

Customs system to be restored tomorrow, but patience running thin

■ Vishanna Phagoo

vishanna.phagoo@trinidadexpress.com

THE Customs and Excise Division says work is ongoing to resolve technical issues affecting the Customs Border Control System (CBCS), with full restoration expected by noon tomorrow.

'The CBCS is operational; however, some users may still be experiencing challenges with the clearance of their consignment. The Division, in collaboration with other relevant border agencies, is actively working to resolve these issues and minimise further disruption to stakeholders,' a release from Customs stated. It went on to say: 'Customs and Excise remains committed to the efficient management of the nation's border operations. We extend our sincere appreciation to the business community and members of the public for their patience and understanding during this period.'

But business leaders say patience is wearing thin as the disruptions, linked to a system failure on Monday following water damage at Customs House in Government Campus Plaza, Port of Spain, have further compounded long-standing issues with Customs processing and port efficiency.

President of the Fyzabad Chamber of Commerce Angie Jairam said the disruption has only worsened 'unbearable delays' that businesses have been grappling with since last year.

Speaking to the *Express* via WhatsApp, Jairam warned that the fallout is being felt across the supply chain, particularly by small to medium enterprises (SMEs) which are ill-equipped to absorb such disruptions.

'Most importers and exporters are not pleased as it affects not only the traders but all stakeholders including employees of the SMEs, key institutions which have ordered critical service items. This shows that any inefficiencies in trade can cripple a country,' she noted.

'Whatever has to be fixed must be done with utmost priority,' she said.

Her sentiments were echoed by Chaguanas Chamber of Industry and Commerce president Baldath Maharaj, who criticised Customs for its delays and inadequate communication.

'While we acknowledge that the system is reportedly operational and that full restoration is expected by Saturday, it is troubling that this update is being issued midweek when the disruption began on Monday and continues to affect businesses across the country,' he said.

In a WhatsApp response to the *Express*, Maharaj said the lack of timely updates has left importers, exporters, customs brokers, and SMEs in a difficult position, incurring mounting demurrage fees, storage costs, and missed deadlines that directly impact cash flow.

'Most SMEs do not have the financial resources to absorb these kinds of delays. Many of our members have stalled shipments and the risk of cancelled orders due to this extended downtime. These are not minor inconveniences; these are serious disruptions to business continuity in a challenging economic environment,' he said. Maharaj demanded accountability and long-term planning.

'We are being told that ASYCUDA and the port are controlled by different ministries, so waiver of port rent for storage charges directly resulting from this disruption should be considered. Most importantly, a clear contingency plan must be implemented and communicated to ensure that future system issues do not completely paralyse the flow of trade,' he said.

He urged the Customs and Excise Division to provide a detailed debrief on the root cause of the failure and the steps being taken to prevent recurrence: 'In an effort to improve the ease of doing business in T & T, the Chamber asks that the relevant authorities address this matter with urgency, transparency, proper debrief, and effective contingency planning.'

President of the Greater San Fernando Area Chamber of Commerce Kiran Singh said the incident has only deepened existing inefficiencies.

'People in business will be affected indirectly

but not know the real reasons for delays and increased costs. Full Container Load importers are bearing the brunt of the inefficiencies that continue at the ports,' Singh said.

He explained that even before the ASYCUDA outage, business owners were already grappling with lengthy clearance times that led to spiralling demurrage, rental, and transport costs-costs that ultimately fall on the consumer.

'This latest incident compounds the problems we face,' he said. 'Every day delayed multiplies into days of shelves remaining underutilised. How are business people to sustain operations when breakdowns of this magnitude occur?' Singh also lamented what he described as a lack of respect for the role businesses play in national economic life, and renewed calls for longer port operating hours, including on weekends and public holidays, to improve processing times.

'International trade demands a 24/7 operation. We suggest that urgent secondary systems be created to stimulate business activity, which we need at this time. There are concerns of fallout from this latest problem. We expect that the Government will address this directly as it affects all of us,' Singh said.

Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce president Deoraj Mahase described the division's response as 'very concerning,' citing long-standing issues with communication and responsiveness.

'This is a national issue, affecting various levels of business including the service sectors. Both imports and exports are being affected, which impedes commercial activity and revenue generation, including exporter's ability to earn forex and ensure timely shipments,' he said.

Mahase called for the introduction of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robust data backup systems.

'In today's age of technology and AI, they should have more improved systems for storage and backups, including hybrid systems such as on-premises servers and cloud storage. Hopefully these servers are not the only ones for ASYCUDA; if it is, then that's concerning,' he said.

He also advocated for a strong manual backup system, with regular drills to ensure readiness during outages.

'While this incident has drawn attention to ASYCUDA, the current Customs processes also need to be reviewed. Delays in appointments at CES and other premises are raising the cost of doing business,' Mahase added.