



GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

SPEAKING NOTES FOR

THE HONOURABLE KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR, SC, MP

PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

ON THE FORMAL OPENING OF THE ASSESSMENT CENTRE

MT HOPE

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SALUTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon.

I must begin by thanking everyone who has played a role, however large or small, in bringing us to this event.

It has been long in coming and I am deeply grateful for your dedicated work in ensuring that our children can be safe, feel safe, and live confidently with our protection

Today we formally open Trinidad & Tobago's very first *Child Assessment Centre*, at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, Mt Hope.

The safety and wellbeing of our children have always been at the forefront of our priorities.

That is because we appreciate that for a vision of ***prosperity for all*** to be fully realised, it is the wellbeing, protection and growth of our children that must underline our every effort.

PROGRESS ON ALL FRONTS

Making children and their wellbeing our priority is an objective we have tackled simultaneously on a number of fronts.

We have increased the rights and protection of children through new and stronger legislative and regulatory systems.

We have led an overhaul of our education system; with every child in our country now being guaranteed a place from the age of three, to their graduation from tertiary and technical training.

We have reformed our social support system, to ensure that children at the most vulnerable levels are given close attention for their mental, emotional and physical health.

And we have transformed the environment so that children have access to a good education, as well as opportunities to be part of modern technology-driven advancement.

The task of making all of these parts grow and work together was certainly not a simple one, but working with a common objective, we have made it happen.

PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT CENTRE

This Assessment Centre is part of a series of strategies to provide care and protection for children.

Two additional centres are due to be completed in Manahambre and Chaguanas by the end of August 2015.

Discussions are also being advanced with the THA for an Assessment Centre in Tobago.

And an agreement will soon be signed with the South West Regional Health Authority for an interim Assessment Centre at the San Fernando Teaching Hospital.

The Centre will provide a safe environment to assess children and will be particularly sensitive to the needs of children who could be victims of abuse.

Child-abuse continues to be one of the most serious issues facing nations around the world.

Last week in the UK, a story broke on the more than 1,400 suspects, including high-profile persons, who were under investigation for being part of a paedophile ring.

In a Northern city there were reports of extensive grooming of young girls.

Recently the Methodist Church apologised for its failure to respond to reports of child abuse.

Earlier you would have heard of the statistics as they exist here in Trinidad & Tobago.

As adults who are quite capable of defending ourselves, we try to consider ourselves bearing the experience of any form of abuse, and it is very frightening.

It makes you understand the utter terror a child experiences if he or she is made to bear with the experience of abuse.

As a people, there must be no doubt, or hesitation about our sacred duty to do whatever we must to keep our children safe.

These centres are part of our fulfilment of that duty.

THE CHILDREN'S AUTHORITY

The agency charged with the supervision and operations of this and other centres is the Children's Authority.

The original package of children's legislation was passed in the year 2000, and amendments were made in 2008.

Yet, with more than a decade having passed, the Children's Authority faced challenge after challenge attempting to **become fully operational.**

The great urgency of ensuring all efforts were put behind a fully operating Children's Authority came when we considered that 1.3 million people in our country, 13 percent of people

are over 60 years, and 45 percent of people are under the age of 30.

Of more importance to this conversation, 351,622 are under 18 years.

Of that figure, 112,723 are under 5 years.

This why the formation of the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development was so important; we needed to act quickly, but also carefully to protect and empower almost one-third (1/3) of our population.

This Ministry was intended to become the central authority on all aspects of child and youth protection, empowerment and development.

Today, the legislative requirements are finally aligned with the administrative and functional demands and, thanks in large part to the mandate of the Child Protection Task Force; the Children's Authority can now fully pursue its mandate.

A number of people, stakeholders, activists and organisations came together to make this happen and I express my deepest thanks for your work and dedication.

Fast-tracking the passage of the necessary legislation has brought wide-ranging powers to protect children from harm and cruelty, as well as promote their well-being.

We are now working from the same, strong platform with clear objectives:

- Prevention;
- Identification;
- Reporting and
- Investigation.

This is where the critical function of the Assessment Centres is firmly planted.

These centres will be 'one-stop shops' where children in need of care and protection can receive evaluation by a team of multi-disciplinary professionals.

Social workers, psychologists, medical doctors and nurses and child care professionals, will all work together to harness the preventative might of the State and finally deliver complete protection for our children.

