

## Gonsalves 'not picking a fight with T& T over forex'

ST VINCENT and the Grenadines Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves yesterday said while he is not 'picking a fight' with Trinidad and Tobago, he maintains the position that the oil-rich twin-island republic must put in place a mechanism to ensure the payment of Vincentian farmers who sell their produce to Port of Spain.

'I am not putting my mouth in their (Trinidad and Tobago) internal politics, but we have some problems which we have to solve. We can't have Caricom unequally yoked otherwise the CSME (Caricom Single Market and Economy) will falter,' Gonsalves said.

Gonsalves, speaking on the stateowned NBC Radio yesterday, was responding to a statement made by Energy Minister Dr Roodal Moonilal, who had taken umbrage at Gonsalves' recent remarks describing that country's currency as 'monopoly money'.

Moonilal told the Society of Petroleum Engineers of Trinidad and Tobago's (SPETT) 2025 Mature Basin Energy Symposium he had heard about Gonsalves' description in relation to the foreign exchange situation in the twin-island republic.

'He should have shared his wisdom with his colleagues who are responsible for the collapse of our economy. It is a pity he did not share his thinking with the former administration over the last decade which could have reversed this crisis with prudent management and enhanced investments in the energy sector,' he stated.

Moonilal said that the closure of the state-owned Petrotrin and the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery 'would have contributed in no small measure for the decline in forex', telling the symposium 'on another occasion we will speak on our plans to restart the refinery'.

But Gonsalves, in a very lengthy response to the situation, said that while he had no contention with Moonilal or the new government in Port of Spain, reiterated the circumstances that have led to the situation.

He said St Vincent and the Grenadines pays Trinidad and Tobago annually in excess of US\$65 million in hard foreign currency for visible exports from that country, mainly petroleum products and manufactured goods.

But he said the sister Caricom country cannot find less than a miserly four million US dollars in foreign exchange to pay for agricultural products.

'If you get TT dollars and you bring the TT dollars here, what are you going to do with it? I say the thing is like monopoly money. Well I understand that this particular minister may have commented adversely about what I may have said.

'Normally, as Prime Minister, I don't get into controversies with ministers, I don't answer ministers and I tend to answer prime ministers at our conferences and hardly ever across the Caribbean Sea, safe and except if I think you provoke me too much and it is in the interest of my country to speak.

'When I speak, I done with that,' Gonsalves said, adding that he has been following the career of Moonilal 'and he really seems to me to be a sensible fella.

**-CMC**