, but external, too. So, let's hope...that the CET is an attractive rate (so) that we can, in fact, get some new players in the market.'

She assured that the issue is being addressed, noting: 'At the end of the day, we want to see prices a little further down. It's too high.'

### Trinidad Cement Ltd responds:

'We are encouraged by the Honourable Minister Gopee-Scoon's concerns as they relate to the importance of local industries, and the jobs of direct and indirect workers. TCL remains fully committed to its socio-economic responsibilities, mindful of the company's significant role in the construction sector and to delivering a reliable supply of high-quality cement as needed to support the country's growth.'