

Official Report

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRST SESSION (2015-2016) OF THE ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF GUYANA UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CO-OPERATIVE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA HELD IN THE PARLIAMENT CHAMBER, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, BRICKDAM, GEORGETOWN

37TH Sitting

Thursday, 12th May, 2016

The Assembly convened at 1.05 p.m.

Prayers

[Mr. Speaker in the Chair]

ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE SPEAKER

Private Members' Day

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, today is Private Members' Day and as Members can see, the majority of our business today is from Private Members. This practice, which as I understand, is of long standing and one agreed among Hon. Members that every fourth Sitting of the National Assembly will see precedence being given to Private Members' Business. Today is such a day.

By agreement between the Chief Whips and sanctioned by the Speaker, Private Members' matters which are not treated today will have precedence at the next Sitting, bearing in mind our shortened Sitting today.

Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the death of the late Dr. Walter Rodney

Hon. Members, I have received, from the Hon. Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs, on behalf of His Excellency, Brigadier David Granger, President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, Volume I of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed to enquire and report on the circumstances surrounding the death in an explosion of the late Dr. Walter Rodney on 13th

June, 1980.

The Report has been reproduced and, at the appropriate time during our proceedings today, will be formally laid in the Assembly for the information of all Hon. Members. Thank you Hon. Members.

Leave

Hon. Members, there are some other announcements. Leave from today's Sitting has been granted to the Hon. Members Ms. Selman and Mr. Rohee.

Address by His Excellency the President

I am informed Hon. Members, that His Excellency the President, Brigadier (Ret'd) David Arthur Granger, M.S.S. will attend and address the Parliament at today's Sitting. At the appropriate time we will suspend the Sitting to receive the President. When the President departs, we will resume our business.

SUSPENSION OF SITTING OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Sitting suspended at 1.10 p.m.

Arrival of His Excellency the President, David A. Granger, M.S.S.

IN PARLIAMENT CHAMBER

Sitting resumed at 1.29 p.m.

Remarks by the Speaker

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, His Excellency the President has come to speak to the Parliament. Your Excellency we welcome you and we invite you to address us. *[Applause]*

Address by his Excellency the President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana to the National Assembly on the Year of Renaissance

His Excellency the President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana [Brigadier David Granger]: Mr. Speaker, thank you for your kind welcome to address the House today as we approach our 50th Anniversary of Independence.

Hon. Prime Minister, Mr. Moses Nagamootoo, Vice-Presidents, Ministers of the Government, Leader of the Opposition, Members of the National Assembly, Members of the Diplomatic Corp, Clerk of the National Assembly, Special invitees, Members of the Media, ladies and gentlemen.

Guyana, this year, will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of its political independence from the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The Instruments of Independence which you see in the passage way were handed over in this very Chamber.

Guyanese yearned for political freedom from imperial domination. Independence imbued us with a feeling of pride, a sense of purpose and the ardour of patriotism. We had a country to develop, a territory to defend and the prospect of prosperity to be pursued.

British Guiana, in the immediate pre-independence period, was not a pleasant place for poor people. The social, economic and political predicament of the country, at the end of the colonial era, should not be underestimated.

Colonial society was elitist and exclusionary. Independence broke those barriers down. It provided recognition of our rights, greater reward for our endeavours and deeper respect for our people. Guyanese professionals were able to hold the highest public offices from which they had been previously excluded.

The economy, according to a British Government inquiry, was statistically insolvent. Political divisions had degenerated into a period of prolonged terrorism. The British Army, which had been in British Guiana, almost continuously, since 1953, was still on patrol. Social divisions, characterised, in part, by racial hostility badly damaged the country.

The newly-independent nation faced daunting external and internal challenges. The coming of Independence was the opportunity for our two neighbouring states, to the east and to the west, to lay claims on our territory. Suriname, then a part of the tripartite Kingdom of the Netherlands, claimed the huge New River Zone, the Corentyne River and a part of our sea space. Venezuela, more brazenly, claimed the entire Barima-Waini, Pomeroon-Supenaam, Cuyuni-Mazaruni, Potaro-Siparuni and Rupununi Regions, comprising over two-thirds of our territory. These ominous threats still persist and still offend our people and our independence, 50 years later.

Guyana's economy, at the start of our independence era, was ill-suited to the demands for development in our new state. The disturbances of 1964 had exacerbated the country's economic woes and intimidated the business community, many of whom fled. The economy, at the time of Independence, was still dominated by the foreign-owned sugar and bauxite industries. The unemployment rates had reached as high as 22%.

Public infrastructure was in a parlous state. A Report on the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in British Guiana in February 1962, just four years earlier, noted that, except for the road from the international airport at Atkinson Field, which is now known as Timehri, to the City of Georgetown, most of the colony's roads were still made of burnt earth and were heavily potholed.

The public education system was weak. The Government owned only three secondary schools in 1961 but provided financial assistance to 14 other schools. Entrance to these schools depended on the results of the Common Entrance Examinations, but even there success was low. Only 22% of the students who wrote the examinations in 1966 were able to secure passes. Enrolment in the schools was low, only 48% of eligible students aged between 0-14 years were enrolled.

The coming of independence, therefore, was a necessity. Guyana was able to make rapid progress and substantial advances in the immediate post-independence years. The public education system was strengthened by the construction of the University of Guyana, the Cyril's Potter College of Education, the New Amsterdam Technical Institute, the Guyana Industrial Training Centre, six multilateral schools and hinterlands schools for Indigenous students. The former Plantation Turkeyen was acquired as a Campus only on 24th May, 1966, hours before independence. This acquisition allowed the construction of the University of Guyana, as we know it today.

The foundation for modern public infrastructure was laid by the reconstruction of the coastal road network starting at Skeldon; by the reconstruction of sea defences; by the constructing the Soesdyke-Linden Highway, bridges across the Canje and Demerara Rivers; a new international airport at Atkinson Field, now Timehri; and, of course, the Mahaica-Mahaicony-Abary Agricultural Development Scheme.

Public housing was augmented by several housing schemes and public utilities such as rural electrification, telephone services and household pure water supply were extended. The

Amerindian Lands Commission was also a result of independence. This was established to initiate the land rectification process by which ancestral lands were returned to our Indigenous people. Recognition was extended for all religious observances by the three major faiths.

We Guyanese, today, therefore, have a lot to be thankful for. We cherish the symbols of our nationhood, which we adopted at or around the time of Independence. We cherish our national anthem, our national awards, our national coinage, our national flag, our national festivals, our national motto, our national pledge, our national monument and our beautiful national and patriotic songs.

Our national Coat of Arms depicts our unique patrimony, the jaguar, the most powerful predator on this continent; the Victoria Lily, the largest lily in the world; the quaint but inedible Canje Pheasant; and symbols of our great rivers and our agriculture and mining industry which have sustained generations of Guyanese.

We established new institutions — this very National Assembly, the Court of Appeal, we adopted a national Constitution and, four years later, adopted the remarkable official name - the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

1.40 p.m.

These sources of pride remind us constantly of our distinctiveness and of the fact that we are an independent nation in the international community. Guyanese can be proud of what we have achieved in the first 50 years of Independence. These are the first fruits of freedom which have fed and nourished a generation.

Independence offered us the opportunity to work together, to heal our divisions and to promote reconciliation. Independence offered us a new beginning, an opportunity for national unity. But, that national unity has been elusive for most of the last five decades. The absence of national unity has impaired national development. It has triggered a continuous trickle of migration. It has led to political and economic fatigue.

The National Assembly today must renew that Independence covenant with the Guyanese nation. It must resolve to work together to reunite our nation. The National Assembly must take the first steps on the long road to social cohesion, to political inclusion, and to economic resilience.

Mr. Speaker, our nation's future depends on deeper social cohesion. Today's generation has an obligation, at this celebration of our Independence Jubilee, to repair past damage, to restore trust and to rebuild the bases of a moral community. These will enable our people to co-exist and to cooperate with each other. We can construct a more cohesive society by doing more to eliminate extreme poverty, by eradicating the worst forms of inequality, especially gender inequality, by ensuring equal access to education for everyone, by enabling greater participation and inclusion at the political level, and by enforcing employment and anti-discrimination laws in order to guarantee the health, happiness, safety of our working people, our women and our children.

Social cohesion is about fostering greater integration in our nation. Integration can increase a sense of belonging. It can give recognition to all groups and allow them to freely practice their culture.

Our nation's future stability depends, also, on wider political inclusiveness. The ethnic arithmetic of the past can only mean that a minority could be excluded from a government by a majority, however slim. Confrontation characterised the old politics. Calculations of ethnic support determined election tactics. The winner-takes-all jackpot became the prize of every election. The political landscape became a battlefield, not always of ideas, but of racial rivalry. Communal conflict hampered human development. Mr. Speaker, that system belongs to the past. It is now dangerously dysfunctional.

Recently we saw that our communities have been liberated from the paralysing failure to conduct Local Government Elections (LGE). The lack of local democracy constrained the economic participation of citizens within their neighbourhoods and municipalities. Local democracy is the lifeline of increased community involvement.

The creation of new capital towns at Mabaruma in the Barima-Waini Region, Bartica in the Cuyuni-Mazaruni Region and at Lethem in the Rupununi Region will improve the provision of services to those hinterland regions. We need regular municipal and local elections in order to afford citizens a greater stake in the affairs of their communities and in order to provide incentives for economic activities, including the development of small businesses. Our people have been deprived of local democracy for over 18 years, but this will not happen again.

The Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana is an instrument of political inclusion. It has now become a mantra that:

“The principal objective of the State is to establish an inclusionary system of democracy by providing increasing opportunities for the participation of citizens and their organisations in the management and decision-making processes of the State, with particular emphasis on those areas of decision-making that directly affect their wellbeing.”

Mr. Speaker, the Government has initiated the Constitution Reform process. It must aim at strengthening this particular provision to ensure that the intended inclusionary system is made to work. The reform process must be extended to involve consultations with citizens in their communities in all 10 regions. Every eligible elector in this Republic must be given the chance to be heard, so that our country could advance with a Constitution in which we all have confidence.

Guyana is committed to building a green economy. Our country’s future economy depends on speedier adoption of renewable sources of energy and on the environmentally sustainable exploitation of our natural resources. This, therefore, requires a commitment to sustainable development that is mandated, again, by our Constitution - our Supreme Law.

Article 36 of our Constitution states:

“In the interests of the present and future generations, the State will protect and make rational use of its lands, mineral and water resources, as well as its fauna and flora, and will take all appropriate measures to ensure and improve the environment.”

This is the Constitution, not an option. Economic change, therefore, is compatible with stewardship of the environment and measures for sustainable development.

The Paris Agreement, approved by the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris on 12th December 2015, committed Guyana to a global action plan to put the world on track to avoid dangerous climate change by limiting global warming to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

The high cost of energy for manufacturing and other industrial and domestic purposes has hindered Guyana’s efforts to produce more value-added products competitively. Guyana’s

attendance at the US-Caribbean-Central American Energy Summit in Washington, DC, on 3rd and 4th May, 2016 emphasised the need for a national energy security plan, which will provide for the substitution of renewables for petroleum products for energy development.

The transition towards renewable sources of energy, as part of our green development thrust, must be accelerated. Investments in solar, wind, hydro and biomass sources of energy must be augmented.

The approach to a green economy will wean this country from its addiction to fossil fuels, fuels which exact a heavy burden on the economy.

Mr. Speaker and Members of this National Assembly, Independence imposed an obligation to use freedom to unite our people and to assure them of a good life. We now have a second chance to fulfil this promise. Our 50th Anniversary of Independence must not only be a time of reflection on the past, but it must also be an opportunity to plan for the future. It is a moment when we can commit to ensuring that our children and generations to come could inherit a country that will allow them to enjoy a good life.

Mr. Speaker, Guyana, 50 years ago, was born a broken nation under a state of emergency. Social strife, political disunity and economic stagnation prevented our nation from achieving its full potential. We must do better.

The first 50 years of our Independence had to be devoted to mending the social fabric, promoting peace and repairing the economy. The first 50 years were about overcoming a hostile economic environment. The next 50 years must be different. Let us use this special year to usher in an era of social peace, political collaboration and economic prosperity for this and all future generations.

