

EximBank forex disruption hits SMEs

...but ministers say relief coming

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SMALL and medium- sized businesses in the country are facing growing strain amid a sudden halt in foreign exchange allocations from the State-owned Export-Import Bank (EximBank), the *Express* has confirmed.

According to a source directly affected by the situation, the EximBank has not allocated US dollars to any of its clients in recent weeks, citing bureaucratic delays caused by a shift in ministerial oversight and the absence of a functioning board.

The freeze coincides with EximBank's transition from the Ministry of Finance to the newly formed Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism.

However, the new ministry has yet to install a board or streamline a process to resume allocations-effectively leaving forex access in limbo for SMEs already navigating tight margins and international supply pressures. In a joint response to the *Express*, Finance Minister Davendranath Tancoo and Trade Minister Satyakama Maharaj acknowledged the disruption and said corrective measures are being prioritised. 'Will it be fixed? Yes. Both the new board, and a new mandate for greater accountability, transparency and efficiency in the application process and determination of how the country's forex is utilised, will soon be effected,' the ministers stated.

They added that the government remains committed to expanding forex access to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), while also criticising the former People's National Movement (PNM) administration for what they described as a 'destructive combination of negligence and incompetence' that weakened forex generation, stifled the MSME sector, and eroded investor confidence in Trinidad and Tobago.

'This new government is committed to righting those wrongs in the shortest possible time frame. Will it take time? Yes. Will there be a little inconvenience while we fix the decade- old problem? Yes. Will there be pushback? Doubtful—as a better system works for every entity which is genuine, professional and transparent,' they added.

But for affected businesses, relief cannot come fast enough.

A person at an affected business, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they are now being forced to dip into hard currency reserves or rely on customers' US funds—a strategy that puts both parties at risk.

On April 18, just ten days before the general election, the Ministry of Finance announced the launch of the SME Forex Window pilot project through EximBank. The initiative is designed to expand existing government forex programmes, specifically supporting small and medium- sized business growth and stimulating economic activity. SMEs were informed they could access up to US\$50,000 monthly through the programme.

EximBank was previously under the Ministry of Finance. However, when the responsibility for the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism was officially gazetted on May 23, EximBank was transferred to fall under this new ministry.