

Business groups want port bottlenecks removed



Nadira Dass, first vice-president of the Customs Clerks and Brokers Association



Alisha Mohamed Stephens, secretary of the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce

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The local business community is growing increasingly frustrated over persistent bureaucratic bottlenecks at the country's ports.

Ten major business organisations voiced their concerns during a symposium on the operations of Customs hosted by the Couva/ Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce yesterday.

Nadira Dass, first vice-president of the Customs Clerks and Brokers Association, outlined the daily difficulties faced by customs brokers in clearing goods. She criticised the inefficiency of the Customs process, citing a recent incident where the ASYCUDA system went offline and the only communication from the Comptroller of Customs and Excise was a general public notice.

Dass stated that repeated attempts by her association to secure a meeting with the Comptroller have been unsuccessful.

She also flagged critical staffing shortages and limited operating hours as major contributors to delays.

“Customs officers often start after 9 am and finish by 3 pm,” said Dass. “Sometimes, we are unable to speak with anyone, and when we try to seek assistance, we are met with hostility.”

She added that at the Customs Selectivity Unit—responsible for screening documentation—brokers are not permitted to communicate directly with officers, further exacerbating delays.

Dass also expressed concern about the limited hours of operation at the Container Examination Section (CES), which runs between 9 and 10 am until 3 pm, with staff frequently diverted to perform overtime duties on “premises containers”. She called on the Government to ensure weekend operations are implemented to reduce the backlog.

Among other key issues raised:

- Severe understaffing across all customs departments;
- No contingency plan in place for ASYCUDA system failures, leading to significant trade disruption;
- Chronic congestion at the Port of Point Lisas;
- Lack of standard operating procedures and poor workplace discipline—including reports of customs cashiers arriving late, leaving early, and taking extended lunch breaks;
- Calls for expedited clearance of trade cargo, weekend delivery services, and tighter scrutiny of personal effect shipments, which are believed to be a channel for illegal imports.

Dass concluded by advocating for the implementation of a manual back-up system that would automatically activate during digital outages, in order to minimise disruption to trade.

Meanwhile, Dr Vaalmikki Arjoon, economist and vice-president of the Chaguanas Chamber of Industry and Commerce, recommended that the administration explore a strategic partnership with India to modernise port management.

He said a public-private model could attract much-needed investment for upgrading infrastructure and dredging the port to accommodate larger vessels.

Dr Arjoon noted that inefficiencies have already cost T&T millions in lost revenue, as shipping lines are increasingly bypassing the country for more efficient regional ports.

Echoing wider concerns, Anjie Jairam, president of the Fyzabad Chamber of Commerce, and Abraham Ali of the San Juan Business Chamber, warned that the poor national work ethic is also impeding progress. They described the prevailing attitudes within the workforce as being detrimental to national development.

The Hauliers Association added its voice to the discussion, citing delays caused by outdated equipment and excessive red tape, which continue to hamper logistics and supply chain operations.

Deoraj Mahase, president of the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce (CPLCC), said the organisation is compiling a list of recommendations to be submitted to the new Government, aimed at tackling the longstanding challenges within port operations.

CPLCC secretary Alisha Mohamed Stephens noted that port procedures were significantly faster during the tenure of former Trade Minister Vasant Bharath (2010–2015), when goods could be cleared in as little as three days.

She suggested that current delays could be reduced with stronger oversight and administrative reform.

With private sector voices growing louder, pressure is mounting on the incoming administration to prioritise port reform, improve efficiency, and restore confidence among both local businesses and international trading partners.