I generally approach delivery in the context of my duty and responsibility as Prime Minister.

Today, however, I speak with you as a mother, grandmother and 'aunty' to many children - all of the factors combining to create a powerful protection framework for children is a life-long mission fulfilled.

For the first time in our nation's history, children in need of care and protection can receive holistic assessments by all levels of professionals, ***in ONE place.***

There will be fully equipped medical rooms, with the best technology for performing general medical and forensic sexual assault examinations.

And those assessments will immediately translate, if needed, into a comprehensive process systematically structured to always be in favour of the child.

WIDER ACCESS

Supporting these functions, Police Officers can now bring children to a location where they will be listened to and treated with sensitivity.

The medical team here is trained in the highest standards of forensic medical practice.

In fact, the Children's Authority also extended this training to several DMOs, Primary Care Physicians, Emergency Room Doctors, Paediatricians, Nurses, Social Workers and Police across Trinidad & Tobago.

Reviews from these professionals indicate that the training has been invaluable.

One of the most progressive features of the Assessment Centre is its capacity for conducting forensic interviews and assisting the Police in obtaining statements from children in cases where criminal conduct is suspected.

In keeping with global best practice, the Assessment Centre has a one way mirror and audio-visual recording systems in place for interviewing children.

A team of professionals can observe the interview via the one way mirror and feed questions through an ear piece to the interviewer to ensure that evidential standards are met for a robust Police statement and subsequent legal proceedings.

These provisions will be supported by the newly proclaimed *Children Act 2012*.

We are all painfully aware of the trauma children experience when they have to retell their stories to various persons throughout the justice system.

Sometimes very strong cases fall apart because children are too traumatised to recount the details of their experiences.

This system reduces that cycle of trauma.

The child's statement can now be taken in a sensitive manner to be recorded and tendered as evidence in the Court of Law.

A CHILD-FOCUSED NATION

Since taking my first job as a Social Worker, while working and studying in the United Kingdom, I began conceptualizing in my mind a system, a nation, that could come close to being called a '*child-focused*'.

At that time, it felt like a distant dream, but never was it an impossible one.

Today, Trinidad & Tobago has become living proof of the possibilities.

In just five years, Trinidad & Tobago has been able to reform and develop the kind of system that keeps us moving in the right direction.

We now have a robust legislative framework that empowers a Children's Authority to monitor, respond and protect abused and vulnerable children.

But there are other measures which provide a much stronger safety net for children:

- A 5-year old Children's Life Fund that provides financial support for sick children in need of urgent and life-saving medical treatment;
- The first ever Children's Hospital in Couva due to be completed in the coming weeks;
- Universal pre-school education with over 250 Early Childhood Care and Education centres giving the right academic start to 36,000 children;
- Free and full education opportunities for everyone from the age of 3 years, to tertiary level;
- Twenty-five schools capable of responding to children with special needs, including dyslexia, autism, visual and hearing impairment and ADHD;

- Over 10,000 children every day receiving additional academic support through Homework Centres at over 400 schools;
- At least 17,000 children benefitting annually from vision and hearing assessments;
- Over 15,000 parents have benefitted from over 300 **'Parenting in Education'** workshops;
- Over 700 trained professionals as Guidance Counsellors, Psychologists and Social Workers helping children in the school system who need support;
- Children are benefitting from a stronger technology environment with 95,000 laptops for students and Teachers, over 300 computer labs in Primary Schools, and 134 in Secondary schools, and
- An education system where all Teachers are certified by Bachelor of Education degrees or Teaching College diplomas.

While all of these fronts are advancing, a National Children's Registry is also being established aimed at protecting and monitoring the growth, care and development of children throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry will also continue with six new facilities including three Safe Houses, a Transition Home and the two Assessment Centres I mentioned earlier.

SOCIAL MEASURES

The advent of the Baby Care Assistance Grant through the Ministry of the People and Social Development has also been factored in to this child protection framework.

The main mission is to ensure that mothers living in difficult circumstances have the necessary support for their newborns' nutritional and growth needs.

In addition to support to NGOs advocating on behalf of the disabled population, the Ministry is also advancing its National Policy on Persons with Disabilities.

Disability among children is a very serious issue; just yesterday Dr David Bratt wrote in the *Trinidad Guardian* that "it has been estimated that around 16 per cent of children in T&T have some form of disability".

