

## Port scanners cause system gridlock, complain importers

### PORT OF SPAIN

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IMPORTERS say they continue to grapple with the fallout from ongoing delays caused by the rushed implementation of non-intrusive inspection scanners at the country's ports by the Customs and Excise Division.

Minister of Works and Infrastructure Jearlean John has said, the scanner mandate is being addressed with urgency.

Several importers, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *Express* yesterday, that the requirement has contributed to a growing backlog in the clearance of Less than Container Load (LCL) cargo.

'All of this has occurred in a way that has disrupted terribly the trade that is taking place in Trinidad and Tobago. There is cargo backed up, particularly in the United States-in five or six US states there is cargo backed up that cannot be shipped to Trinidad because they have a backlog of cargo waiting to be cleared through the transit sheds that cannot be cleared, and somebody should answer for that. I mean, a more realistic timeline could have been given. Even the sheds which had the scanners and were compliant were horrified,' one importer said.

Importers further criticised the handling of the scanner policy as setting a 'very bad example' for other State agencies.

'Other State agencies will come along and say, 'Well, look at what the Customs did to them, and they couldn't open their mouth'. 'Look at what the Customs did, and they had to shut up and accept it.' That is what is being foisted on the people of T&T...an unnecessary, brutal, dictatorial decision. I and several other importers have received reliable information that inside the Customs there is discontent about the way this was done, because they all knew that it was not workable, that it was going to cause this back-up of cargo,' the importer said.

While the Customs and Excise Division has cited border protection and national security as the rationale for the new scanning requirements, importers argue that commercial cargo has not historically posed this kind of threat.

'All of the cargo is being scanned on the port anyway and in reaction to what was imposed on the importers and on the transit sheds, several major business organisations wrote to the Customs and to the Minister of Finance and expressed confusion as to why the port scanners, which had just been activated and installed, couldn't scan the containers and thereby satisfy the requirement until the transit sheds could import their own scanners. Why not scan the containers using the port scanners on the Port Authority before releasing them? And the reply was that those scanners are not capable of scanning LCL cargo, and therefore they want the individual shipment scanned independently.'

### Punitive behaviour

Importers say the system is now effectively gridlocked.

'Cargo cannot be moved from the port to the transit shed until there is enough room in the shed, but there's no room because there is no scanner, and no cargo can be released without 100% exam,' the source explained.

This, the source said, signals what he sees as punitive behaviour by authorities.

Although seven of the 11 Transit Shed Operators (TSOs) are reportedly compliant, importers noted that only two are currently equipped to handle commercial ocean freight.

'What lies at the heart of this serious interruption of trade is the ability of State organisations and public servants to impose their rules and wishes without any consultation, and with an authority that disrupts the lives of everybody else. No care or concern has been shown for what was done, or for the cost associated with it,' the importer told the *Express* in a phone interview.

Importers also criticised the lack of realistic timelines and stakeholder engagement in the policy's rollout.

'A meeting was called on a Friday afternoon, and the cut-off for having a scanner in the transit shed was given as the following Monday. Clearly the persons who gave those instructions must know that it would have been impossible to make any such arrangements over a weekend. 'Furthermore, they must have known that it was going to cause a great delay in the clearance of cargo. Surely, they must have known that

what they were doing was totally unfair. In the normal practice of business and in a normal operation of any country, to do something like that was a grotesque misuse of authority,' another source said.

Despite the number of complaints from both importers and compliant operators, one TSO operator, Stephen Espinet-who manages Aeromarine and Mayfair-believes there have been no major hiccups since the NII scanner implementation.

He called for ongoing dialogue between TSOs and Customs.

'For us, it has worked well because we implemented in January. Since then, we went through the challenge of understanding how to operate. Three months down the line, we feel comfortable to say they operate well-so much so, I have assisted a number of people who want to use our services due to the fact that the other bonds they were using before are non-compliant and have gone through some challenges due to Customs enforcing these rules,' he said in a phone interview with the Express.

Espinet added that rather than public alarm, the focus should be on constructive dialogue between TSOs and Customs to find long-term solutions.

'As a collective, we at the transit sheds are aiming to have proper discussions and come up with a workable solution...At the end of the day, they need to feel confident that those of us operating these businesses are upholding standards and not contributing to wider issues like criminal activities involving illegal imports. That's really my main point: we should be having a discussion, not fuelling public uncertainty.'