The National Assembly was born in this hallowed Chamber where the Instruments of Independence were handed over to the first Prime Minister of independent Guyana. It is fitting for me to come back here today, to plead with this same National Assembly to use the opportunity of Guyana's 50th Anniversary to unite our people. We have a golden opportunity in our Golden Jubilee to build bridges that will lead us forward into the future as a unified nation.

I wish you and Members of this honourable House a Happy Independence Anniversary. May God bless the National Assembly and may God bless Guyana. I thank you. *[Applause]*

Mr. Speaker: Mr. President, allow me on behalf of the Hon. Members of this Assembly to express our gratitude to you for speaking to us at this particularly important period of our country's history. We are grateful for the thoughts and insights which you have imparted to us. I thank you.

Sitting suspended at 1.52 p.m.

Sitting resumed at 2.08 p.m.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND REPORTS

The following papers and reports were presented:

(1) Report of "the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to enquire and report on the circumstances surrounding the Death in an Explosion of the Late Dr. Walter Rodney on Thirteenth Day of June, One Thousand, Nine Hundred And Eighty at Georgetown.

(2) Minutes of Proceedings of the 4th Meeting of the Committee of Selection held on Wednesday, 4th May, 2016.

[Speaker of the National Assembly - Chairman of the Committee of Selection]

(3) The Childcare and Development Services Regulations 2016 – No. 3 of 2016.

[Minister of Social Protection]

2.10 p.m.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Presentation and First Readings

The following Bill was introduced and read the first time.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT BILL 2016 – Bill No. 14/2016

A BILL Intituled:

“AN ACT to provide for the protection, conservation, management, sustainable use internal and external trade of Guyana's wildlife.” *[Minister of Natural Resources]*

PUBLIC BUSINESS

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

MOTIONS

REPORT OF THE WALTER RODNEY COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, you would recall that I had just presented to the Assembly the Report, which for short description we would say, the Walter Rodney Commission of Inquiry. That Report, having now been laid before the Assembly, the motion standing in the name of Ms. Gail Teixeira in relation to this very matter appears to no longer be appropriated for discussion here. What the motion requires is that the Report be made available to the Assembly within two weeks of the date on which it would have been approved, if that is the correct word, in the Assembly. In the circumstance, the motion, as it stands, would no longer be dealt with here.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I tabled a motion because the Government had to table the report, we could not table the report. Having tabled the Report, I put in an amendment seeking that this matter be sent to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee for further examination. My amendment was submitted yesterday afternoon by 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock and it has been circulated on the floor. It is quite appropriate according to the Standing Orders that a motion can be brought by a Member under the "Admissibility of motions" and secondly, to do such a matter with a report, a petition or a motion. So, Sir, I am appealing to you. My amendment is in order and I am asking that my motion, with the amendment, be allowed to be debated.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member for her statement. The Hon. Member would know that, in relation to amendments of motions, amendments of motions are usually provided by Members from the floor, after the question is put. My reading and understanding of Standing Order 37(4) makes that clear. So, I am bound to say to you that the amendment of which you speak is an amendment which you could properly present to this House, assuming that there was a motion, after the question is put. No question is going to be put given the statement I have just made.

Ms. Teixeira: Please, Sir, I am appealing to you and I do this with no disrespect. It is possible at any time when a matter is before this House that an amendment could be put verbally on the floor. I have submitted an amendment hours before - yesterday - to allow for a simple amendment

that this Report goes to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee. In fact, under “Exemption from Notice”, I can move that on the floor without even having brought an amendment to this House. Sir, I am appealing to you that this amendment is in order and that bringing the Report merely to this House does not give it the opportunity for examination by this House.

Secondly, Sir, you said that the Report has been tabled with us. May I say that this is Volume 1, where are the other volumes of this Report? Are there other volumes that were submitted? The Commission of Inquiry submitted a compilation of reports... [*Interruption*] Sir can I be protected?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I think we should allow the Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira to speak and then we will proceed from there.

Ms. Teixeira: This is Volume 1. I do not know whether there are three volumes, 10 volumes or 20 volumes. I have no idea Sir. I do not have any copies. I am again seeking your protection, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, all I am saying is that you have said that the Report is being tabled. I accede that Volume 1 of the Report is being tabled. Therefore, in my view, there must be other volumes and this Volume is not the entire Report.

The Hon. Members find it funny. But, Mr. Speaker, if you would allow me, this is a very emotional matter for me because my entire youth in this country was fought and spent in that period with Dr. Walter Rodney and other comrades for democracy in this country. We have now gone full circle. After 36 years, we now have a report and it is going to be shelved? Mr. Speaker, I am appealing to you. There will be no harm done if this Report goes to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee. We, as the Members of Parliament (MPs) of this House, particularly these younger MPs who did not grow up in that period, would be able to look at it. Do you know why I am begging you, Sir, because we must never let this happen again? We can only do that by looking at the Report, examining it and coming back to the House.

The Commission of Inquiry has made recommendations. Why can this House not pay attention to those recommendations for the better of our country, the Guyana Police Force, the Guyana Defence Force and investigation of crimes? Does the Hon. Member from the Ministry of Public Security not want that?

Mr. Speaker, I generally quarrel and fight in this House, but I generally deferred to you as the Speaker or anyone as the Speaker of this House. For this particular issue, of not allowing an amendment to this motion, for the Report to go to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee, Sir, I do not want to say the word of how I feel because you would probably discipline me. But Sir, I cannot comprehend why you would do this. It is really unacceptable and I am begging you to see the reason that this Report going to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee will do no harm and is only for the betterment of this country, Sir.

First Vice-President and Prime Minister [Mr. Nagamootoo]: If it pleases you your Honour. Your Honour has made a ruling as regards a motion that is spent. This House is governed by rules and a Member seeking to be protected under those rules cannot abuse the said rules of the House. The Speaker has made a ruling that the intention of the motion has been satisfied. The Member is seeking, through the backdoor, to introduce an emotive contribution by a way of a debate of a motion that is spent.

Honourable Speaker, you had ruled that the motion was admissible and that it should be on the Order Paper, but the intention of the motion has been satisfied. It is very clear that a motion before this House should relate to only one definite matter and the one definite matter was that the Report be submitted within two weeks, urgently. The Report was submitted urgently before the two weeks. The single definite matter requested by the motion has been satisfied.

I think that an attempt to defeat the ruling by the Speaker is contemptuous of this House, if not of the rules, of the Speaker himself. I ask that this way of showing open contempt in the face of the Parliament should not be encouraged, whether one is emotional or not. The Hon. Opposition Member Ms. Teixeira is not the only one who would have lived through that period.

If I may say this, that this Report would not have been here if we had had in the lifetime of one Mr. Johnson an inquiry into who had assassinated Dr. Rodney. It was while I was with that side of the House. To come here...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister I must interrupt. We are going beyond the narrow confines of the discussion which I am permitting.

Mr. Nagamootoo: I bow to you Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I would ask the Prime Minister to confine any remarks he is making to the issue here. Nothing in the Report is here.

Mr. Nagamootoo: Sir, I simply wish to say this. Your Honour has ruled and we as Members of this House should respect your ruling and move on.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Prime Minister for his statement. Hon. Member Ms. Teixeira, we have here Standing Order 37(4) which tells us how we may proceed, after a question has been put. The matter before this House was to have a Report delivered to this Assembly in two weeks. The Report has been submitted to the Assembly and the amendment, which you have provided, could only, and I think you know this anyway, be made, according to our Standing Orders, when the question is put. That is what it says. We may wish it to be read differently, but the normal and ordinary meaning of the words is clear. So that is what we have.

As regards the amendment, I think that the Hon. Member knows that there is a method which can be employed to achieve the end which she seeks. I do not believe that the Speaker is called on to make a suggestion. Indeed he will not do that. I would only say that the Hon. Member knows what course she must follow if she wishes for the amendment to have life.

2.25 p.m.

It is always open to the Hon. Member to bring that amendment as a fresh motion but we cannot, because it is inconvenient, alter the meanings of Standing Orders. This matter will not be discussed now.

Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs [Mr. Williams]: If it pleases you, Mr. Speaker. To clarify a matter raised by the Hon. Member, Ms. Teixeira, that it was possible that we laid only a part of the report, I wish to address that.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I must ask you not to clarify anything.

Mr. Williams: As it pleases you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member for his cooperation. We will move to the next item.

Ms. Teixeira: Mr. Speaker, I just want to inform you that, based on your advice, I will be coming back, very soon, in the very near future, as advised. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member, but I am surprised that the Hon. Member would say to me that she did not know that.

Ms. Teixeira: I knew.

Mr. Speaker: You knew it. I see. Well, there you have it.

We now turn to the second matter before this House on the state of the rice industry in Guyana. Mr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali will move the motion. Mr. Ali, you may proceed.

THE STATE OF THE RICE INDUSTRY IN GUYANA

“WHEREAS on the 31st day of October, 2015, Mr. Dharamkumar Seeraj, the General Secretary of the Rice Producers Association and a Member of Parliament, wrote to the Honourable Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Noel Holder, upon the direction of the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo, conveying to the Honourable Minister the grave concern of the PPP/Civic in respect of the state of the Rice Industry in Guyana;

AND WHEREAS in that letter it was pointed out that rice farmers were promised a one hundred percent (100%) increase in the price for which paddy was sold for the first crop of 2015, by several leaders of the APNU+AFC during the campaign leading up to the National and Regional Elections held on 11th May, 2015, and that in breach of that promise, for the second crop for 2015, farmers received between 35 percent (35%) to sixty percent (60%) of the price which they obtained for their paddy in the first crop of 2015;

AND WHEREAS as a consequence, both rice farmers and rice millers are facing tremendous financial and economic hardships and many of them are unable to meet their obligations under loan contracts with commercial banks for which their homes and other assets have been lodged as collateral by way of mortgages and as a result, many of these properties are now in jeopardy of being the subject of foreclosures and sales;

AND WHEREAS in an attempt to bring some measure of relief a number of measures were proposed to the Honourable Minister for his implementation;

AND WHEREAS none of these proposed measures have been implemented and the situation in the rice industry has since gotten progressively worse;

BE IT RESOLVED:

That this National Assembly calls upon the Government of Guyana to implement the following measures with every convenient speed:

- (i) To resume negotiations with the Government of Venezuela with the intention of selling rice and paddy to that country;
- (ii) To immediately remove all form of taxes and duties on fuel for the industry;
- (iii) To remove all taxes and duties on inputs for the industry including machinery, equipment and spares;
- (iv) To commence discussions with all the commercial banks lending to the industry to review terms and conditions of loans taking into account the low prices farmers are getting in order to ‘soften’ repayment conditions;
- (v) To suspend payments of land leases and drainage and irrigation charges;
- (vi) To lay supplementary provisions in the National Assembly to provide financial support to farmers in order to aid in the purchase of seed paddy and fertilizers;
- (vii) To immediately implement minimum export prices for rice and paddy;
- (viii) To implement an aggressive marketing strategy in order to enhance current prices and secure new lucrative markets; and
- (ix) To withdraw its pronouncement that the rice industry’s crisis “is a private matter” and give support to the industry, especially the farmers.” [*Mr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali*]

Mr. Ali: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today, we are debating an essential and very important motion to do with the rice industry. The rice industry, as we know, is not only a component of the economic framework of our country, but the rice industry is an industry that provides economic and social wellbeing to a number of persons in our population. In some

regions, this economic activity accounts for more than 95% of the economic wellbeing of the people. It is, therefore, imperative and, as leaders, we must understand that rice cannot be isolated as private business. Rice is, indeed, an integral and important aspect of national life. If, for a moment, we believe that the woes of the rice farmers could be ignored, if, for a moment, we believe that the hardships of the farmers could be ignored, if, for a moment, we believe that the farmers can be denied the much needed affordable benefits and support that will sustain, secure and safeguard the livelihood of thousands of people across this country, then a fundamental social and economic mistake is being made.