As I mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Education now has 700 professionals assigned to schools to aid in identifying disabilities in children, and also advancing processes for attention and care.

And I want to assure Dr Bratt that a Multi-Disciplinary Task Force is being considered to increase the ability to not only identify and respond to children with special needs, but also bring together to technical expertise so that children can receive the care and attention they need.

STRONGER LAWS AND RULES

On the legislative front, we will not let up on securing the environment for our children and we will continue to advance laws and regulations to keep our children safe.

That legislative and regulatory framework includes:

- *The Adoption of Children Act, 2000;*
- *The Children's Authority Regulations 2014;*
- *The Adoption of Children Regulations 2015;*
- *The Children's Community Residences, Foster Homes and Nurseries Act, 2000, and*
- *The Children's Community Regulations 2014.*

We have also considered the protection of children in *The Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2015.*

This Bill seeks to provide for the establishment of the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Commission for the purpose of regulating the Gaming and Betting Sectors which are, both on a global and national level, vulnerable to infiltration by money launderers and terrorist financing.

The Commission shall establish a licensing framework which will aid in minimizing the potential for money laundering and terrorism financing due to the stringent criteria that will have to be met by anyone desirous of obtaining a licence permitting them to work in the gambling sector.

It is recognised too, that these sectors have the potential to contribute meaningfully and positively to the national economy if regulated effectively, by creating employment prospects not only in the sector but in other sectors servicing that sector, thereby creating greater tax revenues.

At Section 5, the Bill seeks to **protect minors** and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling.

In addition, the *Family and Children Division Bill 2015* will seek to vest jurisdiction for all family matters and children matters in a Division of the High Court to be called "the Family and Children Division".

This Bill will provide for the establishment of the Family Court and the Children Court and vesting of jurisdiction for family matters and children matters as well as the assignment of Family Court Deputy Registrar, Assistant Registrars and Deputy Court Marshals, and for the sittings of the Family Court and the Children Court.

In keeping with the issues of sensitivity and confidentiality, the Bill will also empower the Family Court to hold proceedings *in camera*, for proceedings not to be published, and to restrict publication of the names of the parties or of any proceedings before the Family Court.

So in addition to the institutional advances we have ensured were delivered, we are also ensuring the regulative and legislative environment is modernized and strengthened so there will be no escape for anyone who attempts to endanger or harm our children.

CONCLUSION

I have put forward this comprehensive framework for the protection and empowerment of our nation's children because we must all now commit to the mission of making Trinidad & Tobago a "child-focused nation".

The future for every child in our country must be one that is safe; one that ensures they have full access to the best health and physical care, a strong educational foundation and opportunities to grow and achieve their dreams.

I will be the first to say that there is a lot left to do, but we are off to a very good start in providing a suitable environment for our children to grow.

For anyone loyal to the people of our country and committed to public service, it is not uncommon to sometimes fall short of targets, even in spite of our best efforts.

When that happens, we say (and mean) that we will try harder, and do better next time.

That is something I understand.

But when the efforts we are pursuing and the issues in our hands involve the lives, the care and the wellbeing of children, there is no room for faltering and it is **not** good enough to try harder next time.

We all know of the young boys and girls in recent years whose lives were taken in the most tragic and violent ways.

For those children, there was no next time for us to try harder to protect.

Every waking moment of our lives and service must be dedicated to always doing more than we think possible to save children's lives and protect their future.

This is why I must thank the committed and hardworking citizens of our country who all helped to make this kind of protection and care for our children possible:

[ADD NAMES HERE]

I must also thank Dr David Bratt for his years of advocacy and work for the protection, care and empowerment of our children.

My Government has earned the hallmark of always listening to the people, the stakeholders and the experts on issues we advance.

In this case, Dr Bratt's proposal for the Multi-Disciplinary Task Force will be taken forward and I would like to invite him to be part of it.

While we herald this opening, and put our attention to the other centres that must be completed, our eyes must remain

focused on the long road still to walk to protect each and every child in our country.

Working together, we can make it happen.

This Assessment Centre and the full activation of the Children's Authority is just the start of a long journey towards ensuring the protection of our boys and girls.

This responsibility is not simply one we share, it is one where we must never allow room for failure.

There **is** no failure; there is only continued dedication, focus and work.

I thank you.