

Burris: Open ANR Robinson airport now

■ Elizabeth Williams

THE billion-dollar ANR Robinson International Airport must open now if Tobago is to expand its tourism sector on the global stage, Tourism Secretary Tashia Burris said during Tobago's first-ever tourism forum.

While Burris pressed for operationalising the new facility, THA Chief Secretary Farley Augustine took aim at Caribbean Airlines for persistent issues affecting the domestic airbridge. 'We have just invested just over \$1 billion in a brandnew airport. We need to operationalise that airport whether or not we agree on whether the investment was needed at the time, or whether we had other things to spend that money on. It is here, and we need to take advantage of the opportunities that it presents,' Burris said.

She was speaking at the forum hosted at the Magdalena Grand under the theme Tourism: The Fuel of the Future.

Augustine, delivering the feature address, said the airbridge between Trinidad and Tobago continues to hamper tourism development and must be fixed.

He called for the re-engagement of the Airlift Committee.

'How are we running a tourism sector where 14% of our GDP comes from tourism, where our second-largest employer is the tourism sector, and it is so difficult to get here (to Tobago)? We can't run a tourism sector if you just can't get to the island. We can't run a tourism sector on standby, with everybody waiting at Piarco for 24 or 48 hours to get a flight,' Augustine said.

'Nobody is leaving their bed and their country to come to another island where you have to sit in an airport for 24 hours just to get to another destination. If it's left to luck and chance, it's better we let NLCB (National Lotteries Control Board) run the airport,' he said.

Augustine also criticised Caribbean Airlines for failing to follow through on a promised direct flight between Toronto and Tobago.

'We offered to pay-as we do with British Airways and Condor-to get them to come here. We had an agreement. We went through the contract. We had our lawyers go through it the contract it. We signed.

'But no one from Caribbean Airlines signed. But then I look around and Caribbean Airlines every Monday morning is hopping off to a new destination. That makes me feel like the bastard child, that makes me feel like the outside pickney, the one that the family never really wanted, like the horn child,' he said.

The Chief Secretary insisted that Tobago was ready to lead in tourism, but said the island needed greater financial support from Central Government especially for destination marketing-to compete regionally.

'In total our allocation for this fiscal was \$42 million; if I am to check what that is in terms of US at days rate, that's just a little over US\$6.1 million. If we go to Barbados, neighbouring us, they are spending closer to US\$40 million to just market their destination- they are who we are competing with. We are telling the world come to Tobago instead of going there; look at what they are investing in their product versus the peanuts we are given to drive our industry,' he said.