The negligence of the Government and the incompetence of the Government in dealing with the issue of rice, in understanding the seriousness of rice and its import to this country leave much to be desired. We woke up a long time ago. That is why, when we were in Government, we consistently gave benefits; we consistently provided support mechanisms for the farmers in the rice industry. We are not asking for anything more or anything less. All that we are asking for is for those existing support that the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) Government gave to the rice farmers be restored. We are not asking... **[Mr. Greenidge: What is the support?]** I will tell you, in a moment, what the support is. We are not asking, for a moment, for the Government to implement the promise that it made to the rice farmers. The Government has to be held accountable for the promise it made and how it abandoned the rice farmers. That is something it has to explain. What we are asking for is the sustainability of the sector based on the framework and the policy that the PPP/C Government left.

The total loan to the rice sector is \$9 billion. Let us not, for a moment, believe that rice is isolated from the financial framework of this country. Rice plays a key role in the financial architecture of the country - \$9 billion exposure in the banking sector. Can we understand what \$9 billion of exposure in the banking sector means? **[Mr. Greenidge: What does it mean?]** It is 5% of the total loans and, of course, the Hon. Member, Mr. Greenidge, does not know what it means; I understand. He had a period when he showed the nation that he did not know what it meant.

In December, 2013, non-performing loans in the agriculture sector was \$1,397,000,000; in December, 2015, non-performing loans in the agriculture sector was \$4,214,000,000. Can we

understand this? Worse than this is that 43% of the non-performing loans in the agriculture sector is as a result of paddy.

As I speak on this motion, the state of the rice industry in Guyana is in a catastrophic place. We are living in a time when, although six months ago, 5,000 acres of rice was planted in Leguan Island, today, zero acre of rice is planted on that Island. The last crop covered 34 acres and all was lost. Worse is that, up to today, the Minister of Agriculture has not visited those farmers in Leguan Island. I spoke to the farmers one week ago and they were dismayed at the way they were treated. In Wakenaam Island, the story is the same. In Essequibo, the story is the same. The Government is faced with a moral dilemma and that dilemma is that it has to explain to the people why the promise of \$9,000 per bag of rice cannot be materialised when the very Government can find the resources to increase its salaries by 50%. It is a moral dilemma and the Government is afraid to face the farmers to explain this moral dilemma.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture's *Situation and Outlook Report* dated 14th April, 2016, the 2015/2016 global production forecast was lowered by 0.5 million tonnes which is nearly 2% below a year earlier and the smallest in four years. Production forecasts were lowered also in Brazil, Pakistan, Philippines and Vietnam. This situation presents an opportunity for us. Therefore, it is very essential and imperative that we work with the farmers and producers to ensure that we continue to produce increasingly with the intentions of meeting the shortage. We are in a situation where, based on the forecast for 2015/2016, there is no growth on the market. There is a shortage on the market. Demand is outstripping supply and yet, the Government cannot find an innovative way to ensure that Guyana plays a key and critical role in meeting this demand. Instead, there is a reduction in production. Of course, when markets are examined, one cannot take persons who do not understand the rice industry to negotiate because, when they visit Mexico and the people in Mexico tell them that they need rough rice and they do not understand that rough rice is paddy, then we have difficulties. If this Government is serious, it must have professionals. It cannot have bluffers. Bluffers are for locally and the bluffers and *fluffers* will be exposed. Let us get professional negotiators, persons who can target markets, find the resources and find the way in which this country can benefit from those markets.

According to an international rice research institute and according to the forecast for 2030, the demand for rice will move from 600 million tonnes to 904 million tonnes in 2030. According to

the predictions, production in Asia will increase 1.5 times, production in the Americas will increase 1.4 times and production in Africa will increase 1.4 times. If the analysis is done, there will definitely be a gap in the Americas because, according to the forecast, the production in Asia would only be to satisfy the Asian market and the production in Asia will help the shortages in Africa.

2.40 p.m.

This projection does not forecast the issues of climate change, which, as we know, can also seriously affect production in various years. We have not seen a plan from this Government that looks at the forecast, examines the forecast, strategises on which market segment we should target and then develops a strategy to meet that market.

When we were in Government, we knew the challenges and that is why we were saying that we need to develop a speciality product. We were looking at aromatic rice and targeting different markets. That was not something that we just plucked out of the air. We were looking at a cereal plant. We were looking at other ways in which we could have diversified our product, improve our product to meet different markets. In order for us to meet this demand and the shortage, we had to find ways in which we could increase production. We were able to move production from less than 100,000 tonnes, when we came to Government, to over 600,000 tonnes and our forecast was to take this in the near term, not the medium term, to 1 million tonnes.

We were achieving that target of a million tonnes and I will say that the farmers have a legitimate expectation from Government to support this sector. The policy framework of the agricultural sector drove farmers to expand their production. It drove farmers to invest in increasing production and they have a legitimate expectation if the policy framework pushes them to that direction. You cannot just change in mid-course, but worse than that is that this Government created additional expectation during the campaign when it advised the farmers that it will pay \$9,000 per bag.

The Government has the opportunity to go out there and deny that they promised this. When you campaign during elections, the populace takes you seriously. If you create legitimate expectations, then you have a duty to ensure that you fulfil those legitimate expectations. I will say that the fact that the Government is moving away from its promise, we can face ourselves

with a legal battle because legitimate expectations and actions based on legitimate expectations must not be taken lightly.

I wish to touch briefly on the Venezuelan market. It is important for us to understand what transpired in relation to the Venezuelan market. The Government has never announced or sought to enlighten the farmers on how exactly we lost the Venezuelan market.

When you come into Government, it is serious business. You cannot come into Government and make remarks that can affect the relationship with major trading partners. **[Mr. Greenidge: Are you sure that is what happened? It is Venezuela's right].** You can justify it how you want to justify it. I will also outline the outcome of the failure of the Government to secure the continuity of the Venezuelan market. If we fail to act and seek plausible solutions, the impact can determine our economy and, most importantly, affect, adversely, the living standards of our people.

If the Government is serious about rice, then we should see a high-level team seeking to engage the Venezuelan Government in relation to this issue. It is a major enough issue for us to engage the Venezuelan Government. Engaging the Venezuelan Government in the interests of the rice industry is in no way selling out our position. We have made our position known on Venezuela. **[Mr. Greenidge: Have you?]** Of course, the Leader of the Opposition has made definitive statements on this issue and we do not have to hide behind anything. The people of this country know exactly what our policy and position is on every single issue. We have never betrayed the people on any issue.

The total earnings from the export of white rice and paddy to Venezuela for the period 2012 to 2015 were as follows: US\$504 million, US\$428 million and, in 2015, when this Government was in office, US\$50 million.

It is important to point out that exports to Venezuela as a percentage to total export is an average of 66.47%, while, in 2015, exports to Venezuela were nearly 22%, a drop from 66.47% to 22%. We are seeing the outcome of this reduction and, eventually, if we do not move to repair relations, we will see the impact of this reduction more severely on the communities that are extensively rice producers.

A quick analysis shows that a total of \$11.466 billion in revenue was lost due to the failure of the Government to secure this market. The inaction and failure of the Government to act in relation to this market has cost us almost \$11.5 billion in revenue. If one was to factor in the indirect and induced revenue loss, we can estimate the total loss of revenue to be somewhere around \$22.9 billion. The incompetence of this Government and the inability of this Government to secure a market have cost us \$22.9 billion in revenue, directly and indirectly. In addition, we have the loss of foreign currency, which will also affect our balance of payment position. We have farmers unable to replant. This will impact on our production figures. Additionally, we have the El Niño issues. Production, at this moment, is stymied by the inaction and ineffectiveness of Government to address the issues facing the rice sector. Many businesses in rice producing communities have been affected with reduced demand. You have reduced sales in many of the communities.

Today, we are not going to just raise these issues and leave them there; we are committed to the sustainable continued growth of the rice sector and we, on this side of the House, would like to propose the following: one, which we proposed a year ago, resume talks and negotiations with the Government of Venezuela; two, remove all forms of taxes and duties on fuel for the industry; **[Hon. Member: Did you do that?]** Of course, we did that. I just said this: if those who are tasked with pushing this industry forward do not have an understanding of what was done to help the industry, then where are we starting from? We ask to remove all taxes and duties on inputs for the industry, including machinery, equipment and spares. Three, on this issue, we ask for a transparent public tendering of fertiliser for this industry and not the unilateral, non-transparent way in which the high officer sought to secure fertiliser from a campaign financier; four, they must work with financial institutions to refinance loans of farmers. The Government needs to sit down with the banks and to work out the refinancing of loans. Farmers are losing their assets. Our fifth recommendation is to suspend payments of land leases and drainage and irrigation (D&I) charges. Six, we ask that the Government lays a supplementary provision in the National Assembly to provide financial support to farmers in order to aid the purchase of seed paddy and fertiliser. We did all of this. Seven, we ask to immediately implement minimum export prices for rice and paddy. Eighth, we ask to implement an aggressive marketing strategy, that is not headed by the Prime Minister, in order to enhance current prices and secure new lucrative markets. Nine and very importantly, we ask for the immediate withdrawal of the pronouncement by the

Government that rice is not Government's business. We ask for the pronouncement that rice is a private matter be withdrawn immediately.

2.55 p.m.

These are only some of the additional recommendations that we wish to put forward to the Government, and, in so doing, I conclude by saying to the rice farmers... Of course, Mr. Speaker, guess what the Government did? Instead of helping, it now added 16% Value Added Tax (VAT) on machinery; the tractor and the combine now attracts 16% VAT. We ask that this 16% be immediately withdrawn, and, as an immediate support system for the people in the rice industry, in communities where more than 80% of the income depends on rice, we ask that the electricity subsidy and water subsidy be immediately extended to these communities.

[Hon. Member: Why did you not give them?] Why did we not give them? We are not in Government now to give them. If we were there, we would have given them because, when we left, we left a blooming industry. We did not have any catastrophic industry; we left a blooming industry! When we were in Government and bauxite faced the challenge, we gave the people of Linden [*inaudible*] benefits! We gave you subsidies; we retrained and recruited the workers to function in different aspects of the economy! So, do not tell us why we do not do it! You are in Government now and you must do it!

This is a highly emotional issue and this... [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I interrupt only to say that I can assure you that the Speaker hears you perfectly.

Mr. Ali: Mr. Speaker, let me say this: if this is the way the Government wants to treat the rice farmers, asking why we do not do it, well I have news. I want the rice farmers to hear, and, very soon, they will put us back there so we can do it for them and we will do it for them.

I conclude by saying that, today, the rice farmers know who is on their side. Today, the rice farmers know who cares about them, and I assure them that we, on this side, would fight to the end to ensure that they can exist in this country like any other person.

I thank you. *[Applause]*

Mr. Damon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me stand here to support what my Colleague, Comrade Irfaan Ali, has just said and, at the same time, let me give my little bit also. When our foreparents brought rice to Guyana as a food source in the 18th century, from then, it was sweet rice; sweet rice is here to stay.

For the past year, rice has been taking a “licking” and \$1,500 per bag of paddy is what is being paid to our farmers under the APNU/AFC Government.

During our General Elections campaign just over a year ago, several persons who are known affiliates of the APNU/AFC Government were on the television and radio promising \$9,000 per bag of paddy, and the Prime Minister knows that.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, do you rise on a Point of Order?

Mr. Nagamootoo: I rise on a Point of Order, Sir. The Member is misleading this House. It has been said once, and if one is making a statement, Mr. Speaker, you would expect to have the name of the person who said what is alleged to have been said, the source of who said it and the date at which it was said. Unless, those materials are supplied to the House, the statement remains empty and is only intended to mislead and introduce a propaganda effect. It is self-service.

[Hon. Members: What is the Point of Order?] The Member is misleading the House by not giving the source.

Leader of the Opposition [Mr. Jagdeo]: Mr. Speaker, you are being given a lecture by the Hon. Prime Minister.

Mr. Nagamootoo: I am on my feet. You have become so jittery.

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I understand that there is emotion in the House. Could we still contain ourselves in accordance with the rules? Mr. Damon, please proceed.

Mr. Damon: Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, there were several persons who were known affiliates of the APNU/AFC Government who were on the television and radio pronouncing \$9,000 per

bag of paddy. Farmers voted for the APNU/AFC Government but this was just talk. Our farmers were conned and rice died a natural death.

