

Address by the Honourable Colm Imbert Minister of Finance
On the occasion of the Official Opening Ceremony of the
Customs and Excise Building – King’s Wharf, San Fernando
Tuesday 24th January 2022

Salutations.

It is indeed an honour to participate in this milestone event in the life of the Customs and Excise Division (CED) and the wider Ministry of Finance – The handover and official opening ceremony for the CED Building at King’s Wharf San Fernando.

Most certainly, improving the accommodation and out stations from which the CED operates is a key item on our agenda at the Ministry of Finance, and we are very grateful to UDeCOTT for facilitating the CED’s transition to this new facility as they work towards strengthening their contribution to the national objectives of Revenue Collection, Trade Facilitation and Border Protection.

Over the past few years under my tenure the Ministry of Finance has systematically strengthened its engagement and cooperation with the Customs and Excise Division as the Division worked not only to enhance its Revenue Collection and Trade Facilitation capabilities but also to improve and strengthen its National Security responsibilities. And, this afternoon I wish to share with you some of the key aspects of our workplan for the coming year.

The cornerstone of this renewed engagement is the establishment of the Revenue Authority, which, after more than a decade of

technical work and stakeholder consultations was established with the passage and partial proclamation of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act (2021) and the appointment of the TTRA Board in June of last year. Under the TTRA, the overarching objective is to create an innovative, data driven organization that will optimize Revenue Collection and Trade Facilitation through the modernization and streamlining of services and systems. By way of update, the TTRA Board, immediately following its appointment last year, has worked assiduously to meet its statutory obligation to deliver a Strategic Plan and an Operational Plan to me within 6 months. These plans were delivered on time, and are currently engaging the attention of the Cabinet and will be laid in Parliament on or before its statutorily due date. In the interim, the TTRA Board is forging ahead with the recruitment of key personnel namely the Director General and the Corporate Secretary. The Board is also currently working with its advisors to craft a Communication Plan and to build out the structure and work plan of a Transition Office to oversee this very complex and highly sensitive process.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I must say that I am very much heartened by the response of the staff of the CED to the ongoing initiatives towards the establishment of the TTRA. Contrary to the naysayers, relevant staff of both departments of the Ministry of Finance have made themselves freely accessible to the professionals working on the project, and have willingly assisted in the provision of data, information and insights to facilitate the development of a seamless transition process. As the authority takes shape, I wish

to support the commitment of the TTRA to, as far as possible, closely engage throughout the process, and to seek to provide clarity to each member of staff in terms to their chosen career path in this process.

Acquisition of four (4) mobile scanners.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Trinidad and Tobago sits on a drug trafficking corridor linking drug producing regions with the large drug consuming markets in North America and the like. This traffic has opened the doors to high levels of violence and gang related crime in the country. As the national community mobilizes to counter these nefarious activities, it is imperative that the CED upgrade its fleet of mobile scanners to provide enhanced Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) coverage of imports and exports. In furtherance of this objective, an International Tender Notice was issued, inviting tenders for the supply, delivery, installation and commissioning of four (4) large scale NII High/Medium Mobile X-Ray Systems. Since that time, the CED and CTB have continued to engage with interested parties; and it is anticipated that the tendering process would be completed by the end of February 2023. Thereafter, the Ministry of Finance undertakes to work with the CED to ensure timely implementation.

Improved security conditions at the Queen's Wharf

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Queen's Wharf at Port-of-Spain has been identified by the CED as well as by a JSC of Parliament as being an area of risk. Specifically, a security and risk assessment

of the operations at the Queen's Wharf conducted by the CED identified risks such as the smuggling of weapons, drugs, alcohol, tobacco products, and pharmaceuticals. In response, the CED has identified measures to enhance border security at this installation. Measures include strengthening of the entry/exit gate and parameter walls to restrict vehicular traffic to Queen's Wharf, as well as the establishment of a unit of the Preventive Branch of the CED to facilitate joint operations. The CED is currently working in collaboration with the Port Authority, the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Ministry of Finance and where necessary, the TTPS, to address these deficiencies in a collaborative and efficient manner.

