

First Citizens board blocks forced resignation of CEO



Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development Kennedy Swaratsingh



Attorney General John Jeremie



Former prime minister Dr Keith Rowley

GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development
Office of the Minister

August 20, 2025

Ms. Karen Darbasie
Group Chief Executive Officer
First Citizens Bank
Port of Spain

Dear Ms. Darbasie,

I refer to your letter dated August 19, 2025.

Following guidance from the Attorney General, on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and main shareholder and corporation sole - I accept your letter of resignation from First Citizens

We undertake to view favorably the following matters set out in your letter:

- (a) Salary
- (b) Bank Vehicle Benefit
- (c) Pension Benefits.

Further, we undertake to take advice from the Attorney General on:

- (a) Annual Flexible Spending Allowance
- (b) Bonus.

As indicated to you, our position regarding your final working day has changed. You are no proceed on paid vacation leave with immediate effect, rather than on September 01, 202 discussed.

Sincerely,



Senator Dr. the Honourable Kennedy Swaratsingh
Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development



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Minister Kennedy Swaratsingh's letter to First Citizens Group CEO Karen Darbasie last Wednesday.



First Citizens Group CEO Karen Darbasie

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The Government last week attempted to pressure the Group CEO of majority state-owned First Citizens Group, Karen Darbasie, to resign immediately, a move that was repudiated by the board of the bank, which agreed to allow her to take her accumulated vacation leave from August 21 (Friday) and retire from First Citizens on October 21.

Government's attempt to force Darbasie's immediate resignation included leaking an erroneous story to the Newsday that the Government had accepted her letter of resignation and circulating a fake WhatsApp message that her retirement on October 21 was not due to "external pressure, regulatory issues or financial factors."

Sources told Guardian Media that last Tuesday (August 19), Darbasie wrote to Corporation Sole, Minister of Finance Davendranath Tancoo, and copied Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Dr Kennedy Swaratsingh.

A source external to the bank said Darbasie's letter to the ministers indicated that her retirement date was in May 2026, but that she was prepared to demit office as CEO of T&T's second-largest bank before that, if the terms of her contract of employment were honoured.

In response to Darbasie's letter, Swaratsingh wrote her last Wednesday (August 20) stating, "Following guidance from the Attorney General (John Jeremie SC), on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago-main shareholder and Corporation Sole-I accept your letter of resignation from First Citizens.

"We undertake to view favourably the following matters set out in your letter (of August 19): (a) Salary (b) Bank vehicle benefit (c) Pension benefits "Further we undertake to take advice from the Attorney General on:

(a) Annual flexible spending allowance

(b) Bonus."

Several sources told Guardian Media that Darbasie's letter of August 19 included no reference to her resigning from the bank.

An industrial relations expert, who is aware of some of the issues surrounding her departure, described as "improper" a Government minister attempting to pressure the resignation of the CEO of a state-controlled company that has a board in place.

In an all-staff memo on Friday, First Citizens chairman Anthony Smart said the board held a special meeting earlier that day, following which he advised employees that Darbasie had "proceeded on approved vacation leave for the period (from) August 21, 2025 and will retire effective October 21, 2025." Smart also told the employees that the company's succession plan was in place.

"Consistent with the published announcement made on April 4, 2025, the board has appointed Jason Julien, currently group deputy CEO business generation, to act as group CEO in Darbasie's absence with effect from August 22, 2025, until the retirement of the group CEO after which he will assume the substantive position as group CEO."

In his August 20 letter to Darbasie, Swaratsingh also told her, "As indicated to you, our position regarding your final working day has changed. You are now to proceed on paid vacation leave with immediate effect, rather than on September 1, 2025, as discussed."

According to a pre-action protocol letter issued by attorneys for dismissed Central Bank governor, Dr Alvin Hilaire, Swaratsingh visited Hilaire's office on June 24, 2025, indicating that Government

wanted the governor to leave the post and it would be prepared to pay Hilaire in full for the remainder of his term, if he were to resign immediately. Later that day, Hilaire received a document from President Christine Kangaloo that his appointment had been revoked.

Contacted by WhatsApp for comment on Friday and Saturday, Swaratsingh said he was aware of her alleged resignation because he was copied on it.

Asked if he was in a position to share the allegations that were made against Darbasie, Swaratsingh said, "I have no idea what you are referring to."

Reason for pressure to resign

Guardian Media understands that one of the reasons the Government wanted Darbasie to resign immediately was because it claimed the bank had provided former prime minister Dr Keith Rowley with preferential access to foreign exchange.

That allegation was first raised by Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Darrell Allahaar, in his July 1 contribution to the Midyear Budget debate.

In his contribution, much of which comprised complaints about First Citizens, Allahaar said, "The PNM government has for the last 10 years left the commercial banks alone to brutalise poor people, while enabling friends and family and financiers to access foreign exchange and to navigate the banking system and the cream of our economic system with ease.

"... we are left to feel the pain of the ordinary person and the inconvenience that they suffer because of this abject stupidity of commercial bankers and the preferential treatment they choose to give to big clients where they put the big boys first."

He then said someone had given him an email, but he did not know the origin of the communication.

Allahaar said, "It is an email to somebody called Karen Darbasie, in which a high public official is saying: 'Please do a letter for PM to purchase US dollars to pay these three invoices. He needs to have payment made tomorrow, no later and is waiting for a letter to confirm instructions now.'

"Invoices to be paid by him for a friend. And it is an email from that person to Karen Darbasie...But I will get back to that another day."

Dr Rowley responds

Asked on Saturday by WhatsApp if he was aware that an allegation involving him may have been one of the reasons the Government attempted to force Darbasie to resign immediately, Dr Rowley responded: "I am a shareholder and customer at First Citizens. I have only engaged in NORMAL banking procedures there and have received the kind of treatment I get at other banks in the country.

"First Citizens is not the only bank that offers 'private banking' or personal services.

"I did see a breach of banking privacy a few weeks ago when UNC Senator Allahaar was in Parliament quoting from an internal bank email concerning my business and telling lies that I was getting foreign exchange for a friend. It was a lie.

"It had to do with me buying a Guyanese wood house from Guyana and paying for it (US\$25,000), paying shipping and brokerage and designating my builder as the "agent" to receive the container.

"Over the years, when I travelled mainly on government business, I would request small sums of cash in foreign currency and would usually return unspent amounts to the country.

“None of my banking business is extraordinary and has nothing to do with Allahar, Swaratsingh or anyone in the UNC for that matter.

“I hear my name being called in their vendetta against the Group CEO at the bank. Once they call my name within the law it’s okay with me, but once they slander me, I will take advice on that.”

Guardian Media also asked the former prime minister whether he made other requests for foreign exchange from First Citizens or majority state-controlled Republic Bank for his legal matter at the Privy Council or for his foreign medical checkups.

“I have done nothing but my private needs at my First Citizens bank, as you have touched on... Also, while I have small accounts in other institutions, my main bank is First Citizens and, as such, most of my banking needs are handled there. I singled out the transaction that was put on Hansard by Allahar simply because he lied and misrepresented. I have not sought foreign exchange from other institutions,” said Rowley.