What happened was that the same APNU/AFC Government disowned our rice farmers. We heard rice is a private enterprise; how foolish it sounded. How dare in the ears of our hardworking farmers...

Rice, sugar and bauxite kept this country afloat for decades. How now has the APNU/AFC Government decided to distance itself from rice? The farmers of Region 2, Region 6, Region 3 and Region 5 demand that the APNU/AFC Government must address the rice industry. Eighty per cent of our people depend on rice directly and indirectly. For example, in Region 2, where I was born, if rice is not addressed, every other sector in Region 2 will feel the squeeze.

I have a message, for the Hon. Minister of Agriculture, from the farmers of Guyana: “Get your acts together or else you will end up in a dismal failure.” Let me advise you, the Minister of Agriculture, Hon. Member, about the way forward. The APNU/AFC Government should send the Minister to Venezuela to renegotiate the rice/petro deal. Now, our farmers want rice; Guyana needs rice. So, stop killing rice, Hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Let me now take this opportunity to let the APNU/AFC know what is happening to our rice farmers in Region 2. Most of our farmers are penniless because of the low price of paddy and the high cost to cultivate rice. The farmers owe hundreds of millions of dollars in loans that were utilised in the rice industry; for example, farmers bought new machinery in order to produce more rice for Guyana.

Our farmers need help and, as such, Hon. Minister of Agriculture, I now ask that you make yourself available and pay visits to all the rice growing regions to meet our farmers and, of course, with a package for them to return to the rice industry.

I thank you. *[Applause]*

Minister of Agriculture [Mr. Holder]: Mr. Speaker, the last two speakers left me breathless, even though I have not said a word.

I rise to speak on the motion by the Hon. Member, Mohamed Irfaan Ali, on the state of the rice industry in Guyana. In its preamble, he referred to a letter written by Mr. Dharamkumar Seeraj,

the General Secretary of the Guyana Rice Producers Association (GRPA), conveying to me the grave concerns of the People's Progressive Party with respect to the state of the rice industry in this country. And, indeed, as stated in the Guyana Rice Producers Association Act, Chapter 69:01:

“The functions of the Association shall be the performance of any of the following services:

(c) making representations to the Minister concerning any matter affecting production in the industry, the operations of the Rice Marketing Board and the interests of rice producers generally...”

Over the past several months, I visited the entire rice belt, albeit with the exception of Leguan and Wakenaam, which I will try to correct very shortly. I find myself continually being faced with farmers who complain of the neglect meted out to them by the so-called representatives of the Guyana Rice Producers Association. It is easy to understand the farmers' frustration, particularly since the GRPA has refused to hold proper, transparent and verifiable elections, in accordance with the regulations, for several years. This illegality has created the distorted view of the powers and authority of the General Secretary, who is, in fact, an employee of the Association. One will, therefore, have to be very careful in dealing with the emanations from such a group since many of the positions proffered are not based on facts or statistical analyses, but more on hearsay and clear fabrication. Let me, however...

Mr. Seeraj: I am rising on a Point of Order, Sir. The Guyana Rice Producers Association Act provides for elections to be held biannually, that is, once every two years. There are regulations governing how it is done and the GRPA has been compliant up to last year, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: That is a Point of Explanation. Thank you, Sir. Minister, please proceed.

Mr. Holder: Let me deal, however, with the measures proposed in the motion:

“(i) To resume negotiations with the Government of Venezuela with the intention of selling rice and paddy to that country...”

Under the PetroCaribe arrangement, Guyana signed contracts with Venezuela for each consecutive year from 2009 to 2015 and honoured all contracts. The Venezuela rice trade totalled

624,647 metric tonnes of paddy and 355,628 metric tonnes of white rice, valued at US\$594,918,265 which is US\$312 million approximately in paddy and US\$282 million in rice. During this period, the rice industry saw some positive transformations, farmers and millers gradually increasing their investments over the years.

3.10 p.m.

However, it is a well-known fact that the contract with Venezuela was repudiated by Venezuela. Guyana's efforts to resume shipments were not successful.

We are all aware of what has happened to the price of oil and the serious economic problems that Venezuela, as a nation, faces. It is inconceivable that deals that are comparable in volume and price of the past are achievable again. Indeed, we are informed that the current arrangement between Venezuela and Suriname, which is itself in jeopardy, is at a price way below the US\$760 per ton which was received by Guyana.

The Hon. Member would agree with me that Guyana benefits with the reduction in oil prices. However, this is not the case for Venezuela. Professor Thomas, in his article *Guyana's Perspective: The Basic Contradictions of PetroCaribe* on 22nd March, 2016, in the *Stabroek News* stated:

“Venezuela needs an oil price of US\$120 to US\$140 per barrel to meet its obligations fully, including those of PetroCaribe. And given that the days of US\$100 per barrel of oil may be gone for decades, with current market prices at US\$30 to US\$40 per barrel, it must be deduced that even if the Government does resume negotiations with the Government of Venezuela, it would be very difficult for Guyana to pursue the deal since they are limited.

Additionally, there is no scenario analysis for the rapidly reduced oil prices as had been seen over the past nine months, despite the abundance of oil resources.”

The second Be It Resolved clause states:

“To immediately remove all forms of taxes and duties on fuel for the industry;”

The third Be It Resolved clause states:

“To remove all taxes and duties on imports for the industry, including machinery, equipment and spares respectively;”

I will address these two clauses together, if the Hon. Member does not mind.

It may be possible to attempt this if one could relate the quantum of fuel used for field operations on a per acre basis. This is the kind of work that the field staff of the Guyana Rice Producers Association (GRPA) should be doing and I call upon the GRPA to collaborate with officers of my Ministry to present a proposal on how the removal of duties and taxes on fuel can be addressed without the haemorrhage of such fuel into the society at a great loss to the Government’s coffers.

It is true that Value Added Tax (VAT) is now being charged on imported machinery, equipment and spares, unlike the earlier years. But this could be relooked at and I would ensure that this is done so that recommendations, if considered feasible, could be made to the Ministry of Finance.

The fourth Be It Resolved clause states:

“To commence discussion with all of the commercial banks’ lending to the industry to review terms and conditions of loans taking into account the low prices farmers are getting in order to ‘soften’ repayment conditions;”

Once, in the past, Government had intervened with the refinancing of defaulting farmers. Where the taxes on interest earned by the commercial banks were waived and farmers benefited from a lower interest rate. There is much potential for this to benefit our farmers, since, according to the Bank of Guyana (BoG), the commercial bank loans and advances to the private paddy producers was not \$9 billion but \$65.5 million in 2015. Whilst from January to March, 2016, it was \$17.22 million. This is an increase of 19% for the same period of January - March, 2015. My Ministry will commence discussions with the Ministry of Finance and commercial banks, as was suggested, to soften repayment conditions. We have no problem with that.

The fifth Be It Resolved clause states:

“To suspend payments of land leases and drainage and irrigation charges;”

One may need to examine this in greater detail. Robert Kiyosaki once said:

“The best way to predict the future is to study the past.”

From the past, if one examines the Black Bush Polder and Tapakuma Schemes, both are rich rice producing areas where farmers were irresponsible in cattle rearing, cleaning and clearing of fields, and drainage to farm lands by not paying their drainage and irrigation (D&I) fees. This resulted in the deterioration of the schemes. Government intervened by accessing Inter-American Development (IDB) loans to resuscitate these schemes. Every one paid. Is this what the Hon. Member wants to happen again?

The sixth Be It Resolved clause states:

“To lay supplementary provisions in the National Assembly to provide financial support to farmers in order to aid in the process of seed paddy and fertilizers;”

Government has, in the past, given favourable consideration to supplementary provisions for farmers. We are prepared to import fertilisers and make it available to the farmers at the lowest possible price, as had been done in the past.

The seventh Be It Resolved clause states:

“To immediately implement minimum export prices for rice and paddy;”

When we look at our position in the world’s rice trade, our production is only 0.161% of the world’s rice production. This means that our position is the same as that of a single drop in our mighty Essequibo River. What this means is that we are not in a position to dictate terms on the World Market or influence price or production trends. We are at the behest of world market prices.

We would have avoided this reality in the recent past with the very favourable prices received from Venezuela under the PetroCaribe arrangement, where they accepted rice as payment for oil. However, this arrangement had many challenges and we are forced, once more, to wake up to the reality that is the World Market.

We operate on open market conditions. We monitor the prices and set our contracts based on the world prices. How, therefore, could Guyana implement a system of minimum export prices for paddy and/or rice? What happens when there are no buyers because there is cheaper rice available elsewhere? Given that we are unable to compete on price alone, this presents the opportunity for producers to concentrate on growing and maintaining the quality of their product to gain premium

prices in this space or to produce the new aromatic varieties, which fetch higher prices on the World Market.

The eighth Be It Resolved clause states:

“To implement an aggressive marketing strategy in order to enhance current prices and secure new lucrative markets;”

The Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) has been doing this on a continuous basis. The Panama contract is a case in point and negotiations are in train to secure a new market in Mexico. I would not shy away from the fact that one of the main issues facing the industry is the challenge of marketing our rice at a price that is profitable to all stakeholders. The enormous increase in rice production now means that we must market our rice into newer markets and be competitive with other producers of rice. Forty countries now buy Guyana’s rice, allowing our export earnings from rice to grow to more than US\$240 million. We must protect and extend these markets by ensuring that the highest quality rice is exported.

In 2010, the Venezuela market was 70% of local production. In 2014-2015, the Venezuela market, which maintained its volume, was about 30% of our production. Hence, as we continue to seek high-priced preferential markets, we must gear our industry in such a manner that we can accept World Market prices and still make a profit. We are the only country in the world that exports as much as 75% of the rice produced. Our current industry model is one that is dependent heavily on marketing. This Government is fully aware of the importance of this sector on the performance of the economy and on the livelihood of our people.

It would be ill-conceived if we continue to increase production and have nowhere to market our rice. As such, this Government has placed much emphasis on marketing. Government is committed to provide support, but the industry must also take responsibility.

The ninth Be It Resolved clause states:

“To withdraw its pronouncement that the rice industry’s crisis ‘is a private matter’ and give support to the industry, especially the farmers.”

The rice industry is, at present, the most important agricultural industry in Guyana. Indeed, it is now ahead of sugar in terms of foreign exchange earnings. Rice is the largest user of agricultural

lands, and absorbs and influences more of the working population than any other industry in Guyana. This Government recognises the 7,300 farmers across the rice belt cultivating some 240,000 acres.

Rice is our industry. We must stop the bickering and making statements and work together for the benefit of the farmers. I welcome the Guyana Rice Producers Association and the Hon. Member to come, sit down with my officers, and let us work on these measures in greater details for the benefit of the farmers and to improve the state of the rice industry.

Notwithstanding the above measures raised by the Hon. Member, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Guyana Rice Development Board have and will continue to do the following measures to enhance the state of the rice industry in Guyana.

Furthermore, in this matter, as was revealed during the Budget debate in 2016, that production was expected to decline by 8.4% from the 2014 levels to 630 028 metric tons.

As of 9th May, 2016, we have harvested about 80% of our spring crop and produced 215,339 metric tons. We are on track. For this first crop, most rice has been harvested. We have lost only 4%, the effects of the *El Niño* phenomenon notwithstanding.

To this effect, the Rice Research Station at Burma will continue its focus on plant breeding, agronomy, soil fertility and crop nutrition, entomology, seed production, agricultural engineering, with the latter focusing on laser levelling programmes. It is our estimate that if we could institute a laser levelling programme throughout the rice producing areas of the coastland, our rice production, by that means alone, would lead to such better water management that our production could increase by 14%.

A parameter measuring programme, rice transplanter programme, pioneered mechanised rice transplanting in Guyana with the aim of improving seed quality and productivity and the modernisation of the seed cleaning and treatment plant are other areas of focus.

The GRDB is also working on the resuscitation of the rice project in Moco Moco in the Rupununi in Region 9. For the next four years, the GRDB plans to facilitate the increased production of rice in the Rupununi from approximately 20 to 30 acre cultivations, gradually, to 50 acres and then

100 acres. This particular area and also coastal rice production are very important because we have to look at the Brazilian market.