The acquisition of Scanners to be utilized at Transit sheds and the Container Examination Stations

Ladies and Gentlemen, while we are under no illusion that Transit Sheds and Private Warehouses provide an invaluable service in terms of trade facilitation and revenue collection, we at the Ministry of Finance and CED are also acutely aware that these installations also form part of our border security installation and so we have begun to work to facilitate the inspection and improve the efficiency of border security at all Transit Sheds, and Private Warehouses. Accordingly, an RFQ is being prepared for the acquisition of Cabinet X-Ray equipment as well as Trace Detection and Chemical Identification Systems to be deployed at all Transit Sheds to ensure that these operations are properly secured, monitored and regulated. In addition, other measures such as the regular change out of all security locks and the installation of

improved and independent CCTV coverage of operations by the CED are also under consideration for implementation in the shortest possible timeframe.

Creation of the Internal Affairs Unit headed by the Assistant Comptroller, Regulatory Audit Unit.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have also recognized the need to improve the Post Audit, Internal Audit and general compliance functions of the CED. Accordingly, we are moving to fill the post of Assistant Comptroller, Regulatory Audit which was created by Cabinet many years ago, but inexplicably was never filled. The intention is that this office will enhance the enforcement arm of the CED and will oversee the operations of the Post Audit Unit (PAU) and the Internal Affairs Unit (IAU) with the aim of combating corrupt practices within CED. The objective is twofold whereby the PAU will review and investigate the operations of Importers and Exporters to ensure conformity with the Laws, while the Internal Audit Unit (IAU) will review and investigate the operations of CED Staff, to ensure that professional standards are maintained and illicit transactions deterred.

Scrap Metal Exercise

Ladies and Gentlemen, on 12th August, 2022 the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago enacted a six-month ban on the export of old and scrap iron. At that time several containers of scrap iron were caught on the Ports of Port of Spain and Point Lisas. I, as Minister of Finance mandated the CED to re-examine these consignments of scrap iron to determine if any stolen items

form part of the consignments for export. The CED, in collaboration with the TTPS, has facilitated this exercise which has led to investigations into the theft of articles, such as copper. There were numerous challenges in the conduct of this exercise, as many facets of the operation were unknown. These related to, the unstuffing of compacted cargo, preparation of the scrap iron for examination and undertaking of the re-stuffing operations. As of today, of the 40 containers on the Port of Port of Spain, 29 containers have been re-examined and re-stuffed, with 11 remaining to be unstuffed, examined and re-stuffed. The Ministry of National Security is conducting a similar exercise at the Port of Point Lisas.

Engagement with US Customs and Border Protection

Ladies and Gentlemen in seeking to strengthened the enforcement functions of the CED, the Division in partnership with the Ministry of Finance has moved to more closely engage with our partners at the US Customs and Border protection and, commencing this month several initiatives will be rolled out including: -

- CBP Integrity Seminar geared toward senior level CED and MoF staff;
- Continuation of efforts to strengthen the Division's Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) capabilities with next steps focused on upgrade of existing fleet and requisite equipment before end of lifecycle including the baggage inspection systems at Piarco and ANR Robinson Airports in addition to all warehouses, shed 10, free trade zones, and bonded facilities.

- CBP Supervisory and Mid-Level Leadership Training.
- CBP Valuation Training.
- Strengthening of the Canine Division with the purchase of canines and upgrade and develop facilities.

In closing, Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the assurance that even as we seek to address the areas of risk and exposure at the CED, we remain focused on working with the business community and other stakeholders to ensure that the legitimate flow of goods into and out of the country is not unduly affected – and; from the Ministry of Finance perspective; Revenue Collection is not unduly affected. To this end, we are aware that human resources are a real limitation to the attainment of these objective and we have continued to engage the Service Commission Department in filling the existing vacancies at the CED, having recently received approval for the appointment of 82 new Customs and Excise Officers I. In addition, we have sought to retain institution knowledge and boost the Human Resources at key installations through the engagement of retired CED personnel.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are working on all fronts and fully expect to reap the full benefits of these initiatives in the shortest possible time.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention and look forward to the rest of this afternoon's proceedings.

