

Pre-budget recommendations from TTCSI, Amcham T&T: Address crime, ease of doing business and digital drive



**Geisha
Kowlessar-Alonzo**
geisha.kowlessar@guardian.co.tt

As the UNC administration prepares to deliver its first national budget, key business organisations like the T&T Coalition of Services Industries (TTCSI) and Amcham T&T have presented a unified vision for a diversified and resilient economy.

Their proposals highlight a shared understanding that a move away from traditional reliance on the energy sector is paramount, and that bold, decisive action is needed to tackle long-standing issues that are hampering growth across all sectors.

While the TTCSI provided a roadmap centred on various sectors, Amcham T&T called for “bold and decisive action” to tackle persistent issues that have been holding back national progress.

Crime and national security remain a top worry for these business groups.

Amcham T&T labelled this scourge as the “number one concern” for its members, citing it as a major deterrent to investment and talent retention.

The TTCSI concurred, noting its negative impact on the reputation and performance of service sectors like tourism and business process outsourcing (BPOs).

It also noted the negative impact of crime on citizens, businesses and the nation’s reputation.

“A high and seemingly uncontrollable crime rate is a major deterrent to foreign direct investment and business in general.

T&T’s main drawback is not the lack of legislation, but the inefficiency of the enforcement system and the Judiciary.

Strengthening these institutions, together with the rehabilitation of convicts, will go a long way in addressing crime,” Amcham T&T said.

The organisation maintained that addressing crime must remain a top priority to rebuild trust and reduce business costs.

The TTCSI echoed this sentiment, highlighting that high crime levels particularly hurt important service-based industries like tourism, business process outsourcing (BPOs) and the creative industries.

To address the issue, both bodies propose a multi-faceted approach.

Recommendations include:

- Strengthening community-based services—This involves providing more mediation, youth counselling and legal aid;
- Improving the judicial system—Key proposals include digitising the court system with e-filing and case tracking, as well as introducing night courts to clear case backlogs and improve efficiency.

These measures aim to streamline the justice system and foster a more secure environment for investment and growth.

Amcham T&T further suggested that community engagement is a critical component of reducing crime.

With young people being recruited into gangs at earlier ages, it urged that the TTPS must focus on building trust and confidence within communities by:

- Increasing investment in community policing initiatives, especially through expansion of the police youth clubs;
- Developing structured programmes where local police officers regularly meet and interact with community members, building trust and fostering proactive cooperation in crime prevention.

Both the TTCSI and Amcham T&T also pinpointed Government’s inefficiency as a major obstacle to economic growth, with a specific focus on the ease of doing business.

They agreed that bureaucratic delays and a lack of clear procedures are hindering business expansion, investment and daily operations.

The TTCSI further pointed out several specific challenges:

- Businesses face significant hurdles in obtaining licenses, registering, and accessing government grants;
- Poor inter-agency coordination—This makes essential processes like trade compliance unnecessarily complex and time-consuming;

- Trade facilitation bottlenecks—Delays in cargo inspection and clearance are a significant issue. The limited use of Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) equipment contributes to port congestion, inefficiencies, and heightened security risks.

Amcham T&T echoed these concerns, agreeing that improving the ease of doing business in T&T remains one of the most pressing needs among its members.

“Businesses continue to face long delays, unclear procedures, and regulatory inefficiencies that hinder expansion, investment, and day-to-day operations. These challenges are especially harmful to SMEs, import-dependent sectors, and companies seeking to scale regionally or globally. A clear strategy and accountable leadership must be applied across government agencies to create a predictable, transparent, and investor-friendly business climate,” it too agreed.

Amcham T&T said that as the business community seeks to work in partnership with the Government to enhance border security, it recommended the removal of VAT and duties on security-related hardware purchased by transit sheds and logistics companies that enhance border security measures.

These would include, but are not limited to, scanners.

Amcham T&T further advised that the ASYCUDA system, a computerised customs management system used for trade facilitation, must be utilised to its full potential.

The organisation’s recommendation comes in the wake of recent system disruptions, which have highlighted critical vulnerabilities.

While the system is a key tool for improving efficiency and security, it has been plagued by issues such as a lack of proper backup infrastructure and disaster recovery protocols.

“With international trade increasing, it is alarming that despite the country making significant investments in an ASYCUDA system, some modules are still to be deployed, and a manual system is still being used.

Amcham T&T believes that as the country embraces digital transformation, this will also be done at our borders,” it added.

The business organisation also addressed a key cross-cutting issue affecting the ease of doing business: the current T&T-US double taxation treaty.

The organisation has recommended that the government initiate discussions with the US government to renegotiate this treaty, which was originally signed in 1970.

“The current treaty, in place since 1971, is outdated and does not align with modern global standards or reflect the evolving trade and investment relationship between T&T and the United States. Notably, it offers no relief from the US standard 30 per cent withholding tax on dividends and interest to T&T residents, unlike treaties with regional peers like Jamaica and Barbados, which provide reduced rates as low as five per cent,” it explained.

This, Amcham T&T said, puts local investors at a competitive disadvantage and discourages the repatriation of US income, ultimately limiting foreign exchange inflows, reinvestment and tax revenue collection in T&T.

It stressed that renegotiation would not only enhance competitiveness but also support the development of local capital markets and better align with international tax transparency standards.

In its budget recommendations, Amcham T&T also emphasised that while the Government has made progress on its national digital transformation strategy, more focussed, high-impact initiatives are necessary for T&T to become a leader in the digital economy.

In this vein, it said Government should finalise and implement a clear, measurable national digital economy strategy with a focus on high-value industries such as software development, cybersecurity, precision agriculture and creative digital media.

Additionally, Amcham T&T said a digital nomad visa policy ought to be introduced to attract foreign remote workers, stimulate tourism and diversify the economy.

It said this should offer competitive visa conditions, streamlined application processes, and integration with local co-working, housing, and community engagement initiatives, adding it could generate foreign exchange earnings, enhance international visibility, and contribute to a vibrant local digital economy.

Meanwhile, the TTCSI stated that a major obstacle to achieving digital goals is the limited capacity of service-sector MSMEs (micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises) as these businesses often lack access to the necessary digital tools, infrastructure and training to compete on an international level.

It is proposing the implementation a national digital services hub, subsidised training in cybersecurity, etc as well as incentivising innovation hubs and promoting export-ready digital services (eg, fintech).