At Manaus, there is a population of 2.5 million people, a similar population to Toronto, and that is a market that we should look to tap, with the coming into being of the Lethem Road. Once that happens, then there would be traffic on both sides. There would be trucks bringing stuff from Manaus and Boa Vista to our ports for export abroad, and those trucks would be going back empty. Why can they not take our rice? But we must have the road. **[Ms. Manickchand: You are in the driver's seat. Make it happen.]** I am sure we are working on getting that road done.

Mr. Speaker hit the gavel.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, would you resume your seat for the moment? Hon. Members, I must point out that I thought the object of the question was to elicit answers. What I understand is that answers are being given by the Minister of Agriculture on a matter that is, I am told, very emotional, but that Members do not seem interested in the answer, if only to argue against it again. Please continue, Minister.

Mr. Holder: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The measure suggested by the Hon. Member to take the rice industry forward is welcomed.

3.25 p.m.

We are here to learn from each other, in the interest of the citizens, and to take the country forward. Our Government will not be deterred and will continue to support the transformation of the sector. We will continue to address the needs of the citizens and involve them in decision making.

Rice farmers have been influenced by naysayers, but they are smart, hard-working and resilient people. We have seen them sowing and harvesting rice lands despite all the negative comments. We, in the Government, will continue to do all in our power to take the industry forward, despite the constraints. Over the next month the Ministry of Agriculture and the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) will hold a series of meetings to update farmers and be actively involved in solving their problems as the rainy season kicks in. However, unless there is

considerable revision of its contents, I am unable to recommend the adoption of this motion by the Hon. Member. [*Applause*]

Mr. Mustapha: I rise to support the motion that was moved by my colleague and I think that this motion is very appropriate at this point in time.

First of all, we should not attack the messenger, but we should deal with the message. The nine points, which are listed on the motion, are the concerns, the requests, of our hard-working rice farmers. We should not attack people by saying that they do not have election in their organisation. Those are cheap talks. Without a doubt, the rice industry is in serious crisis in this country.

When we look at this motion there are only two options. It is either we support the motion, stand with the rice farmers and ensure that we try to assist them, or stand against the motion and try to see the suffering continue. I think my colleagues over there are making fun, making joy, with the people who are feeding this nation, the people who are feeding our country. We should ensure that when we come here we must be serious because those people are the people who are toiling day and night. Those are the people whose economic lives, whose future, depend on an industry, an industry that is not performing because of the incompetence of that Government over there. As I said, the unwillingness of this Government to assist the rice farmers is tantamount to “we do not care a damn attitude.” If there is any help from this Government, the rice farmers need it now. Now is the time the rice farmers need it. When we come here we must not make promises.

I want to repeat what both of my colleagues, over on this side of the House, just said. Not so long ago when they were on the election campaign two honourable gentlemen, who are sitting over there now, senior gentlemen on that side of the House, went on a television station in Berbice, when the farmers were getting more than \$3,000 per bag of paddy, and they said that that is cheap they will get \$9,000. It was a wild promise that they made on a television station in Berbice. They are coming here today, coming to this House today, to tell us that they have the concern of the rice farmers at heart. They have destroyed the rice industry already.

In 1992 when we took over this country the rice industry was destroyed. The farmers were producing less than 100,000 tons of paddy. They were exporting less than 40,000 tons of paddy. We took a broken down industry and moved it to produce over 600,000 tons with 500,000 tons

export. That is what we did. We are once again seeing history is repeating itself. They are once again destroying this industry; the most important industry to address the concern of hunger in our country. I think that the rice farmers deserve better. They fooled the rice farmers and were able to garner votes, but go in the rice producing area today, walk in Essequibo, in Berbice and you will see what the rice farmers are saying.

They have neglected the rice farmers because they have lost the most important market with reckless remarks. When there is a major trading partner you have to be very diplomatic; you have to allow economic diplomacy to prevail rather than to use your ego and destroy the economy of your country. The whole industry is on a decline today.

What is the reality today? Rice farmers are receiving between \$1,000 and \$2,500 per bag of paddy. What is the cost of production for a bag of paddy? The cost of production is \$2,500. Today in my region, Region 6, when you traverse that region many farmers are in tears, meeting you on the road telling you that the financial institutions have ceased their assets because they are unable to repay their loans. As I said, the most important market for us which transformed the rice industry, which moved the rice industry, which had direct and indirect results in our country, they have lost it. Do you know what that market was? Between the years we traded on that market in Venezuela we were able to export 899,639 tons at a whopping value of US\$549,937,378. That was the value. That was the kind of development that was coming to our country.

Mr. Speaker, I want to refer to Region 6 from where I come. I want to show you the decline in production and in planting in Region 6. For the first crop in 2015, 62,631 acres were cultivated at 37 bags per acre. Farmers used to receive prices ranging between \$42,000 and \$36,000 per ton at an average of \$3,000 per bag. In the first crop of 2016 rice production dropped to 56,000 acres at 28 bags per acre, at a price ranging between \$3,300 and \$1,900 per bag, at an average of \$1,500 per bag, when the production cost was \$2,500. Mr. Speaker, do you know what that caused in Region 6? It caused Region 6 this: 6,631 acres by 37 bags per acre which would have given 245,347 bags at \$3,000 per bag which would have given a total of \$736,041,000. That was lost in Region 6. Imagine what happened to the other rice producing areas such as Region 5 and the Essequibo. The whole economy of the Essequibo depends on the rice sector. Imagine what is taking place there.

As I said, the most important market was lost. I want to give two testimonies of people who were planting and exporting at that market at that rate. A farmer from Crabwood Creek said that the Venezuelan market had been proved as the livelihood for every Guyanese rice farmer. During his involvement in rice cultivation he was able to increase his yield by ten bags per acre on a total of eighty acres. He indicated that the increase in the price for paddy encouraged him to produce better quality due to the demand of the market. His increased income allowed him to buy resources - that is fertiliser, machinery - when the crop needed it most, allowing him to have better yield potential. He related that he was able to purchase a tractor worth \$9 million and completed payment within two years. Additionally, 20 acres of rice land valued at \$150,000 per acre was acquired for his expanded acreage. He was able to donate needed materials to the school his children attended. That is not him and his family benefiting, but the entire community.

There is another farmer who testified from Black Bush Polder. He said that the Venezuelan market improved his livelihood. During his involvement with rice cultivation he was able to increase his yield. His increased income allowed him to buy resources to better his yield when the crop needed it most, allowing him better yield per acre. He related that he was able to purchase two new Fiat tractors and was able to pay for them before the specified time. That was the outcome of the market that we lost. We lost it because we do not have diplomacy. We cannot negotiate. We sent people who know about *curass*. I will call a name, Mr. Speaker. We are sending people who do not know about certain things to negotiate for us.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, if you give the Speaker notice you are going to do something you should not do it does not allow you to do it. Please proceed.

Mr. Mustapha: That is why I would not do it. I think I premeditated that. It is just two lines more. I was talking about the farmer who bought two Fiat tractors and was able to pay off his loans before the time. One farmer said that he bought a car, cash, which he was able to use not only to transport his family but his neighbours around Black Bush Polder to the Port Mourant Market. The farmer said he was able to also go overseas for a vacation for three weeks, in the United States of America. Those dreams were shattered now for the poor farmers. I am calling on the Government, if it is serious, to let us not make mockery with the hard-working people. A lot of people in this country do not have respect for cane-cutters and rice farmers. It feels those persons have to work in the fields all their life but today cane-cutters, because of our

Government, have professional children - doctors, engineers and lawyers - just as the rice farmers. We made that happen in this country.

3.40 p.m.

I want to conclude that a lot of them... Some people are asking me here - I am hearing the heckling - what happen to me. They cannot go and face the populist out there. They are hiding. They cannot go because they are afraid. When the sugar workers struck at Rose hall, some of them were chased away. When the sugar workers came to Parliament, some of them were chased away and same thing as the rice farmers. They fooled the rice farmers and today they left the rice farmers hanging in the winds of miseries and poverty in this country.

I am proud to be in a party that has supported not only the rice farmers but all the working people of this country and we will continue to support the rice farmers. I want to conclude in saying that the Government should accept that nine-point proposal, so that we can improve the living standard of our hard-working rice farmers and improve the country economy as a whole.

Thank you very much. [*Applause*]

Ms. Manickchand: I would not be very long this afternoon. The issue of rice in our country, the status of rice in our county, the importance of rice in our county and a number of our Guyanese citizens, particularly our young people who depend on the rice industry, is not unknown to anyone in this House and it certainly is not unknown to the people who most depend on this industry.

I do not have a prepared speech. The reason I do not is because I think I am going to tell this House and Your Honour, the story of rice as I have seen it over the years. My father is a rice farmer, continues to be a rice farmer, my grandfather, before him, was a rice farmer and in fact it is rice and the rice industry that has supported my family and my cousins over the years. I have had the unique view of this industry from the perspective of someone who depended on the proceeds of rice, depended on the various governments to look after rice properly, depended on the various leaders in the sector to do what is right by the people in the sector.

I remember distinctly when I was younger – I do not remember how old - the travails of this sector was horrible. People were planting because this is all they knew. They had land; they had

access to land, and this is what they knew to do. They had children that they had to send to school. Take for example my parents, in particular, who made a conscious decision that they were going to live separately for most of the month in those days so that they could give their children an education in Georgetown, which was considered, and still is, the premier place for education. The life and sacrifices that farmers have made over the years is not unknown and should not be trivialised by saying rice farmers have to be more responsible. I would like to ask, “be more responsible”, “to do what”?

The Hon. Minister of Agriculture came here and told us today that we will support but the farmers must be responsible - I would come to that later - more responsible, to do what? That is almost insulting. In this case, it is blaming the victims. The rice farmers are the victims of this terrible system, whether on the world market or in any efficiency and incompetence of a Government which does not understand rice. The farmers are the victims and you are telling them to be more responsible and it is to do what, I might ask, because I have seen these farmers, men and women, over the years give up holidays, give up the beauty of a complexion that does not get tarnished by the harshness of weather and give up the family time that people who do not have to work day and night on any given day, give up the ability to enjoy the things that the city has to offer the years. How much more responsible can these people be? What are we asking them to do and how could we blame them in these circumstances?

I remember sitting at the back of a land rover with my father, lined up at a place called Burma, in Mahaicony, waiting for hours - sometimes you go there in the morning, the sun is not yet up and you leave at night when the sun has gone down - to be able to drop off your paddy. This is prior to 1992. I was young. In 1992 I was 16. I remember waiting to be paid. You dropped your paddy off and you could not get payments. When many people here would have had Christmas, many of the rice farmers’ families enjoyed Christmas on Christmas Eve Day. That was when they would have been given their cheques. That was when their wives would have been bustling downtown trying to buy presents and children awaken up Christmas morning to find them under the Christmas tree. That was the reality. Remember, if it was not fertiliser that was short, it was bag twine, if it was not bag twine, it was bag needle. That was then state of the sector.

I said earlier that my own parents had been separated and they would be separated for almost a month, not legally separated. They are married but had chosen to live separately, so that one

could earn more in Mahaicony, so my father and my mother could have looked after us in town. The opportunity or the wherewithal for my father to come down to town... Now it could be done two or three times a day. We could go to Mahaicony two or three times a day. Then there was no fuel. The roads were so bad that so you would have seen these people...I would have seen my father once a month, sometimes twice a month, and that was how hard it was. Then what happened was the fortunes of the sector changed and rice had a boom and so many persons invested heavily in the sector, took loans, recapitalised, bought new tractors - by new, I mean, newer than what they had, not brand new - new vehicles, new equipment, more things to put into the sector.

There was big boom in rice when the highest price was being paid and this did not happen by magic. It was not accidental that it happened under the People's Progressive/Civic (PPP/C). It was because that Government, at that time, was paying attention to the sector. It could not have given every rice farmer \$30,000 or \$10,000. It brought relief to the farmers, their farms and their families by innovating on the reliefs that could happen. We saw over years the various reliefs the PPP/C Government offered, not cash, seed paddy, so the farmer could have gone and planted fuel, financial assistance, restructuring loans and fertiliser. I am sure Mr. Seeraj could give a whole host of other things. We did not stand here in this House to pontificate and claim that we are talking about it. Let us talk. Let us have an old jolly gaff. We are looking at it; let us look at it. We actually made these interventions and people benefited from the interventions. They were able to keep their farms, equipment and rice continued.

