

■ Scrap iron president:

Biggest problem-export delays

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SEVERAL issues continue to plague the local scrap iron industry, particularly within the export process, says president of the Trinidad and Tobago Scrap Iron Dealers Association (TTSIDA) Allan Ferguson.

Speaking to *Express* via WhatsApp, Ferguson described a series of delays exporters face, noting that every step comes with a lengthy waiting period resulting in serious bottlenecks for operators.

'Our biggest challenge right now is exporting. When we purchase material, we have to wait 14 days before we can apply for an export licence, then another 14 days before we acquire the licence. After we receive the licence, we have to then apply for an 'intention to load' that takes seven days, but it's mainly based on the availability of an inspector, and that could run in a three-week waiting period before we get an inspector to oversee our loading. This loading procedure is repeated every time that we have to load containers, and bear in mind that within all this, we still have our workers to pay,' he stressed.

Ferguson also raised concerns about illegal players who continue to pose as scrap dealers and tarnish the image of the industry.

Asked about criminals who posed as scrap iron dealers, Ferguson claimed that the 'same players that caused the industry to shut down in 2022...are still around operating, because they were never charged'.

He further alleged that there were individuals who operate with impunity and who had connections to figures in authority, which allowed them to evade justice.

'We also have foreigners who have immunity (sic)-and nobody seems to be doing them anything. These people in the industry are free to do anything and get away all the time because they are using people in authority to assist them in their illegal activities. Sometimes when they are arrested, the officers don't even show up to court, so the case will eventually be dismissed. So that is why we are strongly asking for the enforcement of the laws,' he said.

Scrap iron can generate forex Despite the challenges, Ferguson believes that if the industry is given the right support and stronger regulatory oversight, it can be a major contributor to the national economy.

He argued that scrap iron can generate much-needed foreign exchange while providing thousands of jobs across the country.

He said the sector creates employment for a wide range of people, including office workers, yard workers, van collectors, hauliers and brokers.

While the Scrap Metal Act was strengthened following the 2022 suspension of the industry, Ferguson contends that the problem lies not in the law itself but in its implementation.

'As for the act, while it is strong, the enforcement is weak, and that is a major problem. Also, the waiting period before a dealer gets to load material for export is also a problem,' he said.

The TTSIDA head believes that a more comprehensive approach is necessary to restore efficiency and integrity to the industry.

'There are deeper issues. The industry needs a regulatory body; CCTV cameras at each yard; allowing us to work on Saturdays- because currently we only work Monday to Friday; they can use the inspectors to visit yard-to-yard during the day instead of stationing one inspector to a yard for the day. Then, in a time where the world is shying away from the excessive use of paper, every transaction that we do, we have to fill out multiple forms; that accumulates to boxloads of paperwork that we then

have to provide to the ministry, just so that we can acquire an export licence to load containers,' Ferguson explained.

Technology can also play a critical role in improving efficiency, he opined.

Reducing the reliance on paperwork and moving towards digital systems would not only modernise the industry but also cut down on time-consuming bureaucracy, he stated.

The scrap iron industry has endured periods of turbulence, most notably the Government- imposed ban in 2022, which was triggered by widespread theft of copper cables and other materials.

Although the industry has since been reopened under new rules, Ferguson maintains that the persistence of inefficiencies and criminal elements is undermining its potential.

He believes that the way forward requires a blend of regulation, enforcement and innovation.

With the right systems in place, he argued, the industry can transform into a structured, job-creating, foreign-exchange earning sector that contributes positively to the national economy.