

Concern over trade disruptions

BUSINESS groups are sounding the alarm over what they describe as the continued unavailability of the Customs Border Control System (ASYCUDA), with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association (TTMA) and the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce both calling for immediate intervention to address the growing disruption to trade. In a release issued yesterday, the TTMA said the system was expected to resume operations on Tuesday, following a reported compromise on June 30. However, 'the business community continues to face complete inaccessibility.

'The disruption has resulted in significant delays in the clearance of goods, directly impacting both import and export activities across the manufacturing sector and wider economy. The absence of formal updates from the Customs and Excise Division has further compounded stakeholder frustration, as businesses are left without clarity on the current status of the system or a timeline for full restoration of ASYCUDA system,' the TTMA stressed.

The Association listed several key concerns and recommended actions: ● Provide a clear and timely update on the current status of ASYCUDA and a timeline for its full restoration.

- Outline a mitigation plan to address the growing backlog of containers currently held at the nation's ports, which are incurring Port Rent and Demurrage charges.

- Engage with port authorities to extend rent-free days equivalent to the duration of the system's downtime, to ease the financial burden on affected businesses.

- Provide clarity on the availability of Customs overtime to facilitate the clearance of cargo from the nation's ports and bonds due to ASYCUDA issues. TTMA president Dale Parson stated, 'The extended disruption of ASYCUDA is severely impacting trade facilitation and by extension the nation's economic activity. Communication and immediate intervention are critical at this time. Manufacturers have hundreds of containers to export but cannot, resulting in missing weekly sailing schedules with CMA, Tropical, Seaboard and other lines-adversely affecting the ease of doing business.'

The TTMA urged the relevant authorities to act swiftly to restore operational normalcy and safeguard the integrity of the country's trading systems.

'TTMA proposes that Customs acquire a parallel computer server as a backup at a different location to avert the current server problems in the future,' it stated.

The Association reaffirmed its commitment to working with public sector partners to ensure business continuity and will continue to advocate on behalf of its members and the wider business community.

Economic consequences

Meanwhile, president of the Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce, Baldath Maharaj, criticised the ongoing ASYCUDA failure. He claimed that even prior to the reported water leak that caused the current disruption, 'ASYCUDA had been plagued by weeks of technical problems'.

'Contrary to some media reports, the system was not fully operational at midnight on July 1. Operational personnel were unable to process import or export documentation, resulting in a wholly unproductive 24-hour period that has now stretched into a second day. The Chamber notes that even prior to the recent water leak at Customs House, ASYCUDA had been plagued by weeks of technical problems, exposing a troubling lack of backup infrastructure or disaster recovery protocols,' highlighted Maharaj in a WhatsApp exchange with the *Express* yesterday.

He emphasised that the economic consequences are already being felt, with several Chamber members reporting that perishables have remained uncleared, posing a risk of spoilage and significant financial loss.

'Several Chamber members report that refrigerated containers carrying perishable goods remain uncleared, posing a risk of spoilage and significant financial loss. Others are saying

the costly demurrage fees, now empty shelves, and lost sales are major setbacks to their business,' he said.

Maharaj added that the cumulative impact is damaging business confidence and eroding T & T's competitiveness at both regional and international levels.

'Because of this, the Chamber and its membership is calling for an urgent meeting with the Comptroller of Customs and Excise, as well as the relevant line ministers. We believe that immediate stakeholder engagement is necessary to resolve this crisis and to chart a path toward a more stable, resilient, and efficient customs processing system,' urged Maharaj.

He continued: 'We cannot continue to operate in an environment where the entire trade system grinds to a halt with no clear contingency plan. This is no longer just a technical issue; it is a national economic emergency. The business community stands ready to collaborate on a solution, but it is now up to the authorities to act with urgency and seriousness.'

He also called on the new administration to treat this matter as a top priority, stressing that the private sector cannot function effectively without reliable public infrastructure.

'The time for temporary fixes is over. Sustainable reform is a national imperative,' he warned. **-Vishanna Phagoo**