One year ago yesterday a new Government took office. [*Hon. Members (Government) clapped.*] I am not sure why anyone would clap and cheer merrily at being accused of taking office, not sure. Your Honour, from then to now we have heard various things, including rice is a private sector enterprise, rice is not Government's business. Minister Roopnarine may be able to tell this House that last term the Grade I students of this country were taught - if the teachers were doing what they were supposed to do - that rice is Guyana's main food. That was the terminology used in the classrooms. I know that from personal experience. They were then taught what could be made with rice, which countries rice is exported to and this term they are being taught that rice brings in income in the country. They are in Grade 1. They are five and six-year-olds and that is what they are being taught. This House is being told that rice is not the Government's business, and our children are being taught that rice is the main food in this country.

If we are untrustworthy and if the farmers are not trusting the Minister of Agriculture then they have reason. I submit to Your Honour that they have reason. Over the last year, the Minister just gave us a lovely story that these trucks are coming empty from Manus, and there are so many millions of people in Manus, and they need rice and that it is going to see about filling the trucks to send them back. When I asked when, Your Honour, your gavel went down. Your Honour, the reason people may be a bit concern about this is, over the year, the stories we have been told. January 21, 2016, *Kaieteur News* headline, “European rice investors eye Guyana Rice.” They are still eyeing it, Sir. October 28, 2015, “Panama, Portugal, will replace Venezuela rice market - discussions being held with Mexico, Haiti, and Bahamas”. Apparently those discussions are still happening, because nothing has been realised from those discussions as yet. That was the Minister of Agriculture. December 8, 2015, *Kaieteur News* headline, “Guyana spreads rice market to 38 countries – Prime Minister”. “Mexico poised to replace Venezuela as country’s biggest buyer”.

I think that might be when he did not know what rough rice is - gone there to negotiate. None of that has come to fruition; none of it has come to reality. In fact, what we have had was a private miller taking rice to the Bahamas and it was dumped and turned back. That is negotiation. We have had all these glorious promises - we are looking at this, we are going to talk about that. Let us chat. Have patience rice farmers, this Government got your back. Never mind it does not know what rough rice is; never mind it does not know how much we are even producing, and never mind it would stand here and deny its own promise, which is, that it would have given the rice farmers \$9,000. The Members are asking us in this House to trust them.

Every single intervention, which is proposed in this motion, has great value. While the Hon. Minister of Agriculture is deciding or thinking, while the Cabinet is chatting about what may be good, we are asking you to implement these that we have provided, that are solid interventions. We understand that you are new on the job; we understand that you may not understand what you have to do and we have provided solutions. If you do not want to do all nine or you want to take them and modify them, then do that. Do something, because, right now, you are doing nothing. Let me tell you what is happening... [*Interruption*] Your Honour, is the gavel still working?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, have you addressed a question to the Chair?

Ms. Manickchand: I was asking for your protection as it is usually offered when any one over there is standing, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Please proceed.

3.55 p.m.

Ms. Manickchand: Your Honour, this morning, in the commercial court, more than 10 actions were brought against rice farmers. This morning, today before we came here, we were trying to wrap that up to run over here for the early 1.00 p.m. start – ten rice farmers. They are unable to meet the payments that they had committed to make. When they had committed to make these payments...These are not scamps or crooks. They felt that they would be able to make them. They are unable to make them now. Last two weeks, there was Associated Industries Limited (AINLIM) versus some of rice farmers on the Essequibo Coast. At least, there is one who I know about, and I know others have been sued, who depend on rice. When those people entered their arrangement, rice was selling for more than double of what it is selling now. The Government was assisting; there was confidence in the sector; the banking sector was an institution that felt that it could have invested. It is no more.

It is urgent that anyone who wishes to stand with conviction, anyone who wishes to stand and have the population believe that person would adopt these nine measures... My friend the Minister of Agriculture said he cannot accept this motion as it is. As far as I am aware, and I could be wrong, and I would be happy to be corrected by Your Honour, I do not know that there are any amendments here or if there are any amendments to this motion. It is not even that you are saying listen PPP/C that we cannot give the rice farmers one, two, three and five but we can give them four and three and we want to amend five and six this way – nothing. It is just a blanket denial. Sit over there make noise and *skin your teeth* and it is a blanket denial from one speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, let us keep it civil.

Ms. Manickchand: Your Honour, I saw Members over there laughing throughout the presentation. I am guided, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: It would be polite if you do not wave at the Speaker. Please proceed. It would be polite when you speak to the Chair. You do not wave your hands.

Ms. Manickchand: Your Honour, I have my style of speaking. I will try to be guided. I am never rude to the Hon. Speaker. I would never be rude to that Chair, but I would not particularly be rude to the person who occupies that Chair right now. However, Sir, this is my manner of speaking and clearly people like it and they have asked me to come here and represent them. If Your Honour does not wave Your Honour's hands, I understand that, but this is how I speak. I will try when I am speaking not to, but I cannot constrain myself to the point where it is going to affect my presentation and my representation of people.

Your Honour, I am saying that if there was a motion on this floor or an amendment to this motion to say something to the effect that we cannot do 'x' and 'y' because it is going to have these consequences, but we are going to do five of what you said in this amended way, in this modified way, we would believe that there is genuine interest in bringing relief to a sector that is in terrible crisis. A sector that the President himself does not recognise is in crisis and in fact had said in the newspaper that it is not in crisis. We would understand that there is some effort, but my belief is that it is the decision by the Government not to field any speakers except one who stands here and says that we are committed to giving you help and we will look into getting some rice on a truck over to Manaus, but the rice farmers must be responsible in what they are doing. We do not believe that sends any message to the rice farmers of this country, to the rice farming communities of this country and, more importantly, the families of rice farmers of this country that they can be confident that this Government understands rice and has their backs in the sense that it will make sure that the sector does not crash.

I thank you Sir. [*Applause*]

Mr. Nandlall: Sir, I rise to make my contribution to this debate to the motion that is before the House. I want to begin, Sir, by reflecting on the very sober presentation by the Hon. Minister, very calm, very collect, very slow and deliberate in his presentation. At the end of it, I am not sure where he stands on the motion. It is because I listened to him, I left for a brief period and I returned because he begins by recognising the industry, at least, he departs from His Excellency the President, the state of the industry, and he recognises the problems that the industry is in. Elsewhere, statements come from the Government that suggests the opposite, that there is no real

problem in the industry. Some of them even say that the industry is not the Government's business; very unfortunate phrase. I believe in all fairness they have come to regret making such – I do not want to say facetious - uninformed remark.

I believe that the Hon. Minister was very appreciative of the magnitude of the rice industry, its impact on the way of life of the Guyanese people, its impact on our foreign exchange, its impact on job creation in our country, its impact on the economy and its impact on the entire social and economic fabric of our country, because he alluded to all of that. Then he falls short in his presentation of giving support to the resolutions which the motion calls for.

When this motion was crafted there was a deliberate effort to come up with resolutions, solutions and recommendations that are not going to be extraordinary burden on the treasury. There was a deliberate effort when these recommendations were made to ensure that we will not interfere with the Minister of Finance's budget, that all of these can be accommodated with very minuscule, if any, budgetary adjustments. That is why, Sir, I am absolutely disappointed that I did not hear from the Hon. Minister of Agriculture that he embraces these recommendations. It is because there is an industry that is in crisis. I do not think anyone can think rationally otherwise. Every part of this country where there are rice farmers and rice is being planted there is social and economic chaos – Essequibo, Region 2, Region 3, Region 5 and Region 6. One thing is common in those regions and it is the rice industry and the heavy dependency on the regional economy and the village economy of those regions on it. It is because of the nature of our society that all the industries are interconnected. The rice farmers' money positively affects or a lack of money negatively affects the cash crop farmer and the rum shop owner and the market vendor and that is how the village economy is intertwined. When there is the bulk of it coming from the rice industry and that sector is stagnating then, Sir, you can imagine what happens. That is why my learned friend, the Hon. Member Priya Manickchand, spoke about the judiciary being inundated with claims against rice farmers for moneys outstanding.

My learned friend spoke about ten matters, but there were much more than ten. I had about ten in which I represented millers on one hand, in some, and farmers on the other hand. Millers are suing farmers because advance payments were made for fertilisers and fuel given and when the rice is reaped it is supposed to be sent to the factory to be milled, but there is no yield. Flooding affecting on one side, pesticide affecting on the other side, there is drought on the other hand and

then there is no market for whenever there is a yield. There is that massive drop in production. The millers themselves are indebted to the bank. Many of them run their business operations on an overdraft, paying an interest rate of 17 and 18 per cent per annum. That is money that they lend to farmers in the form of advance payment. The entire relationship collapses when they cannot have market and the rice industry is in the state that it is.

There is a culture in this country of overcapitalising. Every farmer wants to own his own tractor, plough and combine. They owe Massy Industries; they owe Naseeruddin Mohammed and they owe all the people who sell those things. There is a whole line of cases of those suppliers and sellers of those heavy-duty equipment repossessing and taking rice farmers to court for their money. Then, there are the smaller rice farmers who owe Institute of Private Enterprise Development (IPED). There is a long line, especially in Berbice - I was talking to my learned friend Mr. Adrian Anamayah - and in Essequibo as well. In the commercial court of the country, in all three of the counties, litigation, in relation to the rice industry, predominates in all of the courts.

That is the state. There is a connection between the state of the rice industry and the social problems. It is not necessarily caused but compounded and engendered by the state of the rice industry. Suicide is one.

In certain communities it is an outright shame when you cannot pay your light bill, when the Guyana Power and Light Inc. (GPL) visit your home to disconnect the light in the presence of your community. When you cannot afford to send your children to school or to send them to social events in the village to which they are accustomed to go and to which the village is accustomed to see them going. When these things happen... We are not a very exposed population and we do not have the necessary institutions to offer the social services that are required when people are faced with these problems. For example, I have a case ongoing in the High Court. When the writ was served by the bank on the family - the grandmother and the grandfather, their property has been mortgaged to the bank; the son and the daughter-in-law operate the business now - the old man, the grandfather, collapsed with a heart attack and died.

4.10 p.m.

The grandmother does not know that the bank is attempting to re-possess the property. That is

the kind of ordeal people are going through in the rice industry.

The problem is so huge. I do not think that this Government is showing that type of commitment by their actions, as we heard from the words of Hon. Minister. As I said, the Minister gave a very polished presentation. All the right language was used to convey the impression that the Government is committed to addressing the issues in the rice industry, but the actions are absent to support that.

Why would the Minister of Finance, in Budget 2016, remove VAT exemptions from agricultural equipment? Why would he remove VAT when, otherwise, the rice farmers, for over 25 years were given tax free exemptions for their equipment.

This year is the first year that they are paying some form of tax in the form of VAT. When the VAT regime was introduced in 2007, immediately, with it came an exemption regime. Whereas, once it was certified that someone was a rice farmer, they would qualify for exemption. This was the same for the mining and the logging industries.

It was recognised two or three decades ago that this kind of support was required. Today, the rice farmer has to pay VAT on his combine, on his plough and on his tractor. These are not inexpensive equipment. It is not an Allion car that one buys for \$2.1 million. A tractor is \$8 million or \$9 million. So, when one has to pay VAT on that, it is a huge sum of money.

Hon. Minister, I am sorry, but I cannot believe that your Government is committed. Here it is that your Government, for no reason at all, has removed the VAT exemption. Then you want us and the rice farmers to believe that you care for them.

Why do you re-possess, and I dare say unlawfully, rice lands from rice farmers under the Mahaica/Mahaicony Abary (MMA) scheme. I know that there is need for more lands. If there is need for more lands, we have enough land for every rice farmer. Why do you want to re-possess from rice farmers that have been given 50-year old leases? Their leases are being revoked, throwing them into deeper economic turmoil. Their leases are being revoked, not for the non-payment of rent, but for a wholly extraneous reason.

