

Chambers concerned over new UK visa

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BUSINESS groups have expressed concern about the United Kingdom government's decision to implement a visa requirement for Trinidad and Tobago nationals.

President of the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce Baldath Maharaj believes the move was unnecessary.

'The Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce is deeply concerned about the UK government's decision to impose visa requirements on Trinidad and Tobago nationals. We do not believe this move was necessary, and we see it as an unfortunate step backward in our long-standing relationship with the UK,' he said in a WhatsApp response to *Express* enquiries yesterday.

He argued that the new visa requirement will create unnecessary hurdles for businesses that rely on travel to the UK for trade, investment, education, and professional development. Maharaj said, 'Many of our local businesses have long-standing relationships with UK partners, and this additional layer of bureaucracy will make it more difficult to maintain those connections. Business owners and professionals who travel to the UK for trade shows, networking events, and corporate meetings will now face increased costs and delays. This could negatively impact industries such as financial services, manufacturing, tourism and retail which depend on international collaboration.'

The UK has historically been a key market for T& T exports, he said.

The new visa restrictions could deter local entrepreneurs from exploring growth opportunities in the UK, reducing potential foreign exchange earnings at a time when the local economy needs it.

'The chamber does not believe that T& T posed any significant risk that warranted this change. For decades, our nationals have travelled to the UK without issue, and there has been no clear justification for why a visa requirement is now necessary. This decision unfairly penalises law-abiding citizens and businesspeople who have contributed positively to UK-T& T relations,' he stated.

Maharaj projected that businesses will now need to adjust their plans to account for visa processing times, additional fees, and possible travel disruptions.

Impact on trade

The T& T Chamber of Industry and Commerce, in acknowledging the decision by the UK, recognised the concerns raised by local stakeholders regarding the timing and implications of the policy shift.

'While we understand the decision of the UK Home Office, we do believe that this development may have the potential to affect key areas of bilateral engagement, including trade, investment, tourism, student mobility, and cultural exchange,' the chamber stated in a release yesterday.

'The T& T Chamber urges both the Government and the UK Government to work collaboratively to ensure a smooth transition and to minimise any unintended disruptions,' it said.

The Chamber also expressed hope that the decision will not have a spiralling effect on the progress T& T has made under the Schengen visa exemptions secured with the European Union.

The Chamber added that T& T and the UK have long shared strong economic and historical ties.

'We encourage all citizens, businesses, and travellers to stay informed of the new requirements and plan accordingly,' it added.

President of the Couva/ Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce Deoraj Mahase described the UK's move as 'interesting' given the long-standing relationship between the two countries.

'It's very interesting that such a move was made by the UK, considering our Commonwealth and long-standing relationship but countries have their sovereign right to make such decisions, it is left to be seen how this move will translate towards the business community,' he said.

Mahase added that, as it stands, there 'should not be any major repercussions for the business community'. 'There may be some adjustments or impact for trade based on the customary way of doing business but in this case, it may be seen as another travel requirement to enter the UK,' he said.

Mahase believes that, based on the available information, the implementation of these requirements is more towards the average traveller rather than the business community.

'Countries are implementing various methods to secure their borders and take prevention action regarding these issues, as such these measures may be seen as more necessary now than previously, though possible. While it can have an impact on trade

and logistics, the impact should not be of a major preventative nature for businesses,' he said.

Businesses are generally compliant to what is required by countries to conduct business and therefore they would simply have to continue to meet those requirements, he explained.

President of the Greater San Fernando Area Chamber of Commerce Kiran Singh said the news from the UK came as a complete surprise to chamber members.

'The UK is, of course, a sovereign nation and is within its right to require entry visas from any foreign national that it feels it is necessary to make such a decision. Visas are a form of protecting a country's borders from unwanted visitors. Media reports point to a disturbing trend of our citizens using the now-abandoned UK ETA to enter that country and

then seeking asylum. If the quoted figures are accurate, especially for the last year, it would send disturbing signals to that country to take corrective measures in an instant. A question that should be asked is if this criterion has or will be applied to other countries. We are confident that the Minister of Caricom and Foreign Affairs will address this latest development in due course,' he said.

Singh added that the international arena may also be observing this latest development and wondering as to the confidence the UK has in our own country.

'We are a former colony of the UK, achieving Independence in 1962. Strong diplomatic relations have been in existence since then, trade links are well developed, visitor travel is also relatively high on both sides of the pond,' he said.

Singh said the immediate impact on the visa requirements is that new costs now have to be factored into travel plans.

'The cost increases for longer trips beyond six months. Access to foreign exchange has been a challenge for some time. This will serve to add to that problem. The time to complete the paperwork would also be elongated. It may discourage some from travelling, seeking other destinations that don't require visas. It should be remembered that we have a significant diaspora in the UK. The UK also serves as the gateway to many European destinations,' Singh stressed.