

■ Public sector service challenge...

## Minister flags understaffing

PLANNING, Economic Affairs and Development Minister Kennedy Swaratsingh has identified severe understaffing in the public sector as a major factor contributing to the quality-of-service issues experienced by citizens.

Speaking at the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce's Business Outlook event yesterday at the Hyatt Regency (Trinidad), Port of Spain, Swaratsingh said he recently met with key government agencies and was alarmed by the extent of staffing shortages.

'(Tuesday), I met with Customs (and Excise Division). Customs has 227 officers short; BIR (Board of Inland Revenue) was staffed at 32%, they are 68% understaffed, the Director of Personnel Administration - no staff-the police service, 2,000 people or shorter,' he said.

'Everywhere you look around, we are facing over and over again a depleted workforce.'

He argued that while the public frequently blames inefficiency on laziness or lack of motivation, the root of the problem is a long-standing failure to invest in personnel and systems.

'For far too long, we have all sat down and accepted the status quo.'

Reflecting on his return to T& T from Barbados, Swaratsingh said little had changed in the past 15 years.

'As I said, I have not been here for a while so please, forgive me, but coming into this space, I told myself that I remembered piloting a Visa legislation from 2008 to 2009-data protection, electronic transaction- and I am back here 15 years and nothing changed.'

Turning to foreign direct investment (FDI) and public-private sector collaboration, Swaratsingh stressed the importance of building stronger partnerships to drive economic growth. 'It is crucial for businesses to find new ways to engage and connect with the local and international private sector,' he said.

He noted that the government intends to play a more focused and supportive role in this process.

'For far too long, many of us have sat back and allowed government to take up all that space, and that's not something I am recommending this administration do. We're going to be very aggressive, and part of our strategy is to ensure that government plays the role it's designed to do-facilitate, coordinate, legislate, and articulate policy. But government has not been very good at implementation, so its role must be one of facilitation.'

He added that this shift would require stronger engagement with the private sector and support for emerging industries.

On diversification, Swaratsingh reiterated that T& T has struggled to grow its non-energy economy. However, he revealed that the government recently received interest from a foreign investor looking to commit \$100 million to develop a coconut industry in T& T.

He also pointed to other underdeveloped sectors such as cannabis, which he said is already included in government policy.

'There are ways in which we can create an industry and bring people (to T& T),' he said. 'For far too long, we have had a large informal economy, and we need to find ways to bring it into the formal economy.'

He called for the expansion of farmers' markets and increased investment in agro-processing to meet consumer demand for fresh, high-quality produce.

'We've ignored agro-processing as well. So those are things we want to focus on,' he said.

Swaratsingh also emphasised that technological transformation will be critical if T& T is to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

He revealed that the government is exploring plans to convert the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre (TTIFC) into an International Payment Centre.

'One of our goals in the manifesto is to try to convert the TTIFC into an international payment centre to look at how we can automate some of our payment modules and structures. You will hear more about that in the coming months.'

He added that upgrading the BIR's outdated systems is a top priority. 'The BIR system is currently ten iterations behind. Because of what is available today, we have to leap from where we are to where we need to be. And of course, we have to use AI (artificial intelligence) tools.'

Swaratsingh concluded by telling the business community that the success of these initiatives would depend heavily on the private sector's involvement.