How can we, on this side, go back and tell our supporters that they should give the Government a chance because they are committed when they do things like these - unsolicited and unprovoked.

Why would you not want to waive rents for State lands? What would that cost the Treasury, compared to the destruction of a rice farmer's entire yield or his entire business?

We are asking the Government to remove taxes and duties. Sir, you know this is the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC) *Action Programme for the first 100 days*. This is what they planned and promised when they went to the electorate. They have here in their Action Plan:

“3. – Immediately implement a phased reduction of VAT”.

As it relates to the rice industry, there is an imposition of VAT. There is no phased or any reduction. The opposite of this promise is delivered for the purpose of rice farmers. Why would you want to do that? The Hon. Minister of Public Security is saying change of circumstances.

This is an advertisement that was published in the newspapers and it states: “reduce VAT again”. For the Rice Farmer, their VAT has been increased. It also states “negotiate new international markets for rice”. This was at a time when we had the Venezuelan market. “Waive duty on fuel”. These were the promises. They were promising us additional international market. They lost the Venezuelan market and there is no other new market since. That is the state of the industry.

We asked the Hon. Minister of Agriculture and he has agreed and promised us in this House, that steps would be taken to initiate negotiations with the bank, as we had done on two previous occasions to re-adjust loans, soften interests and re-arrange payments. We did it twice for the rice industry. I welcome the promise Mr. Minister, but I believe Sir, with the greatest of respect, that the promise lacks *bonafides*.

We made this suggestion since the 31st October, 2015 in a letter to the Hon. Minister. We are in the fifth month of this year and there were the three months from last year, making it eight months. The Hon. Minister comes here eight months after and says it is a good proposal, we will do it, but he has not started a single step in that direction. How can we believe him? How can we believe you, Mr. Minister? How can I go back on the television in Berbice and tell the rice farmers that you are speaking as though you have their interest at heart, when after eight months you have not begun a single step in the direction of doing something that you agree is a good thing to be done.

Sir, we had asked for the suspension of land leases and drainage and irrigation charges. In the national scheme of things, these are very flippant sums of moneys - trivial sums of moneys. But when compared to the life of a rice farmer, it is expenditure, if it is waived, and can have great positive implications.

We have to set up a system that will offer financial support for the farmers to aid in the purchase of seed paddy and fertiliser.

Today, I read in the newspapers, the President of the Guyana Rice Producers Association lamenting the decrease in acreage that will go under cultivation for this crop. It is far less. Cde. Irfaan Ali spoke to the fact that not a single acre is being cultivated in the island of Leguan where there are one or two mills at the same time. The five thousand acres cultivated at the last crop have been reduced to zero this crop.

The Hon. Minister of Agriculture told us how important the rice industry is. In fact, he made a fundamental point that the rice industry has surpassed the sugar industry as a foreign exchange earner of our country. He also made the fundamental point of the large number of communities and persons who benefit from the rice industry. That is why I am so disappointed in the Hon. Minister because I believed, in his speech, that he recognises the implication and the importance that the rice industry holds for the country.

These are measures that we are recommending that will not have any great impact on the budget of this country. When I look at the \$2 billion that is being spent on D'Urban Park, while Independence/Jubilee celebrations is important - fifty years, I hope I get there, it is a milestone that I will also celebrate, when I get there - but there is a limit. I will not allow my roof to leak or my pantry to go empty so that I can have a grand celebration. That is all that we are asking. Do you not want the rice farmers to celebrate with you?

The Hon. Minister Ramjattan already told the farmers on the Corentyne that he cannot see them until the Jubilee celebrations were finished. I see my friend from the Guyana Rice Development Board. They have a role to play, but they began on the wrong foot, by attempting to ostracise the largest representative organisation in the country that represents rice farmers.

The Laws of this country say that they have to put on their Board, nominees from the Guyana Rice Producers Association. What did they do? They disregarded the GRPA. They chose

someone who they felt could have represented the rice farmers.

The National Assembly in its wisdom had stated that it did not want that to happen. It wanted the farmers to select their own representatives. Obviously, I do not know what other considerations they are driven by, but that is their approach.

That is why they are in the middle of a controversy with an agreement with Jamaica. The rice farmers and the Guyana Rice Producers Association's representatives are not consulted, but they have given a monopoly, over a three-year period, to a Jamaican company for the exportation of Guyana's rice at a fixed price. This is a deal that nobody knows about because there was no consultation. It was leaked. I am aware that the GRPA's General Secretary has asked the Chairman of the Board for a copy of that agreement so that he could take it to the rice farmers. The last information that I received, about a week ago, was that the agreement had not yet been sent. They are refusing. The request was made over two or three months before.

4.25 p.m.

Why is the Guyana Rice Development Board behaving like that? The Guyana Rice Development Board should be an organisation that is regulating and regulatory; to regulate the industry in the best interest of the industry. Not to get involve in partisan politics and matters that are extraneous to the rice industry.

Sir, returning to the motion, I want to conclude by appealing to this House to give its full support to this motion. As I said, the Resolve Clauses, the recommendations that we are making, the President was here and he spoke about building political bridges, working together and about every one of us having a role to play in the development of our country, well we are asking to play this role. Just accept our recommendations. That is all. It would not cost the Treasury anything. We represent a large number of people in this country. [An Hon. Member from the Opposition: Two hundred thousand and more.] My friend is saying 200,000, I believe the elections were rigged, we represent more people. We should not even be here, but that is another matter.

Sir, I am saying to the Government that we appreciate the fact that the Minister recognises the importance of the industry. We welcome that fact because we were in doubt about it before, that the industry is important. We are making some recommendations here that will not adversely

affect the budget of the country. These recommendations are in the best interest of the rice farmers and we are asking that this House unanimously support this motion. [*Applause*]

Mr. Seeraj: Mr. Speaker, I have listened attentively to the Colleagues on our side of the House and I have also paid keen attention to the Hon. Minister of Agriculture, in his deliverance on this motion. Sir, I must say that I am a little disappointed that a recognised rice farmer in the Government benches was not even afforded an opportunity to make a presentation on this motion, which we feel is so crucial to the development of the industry and indeed to the very survival of the farmers, in particular, at this point in time.

I am certain that the measures contained in this motion would go a long way towards addressing the plight that the farmers are facing. If the Minister of Agriculture had actually put into action the words he mentioned, this motion would not have been before us today. The Minister spoke about working together, the role of the Guyana Rice Producers Association and working with our counterparts. Since last year, that is all I have been trying to do as the General Secretary of the Guyana Rice Producers Association and later on as the spokesperson for agriculture for the Opposition.

We have exercised a lot of restraint in addressing matters in the public domain. I can quote from a number of sources where parties, not formally involved in the sector, have gone viral in the press, calling the Minister all sort of things, asking for his resignation - people who sat very close to them. We on this side have chosen to go the route that we think is best.

I wrote the Minister of Agriculture since the 25th June, 2015. I am still to get a response. The Hon. Minister of Agriculture stood before us this afternoon and said that we must work together. Well, then, Sir, if I do not get a reply, how are we to work together? Sir, not even an acknowledgement.

Then on the 6th August, 2015, I wrote the Hon. Minister of Agriculture, again, about the letter I sent in June, as it related to the appointment by statute/law. This is not a gift. This is not subject to the whims and fancies. It is not a discretion. It is what the statute said. I must give credit to what the Minister of Agriculture did. I called him on the 24th June, I remember clearly because that day was my birthday, I hope that we have a Sitting on that day to afford me some compliments and all of that. But, Sir, we spoke on that matter and the Minister asked me to

submit the list of names of the Guyana Rice Producers Association because the respective Acts and legislation which establish the Guyana Rice Development Board and the National Drainage and Irrigation Authority (NDIA) provide for nominees of the Guyana Rice Producers Association. So, if we can go that route and if the Minister was interested in us working together, at least he would have acknowledged that there are correspondence coming from the Guyana Rice Producers Association and that there are correspondence coming from the spokesperson for agriculture for the Opposition benches. But nothing of the sort.

May I go on to say that it seems as though this thing catches on because I also wrote the Guyana Rice Development Board too and they have been very lax in their response and I think the Hon. Member Mr. Nandlall mentioned that. In March, I wrote seeking a copy of the agreement that was being discussed in the public domain. This agreement was between the GRDB and two companies in Jamaica. I said that, if as the Minister of Agriculture is saying, this agreement will be of benefit to farmers, then it will be in the interest of the Guyana Rice Development Board, the Government and the Ministry of Agriculture for the farmers' organisation to pronounce on it and say that this agreement would be beneficial to the farmers. Instead, I learnt about it in the newspapers. What I read in the newspapers was not complimentary to either the Guyana Rice Development Board or to the Minister of Agriculture. Headline:

“Millions being lost in questionable Jamaica rice deal.”

This deal is an example of the most disgusting corruption going on in the agriculture sector. Wednesday 23rd March.

“US \$18 million that would be allocated to ‘the boys’ and not rice farmers who have been facing hardships in the deteriorating rice industry.”

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, would you want to tell us where you are quoting from and the date?

Mr. Seeraj: I am quoting from a newspaper. I said that earlier Sir. Wednesday 23rd March, 2016, page 3 *Guyana Times*. It said: “Millions being lost in questionable Jamaica rice deal.” The article was quoting one Dr. Turhane Doerga.

Mr. Speaker: I think the House would benefit from that information you just gave.

Mr. Seeraj: Obviously Sir. It was in the public's domain.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, we know what we must do let us try to do it.

Mr. Seeraj: Yes, Sir. I am quoting from the source. When I read this article, I said that if this is about the industry then, as a responsible representative of the rice farmers, we should responsible too. I did not make any pronouncement on it, at all, although it was said and even persons aligned to the Government criticised it. This gentleman was on the campaign with the A Partnership for National Unity/Alliance for Change (APNU/AFC). **[An Hon. Member: Who is he?]** A gentleman by the name of Dr. Turhane Doerga. He was on the campaign with them. I did not say it.

I asked for a copy of the agreement; I wrote for a copy of the agreement. This is May, I wrote since in March and I am still to receive a copy of the agreement. The Minister said that it was in the interest of farmers. I was awaiting the agreement to make a pronouncement on behalf of the Guyana Rice Producers Association to say that this agreement was something good that the Government is doing for the farmer, and to say that what was being said in the article by Dr. Doerga was not true. But Sir, I am still awaiting a copy of that agreement.

It went on and on. Then the Guyana Rice Exporters and Millers Association (GREMA) joined in the fray to say that they are to sue over corrupt Jamaica rice contract. I am quoting from the *Guyana Times* Sunday, 27th March 2016.

We have established a record of behaving in a responsible manner on this side of the House, in terms of our pronouncements on the industry. Indeed, I must say that in June 2015, when I spoke out in defence of the Guyana Rice Development Board, I was then the Vice-Chairman of the Guyana Rice Development Board, I spoke out not on behalf of the Guyana Rice Producers Association. I spoke out in defence of the Guyana Rice Development Board when a senior Government Minister was making statements that were not factual as to the state of play as it related to the Guyana Rice Development Board. I defended the Guyana Rice Development Board because no one else was prepared to do that. I think that being the General Secretary of the Guyana Rice Producers Association, the Guyana Rice Producers Association is being targeted for committing that crime of speaking out against a senior Government official, in defence of a Government agency. I felt and I knew it was wrong, and because I knew it was wrong I said I must speak out against the wrong. We are being penalised for that, in defence of a Government agency, when none other wanted the risk of doing that. Well, if we are to be punished for what is

right then we will continue to be punished and we cannot get away from that. We are not going to do otherwise.

The Minister encourages us to work with them. The Minister of course spoke about the Guyana Rice Producers Association's election. Sir, that election is governed by a particular piece of legislation. We have to do certain things; we to advertise in the newspapers and all of that, which is what we did the last time it was due. It is due, again, next year. It was challenged last year. Sir, do you know why it was challenged? It was challenged because the date we fixed the election for was on a Friday and we would normally use schools across the country to accommodate the electoral process. Because we changed that date from Friday to Saturday, just to have the use of the venue, it was challenged by the same Dr. Doerga who was closely affiliated with the APNU/AFC. The matter was thrown out in the Court.

So, for the Hon. Minister of Agriculture to stand up and say that we are not holding election that is not transparent is not true. I humbly submit to you that it is not true. It went through the due process, the due diligence and all of that and a pronouncement was made. The next election is due next year and that next election will be fair, transparent, and accessible to all farmers, as all those elections are. I refute that allegation in totality. That is why I rose and made my objection known at that point in time.

The Whereas Clause and the letter that Hon. Mr. Ali spoke about, the second Whereas Clause spoke about the payments to rice farmers. The payment is another issue. I will be bold enough to say that a number of farmers reported to me payment as an issue and what they were promised.

4.40 p.m.

All of our Colleagues here spoke about what was promised and we all heard the same thing. A now sitting Vice-President of the Government went into the Cane Grove and Corentyne Berbice and spoke about \$9,000 per a bag. In Cane Grove, he was accompanied by the same Dr. Doerga who was hoping for a big position in the Government I was told. Dr. Doerga then fell out of favour with the Government because the Government realise who it was dealing with, the creature it was dealing with. So Dr. Doerga was very disappointed and went on to attack the Minister, the management and the Board of Directors and all of that.

This Whereas Clause is very timely and appropriate. We must put it in the records that farmers were deceived into giving support for a party, during the campaign, and they were basically thrown to the dogs after the party would have won and got into office. As the Hon. Member Mr. Nandlall said, some concessions were given to industry, even when things were not so bad. One would have expected that, logically speaking, when things start to go bad, then more would be given to an industry to help it out.

What we are seeing is that the industry is going through hard times and the Government is instituting measures, budgetary and otherwise, to make it tougher on the farmers. And then, the Hon. Minister of Agriculture is saying that the Government cares for the farmers and is willing to work with them and would help them. Sir, if they were not prepared to at least continue with the zero rating of VAT on capital equipment, how are they going to look at these things in a positive light, when they was so much needed for the industry?

The financial crisis that farmers are going through is, of course, linked to this issue of prices, payments and all of that. It goes back to what happen in 2015, I know that there are a number of articles that also spoke about an increase in exports, but whilst we saw an increase in export for 2015 by 36,126 tonnes over the corresponding period of 2014. We saw a reduction in the value of the export by US\$28.6 million. If we look at the export figures for January to June 2015, 276,000 or 277,000 tonnes, valued US\$125.6 million, the average between all classes of products exported would have been US\$454 per tonne. Then from July to December 2015, 260,440 tonnes valued US\$95.1 million, the average US\$366.

So within a matter of weeks of the new Government taking office, the average price for export came to more than a US\$100 per tonne and that is what started the decline and the financial crisis that Hon. Member, Mr. Ali mentioned in his motion. I said that I would put that into perspective for us to have an appreciation that although it is stated clearly that there was an increase in the export by 26,000 tonnes, in real value we loss over US\$28 million.

In addressing some of these concerns in the motion, I want to put on record that the Government went about the matter the wrong way by even establishing the boards that governor several institutions of the agriculture sector. In particular, the Guyana Rice Development Board has appointees that were repaid for campaigning. In one instance, and it was published in the newspapers that there is a Member sitting on a board, who the Government knows was involved

in the misappropriation of funds. The Government knowingly appointed a person who was involved in the misappropriation of funds to sit on a board of directors of a State agency. If it was not known one could understand and appreciate that it was done without their knowledge. But if one knows and was written to and senior member of the Government know, how can one, in all fairness, appoint someone who they know was involved in this kind of behaviour to sit at the highest level of a State institution. So if one starts out wrong, he/she cannot end up right and that is what is happening. They started out wrong and they continue to do wrong. That is why we have a continuation of these wrong things.

When I first learnt about the signing of a contract value approximately US\$420 million, in fairness to the Board because I do not think that the Board of Directors was able to pronounce on this matter because my information is that they were told it was a done deal at the level of the Cabinet. They were asked to execute a contract. If there were vibrant representatives of the industry sitting on the Board they would have been able to give their support to the GRDB and to the Board of Directors in combating or at least alerting the Government that it was something wrong and we cannot go through with something like this and that it is wrong to go through with it. But because there are a set of *yes men* and I suppose *yes women* also, sitting on the institution, it was allowed to go and now we have a contract that is signed and sealed to deliver fertiliser without going through the well-established tendering process that the Government advocated for and spoke very lustily about in the past and also currently. Action, again, Sir, speaks louder than the words.

I ended one of my correspondence with the Guyana Rice Development Board like that when I said that the President on several occasions, publicly, spoke about us working together. I said if the President is talking about working together, why is it that the agencies are not really acting on this directive for us to work together in the interest of our people and the industry. It does not even take much to acknowledge receipt of a letter, Sir, even after 11 months.

When the Leader of the Opposition went to West Berbice, there were a lot of complaints about water management and access to water and all of that. I think that our Chief Whip, on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, wrote to the Hon. Minister seeking his intervention to at least do something to address the concerns of the farming communities in Region 5. I was advised that there was no response. Like I said, the General Secretary of the Guyana Rice Producers

Association wrote in June and again in August, October, March, April, and not even the courtesy of a response was given, then we are told in this House that we are prepared to work with you, come with a recommendation. Sir, if you do not even accept or acknowledge receipt of a proposal, how are we going to take it a step further?

On the issue of fuel, the Hon. Minister of Agriculture had said well to give a number. I could have said that we needed 4.5 gallons of diesel per acre in normal circumstances. I wrote the Guyana Rice Development Board asking for support for fuel, in view of the advisory we were getting for *El Niño*. Some of our best crops have been in dry periods, provided that we had water because rice is an irrigated crop. The problem we face during the dry season is to get water onto the land. It is because rice is an irrigated crop that the United State of America would not be able to continue with rice production for long because of the competition for water. I wrote the Guyana Rice Development Board and had said that in view of this *El Nino* phenomenon that we were likely to face, could we meet, discussed and talked about providing support to farmers, in view of the fact that the Venezuela market was no longer there.

We are not going to lay blame anyway. We are not even talking about the renewal of the Venezuelan contract. We had a contract for 2015 - lock, signed and sealed - valued US\$113 million for the supply of rice and paddy. We were only able to execute about US\$42.3 million because of a number of reasons. All of those reasons can be put squarely at the feet of the Government for us being unable to execute a signed contract that we had with the Venezuelans.

Again, our request for support to the farmer for fuel, to help them through the tough period, fell on deaf ears. The Minister of Agriculture would ask us to give us a number. Well, I am saying now that under normal circumstances, 4.5 gallons per acre. It is just a matter of multiplying the acreage and now it would be less because we have planted 57,000 acres less. So it will not be a big strain on the budget. That is how much farmers had wanted, from one season to the other; it just a matter of one season. In Essequibo alone, the acreage has reduced by 15,000 acres between one crop because of the hardship farmers are facing. If we had done the simple things that we had asked for but we did not put in the press and had hoped that we could have worked together on these matters, we could have avoided this disaster that so many farmers are faced with.

I spoke in my budget presentation about farmers committing suicide in Essequibo. As Cde. Damon had said, 80% of persons in the Essequibo rely on rice for their well-being. They do not

have sugar there. Trade is not that much and manufacturing is almost none existence, so they depend on rice.

The rice cereal factory that was established there is still to get off the ground. One of the measures that we spoke about is the negotiation at the banks. We spoke at length about that, how it would affect farmers. There is nothing more depressing and telling on one's mental and physical health, as the burden of a financial institution coming to take away one's sanctuary or humble abode or the house that one lives in.

When one pledges it to plant a crop that he/she depends on to put bread on his/her table, when the risk of that being taken away is real and it becomes real, then it takes its toll and sometimes people choose the easy way out, rather than to face that burden or rather than to face their children and being unable to provide for them. They choose the easy way out and that is by committing suicide.

4.55 p.m.

From the time we had made this proposal, things have gotten worse. There is no recognition of the plight that farmers are faced with. It would appear that the management and the Board of Directors of the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) are following the Cabinet. In recognition of the plight that the workers are faced with, the Cabinet gave itself 50% salary increase while the workers got little or nothing and, for this year, they are still waiting. What did the GRDB do? When famers got 35% and 65% less than what they were doing, one would have expected the GRDB and the Board of Directors to, at least, empathise with the farming community. That was not to be. The Board followed the example of the Cabinet.

One of the Members, in Essequibo, said that the money was too small to come to the meetings. For years, persons were receiving \$5,000 to attend committee meetings and \$10,000 for Board meetings. What the Board of Directors did was to increase fees in keeping with the increase Cabinet got – 50%. Against the backdrop of the famers receiving 50% less, it took an increase of 50% more. Then it is saying that it represents the interest of the farmers. We would not have tolerated that. If the Guyana Rice Producers Association was sitting on the Board... If a minibus has to be taken to travel to attend meetings, which we often do, it would be done. We would rather take a bus than complain about the fees not being enough to attend the meetings.

I think that it was highly irresponsible of the Board to take it upon itself to follow the example of the Cabinet and give itself an increase in fees when the farmers were receiving less. The tragedy is that this is the farmers' money. This is not money coming from the Treasury; it is money that was collected from the farmers via an export commission. At least, the Board needs to be responsible and responsive to the farmers because the farmers are responsible for the Board members receiving stipend and salaries.

To add salt to the wounds, they are buying brand new vehicles – SUVs, Land Cruisers, Prados – in a time when the industry is going through crisis and farmers cannot plant their lands. The Guyana Rice Development Board is buying Land Cruiser, Prado - 2015 or 2016 model - and not recognising the farmers or the farmers' Association.

This motion is here to address some of those issues and they need to be talked about because if they cannot be talked about in-house then they have to be talked about here. If the Minister of Agriculture is not prepared to afford us the courtesy of even acknowledging receipt of our letters and our correspondence to have dialogues, then motions have to be brought here; there is no other recourse. Or we will go to the press like some of the Government's former allies and some of its former friends of whom, I think, are still its friends.

There is an abundance of articles about what is happening in the rice sectors.

In the *Guyana Times* dated Tuesday, 1st March, 2016:

“Leguan farmers yet to be paid”

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I must point out to this honourable House that, at five o'clock, the business should be concluded for today. Please proceed.

Mr. Seeraj: Sir, I was just getting warmed up on this matter. All of my life I have been working with the rice sector.

Mr. Speaker: Just keep your heat until the next sitting, if we do not conclude today.

Mr. Seeraj: The air conditioning unit is good enough, Sir.

“Some Region 5 rice farmers are still awaiting water for their lands”.

I understand that there was an advertisement in the newspapers about improved drainage and irrigation as one of the one-year achievements for the Government.

“Farmers want irrigation; Region 3 drought committee ineffective, according to the Chairman; conditions worsening, Wakenaam rice crop destroyed; large acreage of rice land destroyed by salt water in Region 2.”

And market is being talked about.

I will afford this House information as it relates to what is being spoken about the \$100 million. It is in the news and it is a matter that affects the rice farmers. The \$100 million is rice farmers' money and the Guyana Rice Producers Association...

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, are you going to be much longer? We are at one minute after five o'clock.

Mr. Seeraj: Sir, I will not be able to finish in brief time. I really want to address a number of issues on this critical matter and, if we must adjourn at five o'clock, I would, respectfully, seek your indulgence to resume when we reconvene, if that is to your satisfaction.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Member. By all means, we must stop at five o'clock. We have not done that, as you would see that the time is beyond five o'clock. Of course, you will come with new energy on the next occasion.

The agreement is that whatever is not completed at this Sitting will rollover to the next. Most certainly, that will be the case. Do you want to give your last sentence before we adjourn?

Mr. Seeraj: No, Sir. I just want to thank you very much for affording me the opportunity to resume my speech at the next sitting.

Mr. Speaker: Of course, you will not repeat anything you would have said before.

Mr. Seeraj: Of course not, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, we had agreed that we would stop at five o'clock.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister, I invite you to move the adjournment.

Mr. Nagamootoo: Mr. Speaker, I move that this House be adjourned to 24th May, 2016, at 2.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the Hon. Prime Minister. The House stands adjourned to 24th May, 2016, at two o'clock in the afternoon.

Adjourned accordingly at 5.04 p.m.